

# Harsh winter reveals weakness in Minnesota utility systems

by Steve Downer

A strong arctic high-pressure system brought historic cold to the North and Central U.S. regions on January 30-31, driving temperatures below 2014 'polar vortex' levels. The cold revealed either real or potential weaknesses in Minnesota electric and natural gas systems.

Temperatures were colder than any time since 2001, when the Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) began operating the regional electric grid.

According to MISO, total electric generation outages during the cold spell were higher than previous cold weather events, with approximately 25 percent of the region's electrical generating capacity unavailable due to unplanned outages.

Forced electrical generation outages surpassed 20 gigawatts (GW), including wind turbines,



MMUA file photo

The Litchfield Public Utilities municipal power plants were among those pressed into action during the late January MISO 'Maximum Generation Event.' The plant in the background contains newer diesel engines.

which reportedly shut down to protect vital operating components in temperatures of 20-below zero Fahrenheit.

Total outages and capacity 'derates,' including fossil-fueled generators, took more than 35

GW of generation offline.

While the extreme cold drove high energy use, a sudden and unexpected drop in wind generation, forced outages, and uncertainty, said MISO, required the Jan. 30-31 declaration of a

'Maximum Generation Event.'

MISO on Feb. 27 presented an overview of the Event, which resulted in a call to run seldom-used municipal diesel-

*Emergency: see page 7 please*

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## After 47 years, Larson ready to hand over reins to Fosston utility

by Steve Downer

After 47 years, Dave Larson feels like he can leave Fosston Municipal Utilities in good hands.

Assistant Public Works Director Steven Lyseng is working closely with Larson. It's a big job – along with streets, parks and all the normal city functions, Fosston provides electric, natural gas, water/wastewater, garbage and cable TV service.

Larson started at the municipal liquor store, where he worked for two years. A farm boy, he thought that a utility job would be perfect. He finally got his interview with the Public Utilities Commission, on May

7, 1974. It didn't take Commissioners long to make up their minds – he started with the utility a week later.

Larson didn't have much of a background in utilities, but he did know how to work. The skills and technical aspects he picked up as he went along. That is a process that never stopped.

Part of city hall used to be a municipal power plant. The public works director's office, which doubles as the meter testing area, used to hold diesel engines. The diesels are gone, and Larson is more apt to spend time with a computer these days—

*Fosston: see page 6 please*



Dave Larson (standing) is happy to be turning over the reins of Fosston Public Utilities to his young replacement – Steven Lyseng (seated).

## MMUA group treks to Washington, D.C., to advocate for Public Power

The American Public Power Association (APPA) held its 2019 Legislative Rally Feb. 25-27, at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C.

Approximately 50 attended the Rally under the MMUA banner, including utility staff and power agency personnel, local elected and appointed officials, and MMUA staff.

Energy issues have been getting a lot of media attention, and the MMUA group had much to say on the matter. Our specific issues included: tax-exempt bonds, the federal power program, pole attachment regulations, and wholesale electric markets. Our people also carried the basic message of the benefits of Public Power.

Along with travel to Washington, D.C.,

the weekend and Monday featured pre-rally seminars on a variety of topics. Monday also held briefings, committee meetings and an evening reception.

APPA's Legislative and Resolutions (L&R) Committee was active Tuesday, Feb. 26. The Committee reviewed APPA's federal legislative agenda, and discussed and adopted new policies. In the afternoon, attendees meet with their congressional delegations on Capitol Hill and attended policy briefings on specific issues hosted by APPA.

Resolutions approved by the L&R Committee included:

- Pole Attachments: The Association

*Rally: see next page please*

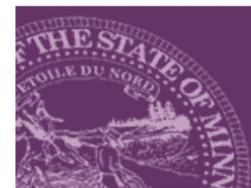


photo courtesy of SMMPA

Sen. Tina Smith addressed the assembled Public Power representatives. Among those listening was H. Smith of Blooming Prairie (right).

