The Wheat Belt Connection

WHEAT BELT PUBLIC POWER DISTRICT

JULY 2026

In May, Dan Westman (left), Line Crew Foreman, and Wesley Christensen (right), Journeyman Lineman, presented a hotline demonstration to the South Platte Natural Resources District in Sidney, Nebraska as part of an electrical safety training.

Artificial Intelligence and Cybersecurity:

What Customers Should Know

By: Jim Weeda, Manager of Technical Services
Assisted by ChatGPT

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is changing the way businesses, utilities, and consumers use technology. While AI offers many benefits, it is also being used by cybercriminals to make attacks more convincing, more automated, and more difficult to detect.

Cybersecurity experts, including the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), have all warned that AI is increasingly being used to enhance phishing scams, impersonation attempts, and other forms of social engineering. AI can help attackers generate realistic emails, text messages, and even cloned voices that appear to come from trusted individuals or organizations.

One of the greatest concerns is that AI allows attackers to create highly personalized messages with fewer spelling or grammatical errors than traditional phishing attempts.

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In some cases, criminals have used AI-generated voice messages to impersonate government officials, business leaders, and family members in an attempt to obtain sensitive information or money.

How Wheat Belt Protects Its Systems

Protecting the electric grid, customer information, and business operations remains a top priority for Wheat Belt Public Power District. While cybersecurity is constantly evolving, several well-established practices help reduce risk from both traditional and AI-enhanced attacks.

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BEHIND THE SCENES OF RELIABLE POWER

By: Joseph Michalewicz, Chief Executive Officer

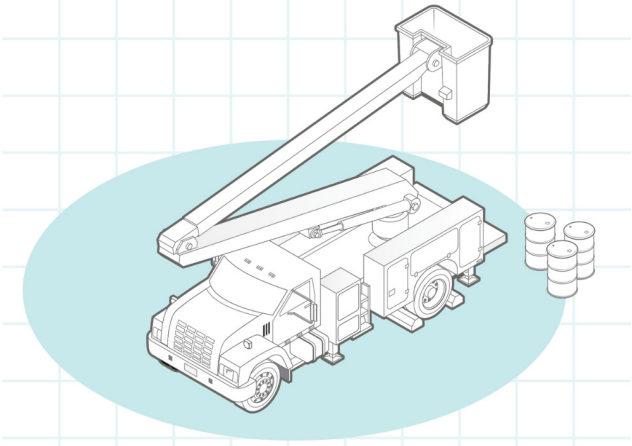
Electricity is essential to the homes, farms, businesses, and communities Wheat Belt Public Power District serves. Behind every flip of a switch is a complex system of generation, transmission, and local distribution that must operate safely and reliably every minute of every day. As power supply costs continue to rise across the electric industry, it is important for customers to understand how electricity is delivered and why the cost of providing service changes over time.

Power begins at generating facilities that use a mix of energy sources, including coal, natural gas, hydropower, wind, and solar. From there, electricity travels over high-voltage transmission lines before moving through substations and local distribution lines that deliver power directly to customers. Wheat Belt PPD currently receives power through our power supply contract with Tri-State Generation and Transmission, Inc. In response to rising costs and regulatory pressure, the Wheat Belt PPD Board has given notice of its intent to exit its contract with Tri-State and evaluate other power supply options.

The cost of electric service begins with the wholesale cost of power, which is the price Wheat Belt PPD pays for electricity before it is delivered through the local system. Wholesale costs are influenced by fuel markets, regional supply conditions, generation availability, and the amount of electricity needed at a given time. A diverse power mix can support reliability and price stability, but each resource also carries its own costs for fuel, operations, maintenance, and long-term investment.

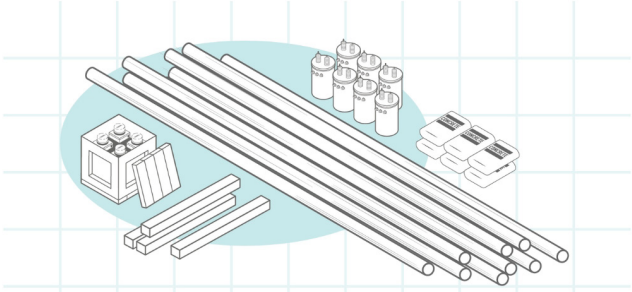
Fleet Costs

Light trucks	+25-40%
Bucket trucks, digger derricks	+20-50%
Fuel costs (especially diesel)	+20-30%
Maintenance	+15-25%
Insurance premiums	+20%



Infrastructure Costs

Utility poles (wood, steel, composite)	+25-40%
Crossarms & braces (steel/wood)	+20-35%
Conductor wire (aluminum/copper)	+30-50%
Transformers	+70-100%
Grain-oriented electrical steel	+80-100%
Oil/dielectric fluids	+25-40%
Copper wiring	+50%
Concrete	+25-35%
Smart meters	+20-35%
Pad-mounted switchgear	+25-40%
Circuit breakers/reclosers	+20-35%



Customer demand is another major factor. During periods of extreme heat or cold, electricity use can increase quickly as air conditioners, electric heat, irrigation equipment, and other energy-intensive systems run for longer periods. When demand rises across a broad region at the same time, wholesale market prices can increase, and utilities may need to secure additional power at higher prices to maintain reliable service.

