



A Message From The General
Manager/CEO
*"Don't Feel Like The Weakest Link", or
"The Mysteries Of Electric Utility Billing
Revealed."*

By Daniel G. Laws

Have you ever noticed the postmark on your monthly electric bill? Well, if you haven't, don't feel like you are "The Weakest Link!" I honestly have never paid attention to that myself, but there are a number of our members who do.

The postmark is actually from Bismark, North Dakota. You see, Rio Grande ECI is a member of National Information Solutions Cooperative, or NISC, for short. NISC is a cooperative with over 500 employees, and because of the volume of bills they print and mail, it is less expensive for us to pay them to handle this function of the billing process for us.

This in no way diminishes our control over who receives a bill or how much they are billed. The daily billing functions, such as posting payments and meter readings, and processing connects and disconnects, are handled in the Brackettville Office, under the direction of our Manager of Consumer Accounting, Ruby Munoz.

An average of 6,100 bills are processed and mailed on the 5th of each month. These bills are generated from files that are electronically sent, with the touch of a few buttons, to NISC by our consumer accounting department. NISC does not make any changes to these files. They simply print and process them.

Based on experience, we know that approximately 25% of the bills the Co-op mails out each month will be past-due and require a good deal of employee time to get them paid. Some are late because of slow mail delivery and some are past due because they are under dispute. Unfortunately, the majority of past due accounts are for reasons that are less understandable.

We mail your electric bill on the fifth of each month, which sets in motion a sixteen-day clock that is used to determine at what point an account is past due. If payment is not received by the 21st of each month, then past due notices are sent, which begins a ten-day clock. If payment is not received by the end of the ten-day period, then the account is subject to disconnect.

Disconnection is not pleasant for anyone involved. It is expensive for both the individual member and the membership as a whole. We make an earnest effort to contact delinquent members by telephone and encourage them to pay, or to

work out a mutually acceptable payment plan. This is a long, drawn-out process that takes our five area office clerks two to four days to accomplish. But, if we can't make contact in a reasonable length of time, we must disconnect.

We've heard some say, "I'm going to pay my bill and the Co-op should know that!" Why should we disconnect? Remember the two time clocks I mentioned? If you will add up the days, it will be clear why we must disconnect. When we mail the bill on the fifth, each account owes the cooperative for thirty days of usage. In addition, since meters are read on the 21st of each month, there are fourteen additional days of usage towards the next month's bill, bringing the total to 44 days. When you add to it the sixteen days associated with the first clock, the account has 60 days of usage. By the time the 10-day delinquency time period is added, there are 70 days of usage, of which only thirty are billed.

Delinquent accounts are expensive - and it is your friends and neighbors, the Co-op membership, which must share this expense. Regrettably, we are sometimes unsuccessful in our efforts to collect delinquent accounts. Each year, the Board is forced to write off thousands of dollars in unrecoverable revenue.

Unlike "The Weakest Link", we won't ridicule you in front of others, we don't have irritating voices, and we **do** give second chances. We are willing to work with you, if you are having a problem paying your bill - that's **"Your Home Team Advantage"**. . However, if you do not pay your bill or work out payment arrangements with us, you leave us no choice but to do what is in the best interest of the member-owners of the Cooperative. "Good-bye."(wink)