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## Fosston:

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these days Larson is more apt to spend time with a computer—whether it be for programming meters or preparing a monthly financial report.

Larson enjoyed his work and said he was blessed to work for good councils and commissions. Local policymakers were conservative but would take calculated risks to keep Fosston moving forward. That commitment to the community shows.

A 14-acre industrial park is full, and 56 acres more are available for industrial development.

A cornerstone of the industrial park is Polk County, which produces steam as a by-product at its solid waste incinerator. Steam is sold to nearby agricultural product processors.

The city put in a wastewater treatment facility for one of those customers that produces biogas, a renewable energy source. The project was jointly funded through

the Fosston Economic Development Administration, the state and federal governments.

With a lack of housing, the city is developing an 80-acre residential area.

“If you develop it, they might come,” Larson said, summing up the local take on city economic development. “If you don’t, they won’t.”

### Electric system focus

The electric utility has approximately 900 customers and employs four linemen—Larson and Lyseng are the journeymen. The linemen rotate on-call duty—the only utility employees to do so.

While the opposite is generally true, Larson believes municipal linemen should get paid more than other segments of the industry because they have to work with so many aspects of the system. Fosston’s linemen are also gas qualified.

Municipals offer certain advantages, however, and not surprisingly, given his background, Larson believes in promoting people from within the organization.



The origins of Fosston city hall/public utilities headquarters is evident in the former municipal power plant, located at the far end of the building. The building is sandwiched between U.S. Hwy. 2, in the front, and train tracks in the back. Also visible is a vehicle of the municipal bus service.

Everybody at Fosston Public Utilities has a specific job but works on other utilities, as needed.

That practice extends beyond city boundaries, with cities working closely with each other. Fosston and Bagley both operate electric and gas utilities and borrow equipment and help each other out with certain big jobs.

The Fosston electric utility, however, is the main focus. The system is in very good shape, but there is work to do.

Major feeder lines were placed underground in the 1980s, and they will be replaced over the next two years. The municipal will bid out the underground directional drilling, but help pull wire and terminate the cable. Loop feeds will serve all customers.

Reliable power is important for everybody, but especially for “critical” commercial and industrial customers.

Larson worked hard over the years for improvements on a power supplier’s transmission system. ‘Blinks’ are now “down to nothing,” he said. “Electricity is no good if it is not reliable.”

Larson can get in the pickup and inspect Fosston and he knows where everything is. Which is a good thing, since the entire system is underground. He remembers the day the utility cut over system voltage from 2,400 volts to 7,200.

“You should have been here that day,” he said.

### Natural gas and wastewater

The natural gas business grew over the years, with 80 percent of its revenues coming from commercial/industrial customers. Gas revenues rival those from the electric utility, with possible future expansion being studied.

Due to a possible expansion in the industrial park, the city commissioned a feasibility study for another 40 acres of wastewater ponds. The cost of \$6-7 million is “pretty hard to swallow,” Larson said, especially since the city in 2011 spent \$6 million on two, 12-acre ponds and lift stations.



Fosston linemen Bill Gustafson (left) and Shane Linehan talked at the Meter School (see page 8) with MMUA Job Training and Safety and Apprenticeship Instructor James Monroe (right). Fosston is among the utilities Monroe regularly works with.

### Local boys

Larson can look back on his work with pride. He looks forward to continuing work on the family farm, where he grew up. He and his brother bought the family place in the early 1990s.

Lyseng also grew up just outside of town and is a Fosston graduate. He has been with the utility six years. He graduated from Northwest Lineman College and the MMUA apprenticeship program. He is also a certified water and wastewater opera-

tor. He was 20 when he started with the utility.

Larson and Lyseng both also serve on the fire department. Larson said he can still drive a tanker truck, but would step down if there was somebody to replace him.

“It’s time to let the reins go to another person,” he said. “If I left today, I wouldn’t be worried about the city.”

Will Lyseng be with Fosston as long as Larson?

With a quick smile, he offered one word that said a lot: “Probably.”

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