Beyond the cost of the electricity itself, electric service also depends on significant infrastructure. Delivering power requires transmission networks, substations, poles, wires, transformers, meters, vehicles, technology systems, and a skilled workforce. Ongoing investment in these assets supports reliability, safety, and service quality, but it also contributes to the overall cost of providing electricity. Since 2020, many of these power supply and infrastructure costs have increased substantially across the electric cooperative industry. Refer to the infographics from the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) for more information regarding price increases.

Continued on 3-C

PEOPLE BEHIND THE POWER

Jordan Peters-Journeyman Lineman

What is your role at the district, and what does a typical day look like?

I am a journeyman lineman, and I have been at Wheat Belt since 2014. Between construction and maintenance, each day looks different. Sometimes you are on repeat and have similar tasks each day, and then you get a wild day.

What do you enjoy most about working in this industry?

I enjoy getting the lights back on. As a customer myself, I know how our customers feel on that side. I also enjoy working with the people in the industry, both past and present.

What does "safety first" mean to you?

Always take the extra second to think, "how can I do this a better way to be safe for the public, coworkers, and myself?"

What is the most important safety lesson you've learned during your career?

While I have learned a lot, I know there is still plenty more for me to acquire and understand. One safety lesson that has always stood out to me is that "we've always done it this way" is not always the answer to continue doing something. It's important to continually evaluate our work practices and look for safer, more effective ways to get the job done.

How has safety changed since you started working in the industry?

One aspect of safety in this industry that has changed since I started working in it concerns climbing and the introduction of fall restraints. Prior to fall restraints, we would just free climb, but a couple of months after I got hired, they were introduced. Fall restraints basically keep us from falling to the ground while climbing poles.

What's one safety message you'd like every employee and customer to remember?

Every rule, policy, or safety code was written in blood. This doesn't just apply to the utility industry, but it also applies to farming and ranching. This is why it is so important to work safely for the benefit of our employees and customers.

What do you like to do in your free time?

Outside of work, I enjoy grilling on the Big Green Egg, shooting and working with firearms, and spending quality time with my son, Reece. I'm also a hobby farmer and enjoy the hands-on work of farming and caring for livestock.

Behind the Scenes cont'd from 3-B

Public policy and regulation further shape the cost environment. Local, state, and federal requirements can affect how power is generated, transmitted, and delivered, as well as the environmental, reliability, and operational standards utilities must meet. Long-term decisions about power supply contracts, resource planning, and grid upgrades are therefore important not only for reliability, but also for managing cost exposure over time.

For customers, the important takeaway is that an electric bill reflects more than monthly energy use. It also reflects the cost of securing power, maintaining a reliable delivery system, complying with industry requirements, and planning for the long-term needs of the communities Wheat Belt PPD serves. As a public power district, Wheat Belt PPD remains focused on service, reliability, and responsible stewardship. Understanding the factors that affect power supply and cost helps provide context for the decisions necessary to keep electric service dependable today and into the future.

LUCKY DRAWING

Wheat Belt Public Power District is pleased to announce Roy and Chelsea Smith as our June Lucky Draw winners. Roy and Chelsea have been in the Lewellen area since 2018, and have two children. The Smith family farms and runs cattle. The Smiths enjoy working together as a family. When they aren't working, they enjoy getting together with extended family, church family, and friends.

The Smiths received a $50 credit on their account for their prompt payment. If you would like to be included in our next drawing and avoid a $5 delinquent fee, please send your payment before the 16th of the month. For your convenience, we offer several payment options. Please give us a call at 308-254-5871, or visit the Customer Engagement page on our website for more information.

Artificial Intelligence cont'd from 3-A

These practices include:

- Security awareness training for employees to help identify phishing, social engineering, and impersonation attempts.
- Multi-factor authentication (MFA) to add an additional layer of protection beyond passwords.
- Timely patching and updating of software and systems to address known vulnerabilities.
- Network segmentation and layered security controls to limit the potential impact of a cyber incident.
- Monitoring and assessment of critical systems to identify suspicious activity and emerging threats.
- Following guidance and best practices from organizations such as CISA, NIST, and the electric utility industry.

Recent federal guidance has also emphasized the importance of rapidly addressing vulnerabilities because AI-assisted attacks can shorten the time between the discovery of a weakness and its exploitation.

How Customers Can Protect Themselves

Customers can help protect themselves by remaining cautious when receiving unexpected emails, text messages, or phone calls—even if the message appears to come from someone they know.

Some recommended practices include:

- Verify unusual requests through a known phone number or trusted contact method.
- Be cautious of urgent requests involving money, passwords, or personal information.
- Use strong, unique passwords and enable multi-factor authentication whenever available.
- Avoid clicking links or opening attachments from unknown sources.
- Remember that a familiar voice or convincing message is no longer proof that a communication is legitimate.

As AI technology continues to evolve, both defenders and attackers will continue to adopt new tools. By combining technology, employee training, proven cybersecurity practices, and customer awareness, Wheat Belt Public Power District remains committed to protecting its infrastructure, employees, and customers from emerging cyber threats.

How Wheat Belt uses AI

While AI presents new cybersecurity challenges, it also offers significant benefits when used responsibly. Wheat Belt uses AI tools to improve efficiency, assist with research, summarize information, and draft communications. In fact, AI technology assisted in drafting this article. Like any business tool, AI-generated content should be reviewed and verified before it is relied upon or shared.

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OUR MISSION

Deliver electricity safely, reliably and efficiently.