



# News from the Trail

September 2016

## MEMBER SERVICES

# Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) Service Coming to OTEC this fall

By Sandra Ghormley

**D**id you know that Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative's (OTEC) four district offices receive and place approximately 6,000 phone calls in a given month? With the quantity of telephone calls growing at a rate of 2% each year, this puts a bit of a strain on our labor resources. Over half of the calls we receive (60%) are routine transactions and very similar in nature, such as members who want to make a payment arrangement, pay their bill or check an account balance. Now, thanks to new cloud-based technology, we can begin to provide an automated communication system or Interactive Voice Recognition (IVR) service that will augment, not replace, our workforce's efforts, help satisfy routine transactions or questions, and manage increasing call volumes.

It is interesting to note that IVR systems have been around and in use for more than 25 years. However, now that cloud-based computing is available, the technology has improved rapidly and the cost

*The new IVR system will free up OTEC representatives, allowing more uninterrupted time to spend on complex member problems requiring special attention. This equates to better quality service overall.*



decreased significantly. This makes IVR feasible for the medium to small sized businesses like OTEC to take advantage of the benefits. Most IVR systems answer the phone, greet the customer, offer automated services through a menu selection, and then direct the phone call to the appropriate station. The typical mission of IVR



Access OTEC 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

systems is to offer new ways for members to take care of their own needs through touch-tone and/or speech-recognition systems without having to speak with an employee directly, this saves time and money, all of which has a positive impact on lowering costs and electric rates. Additionally, when

programmed correctly to answer common questions and handle simple business transactions, the major benefit of an IVR system is the amount of time it frees representatives from handling routine calls, allowing more uninterrupted time to spend on complex member problems that require special attention. This equates to a better quality of service overall.

Partnering with Southeastern Data Cooperative (SEDC) our present billing and accounting software provider, we are confident OTEC has purchased a reliable, cost-effective IVR product that will help us handle our telephone traffic faster and more efficiently. Making it more convenient and easier to access OTEC 24 hours a day, 7 days a week — even on holidays. Implementation plans for the

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## INTERACTIVE VOICE RECOGNITION SERVICE, CONTINUED

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first-phase of the new IVR system, an automated *outbound* calling service, are targeted for fall 2016. As long as the new service passes rigorous testing, the second-phase of the IVR implementation, an automated *inbound* calling service, will take place at the end of the year. We're excited to be able to offer this new service to our members.



*With IVR inbound calling, payments can be made or account balances checked.*

An IVR outbound program will allow OTEC to make calls and provide important information to many members at one time. For example, calls can be placed to members for bill reminders, and inform members of planned interruptions of service. Important messages like these can be quickly disseminated to the membership or a select few. A prerecorded, yet customized message is easily and quickly delivered to the selected group of members instead of dialing each

member's number one at a time. Without telephone automation it would take a significant amount of time to complete calls and by the time all manual calls are completed, the information could be outdated.

Once the inbound IVR is functional members will be greeted with a message and short set of options to instruct OTEC's telephone system where to direct their call. OTEC will ensure there is an option to speak to a representative at any time during the call, but the IVR automation has many benefits for those who choose to use it. One such menu option directs members to OTEC's automated business center where a payment can be made, account balances can be checked or a payment arrangement set up without being placed on hold to talk to a person. Just think...this can be done right



*OTEC will ensure there is an option to speak to a representative during normal business hours.*

from the comfort of home or work at any time of the day or night and is private and confidential. The new automated business center processes and posts a payment to

your account within minutes and is highly confidential. Protecting our members' personal financial information is a high priority for OTEC and an IVR system provides greater levels of security for members' credit and debit card information.

IVR is fast becoming standard operating equipment for businesses and people around the world have grown accustomed to working with automated telephone services. The good news is that these systems have gone through many evolutions over the last 25 years giving the technology time to mature and resolve most problems. There are many new opportunities for OTEC to increase productivity, save costs and save time now that IVR technology is affordable and customizable to fit our members' needs.

OTEC waited many years to be ready to use an IVR system. We remain committed to implement SEDC's IVR slowly and thoughtfully ensuring our members are kept informed of our progress, and have an opportunity to experience the benefits of this new service in order to achieve the highest level of satisfaction possible. ●



*For questions call OTEC's Director of Member and Program Services*

*Sandra Ghormley at 541-524-2822 or email [sghormley@otecc.com](mailto:sghormley@otecc.com).*

## COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES

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### EDUCATION, TRAINING AND INFORMATION

Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so that they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. They inform the general public, particularly young people and opinion leaders, about the nature and benefits of cooperation.

# New Renewables: Not What You Might Think

*Hydro remains the region's reliable source of carbon-free energy*

In a recent opinion piece for the Oregonian, Wendy Gerlitz of the Northwest Energy Coalition (NWECC) opined that the region must choose between healthy populations of wild salmon and removing the Snake River dams. NWECC's solution is to remove the dams and replace them with more energy conservation and new wind/solar projects. In reality, salmon and dams, including the Snake dams, are co-existing and thriving — good news for those who care about restoring salmon and reducing carbon emissions.

No matter how many times NWECC makes their assertion, it simply doesn't change the fact that the Snake dams can't be replaced by energy efficiency or new renewables. Top regional power planners at the NW Power and Conservation Council (Council) analyzed Snake dam removal in their Sixth Power Plan when NWECC first raised it years ago. The Council's analysis found that even if all cost-effective energy efficiency available in the region was acquired, fossil fuel generation would still be needed to replace the energy and capacity lost from removing the Snake dams.

Bringing on new wind and solar doesn't help either. The federal hydro system helps back up these resources now, but hydro has reached its limits. Tom Eckman, a recently retired top analyst from the Council, pointed out that developing new renewables requires building new gas plants to

back them up, which does nothing to help with climate change. <http://koin.com/2016/06/02/the-cost-of-green-energy-is-more-pollution>.



Photo: Lara Petittlerc-Stokes

*The spillway weir at Ice Harbor Dam helps young salmon migrate downstream.*

That's the region's "dirty little secret in the clean energy game," Eckman noted.

***"Young salmon migrating downstream are doing well too. Looking at the federal dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers, survivals are high — averaging 97% percent or better at the dams."***

This makes NWECC's position even more mystifying: for an organization that ostensibly cares about climate change, the Council concluded that removing the Snake dams with fossil fuel generation would add 3 to 4 million tons of carbon to our skies — every year. In fact, removing the Snake dams is likely the single most damaging action the region could possibly take from a climate change perspective. Yet, Ms. Gerlitz says that it is dams that are creating a climate threat to salmon — pointing to last year's

hot temperatures and laying blame on the dams' reservoirs.

Once again, this is entirely off-base. The dams didn't "do in" the

sockeye last year, but Mother Nature did by hitting the Northwest with a combination of low flows and persistently record hot temperatures. In fact, NOAA Fisheries' "After Action" report on the tragic loss of sockeye last year concluded that the dams helped

keep river temperatures cooler through most of the migration season. Interestingly, the Fraser River in British Columbia also has experienced severe sockeye population crashes some years — there just aren't any dams to blame there.

So, how are the salmon doing? This year, with more normal river conditions, the sockeye have returned in droves with 342,000 adults making their way above Bonneville Dam including Snake River sockeye. Chinook returns have been good so far this season and nearly a million fall Chinook are forecasted to return, which is very good indeed.

Young salmon migrating downstream are doing well too. Looking at the federal dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers, survivals are high — averaging 97% percent or better at the dams. Operational changes also are helping speed young salmon on their way and new fish slides at the dams are making for a safer trip. One hundred percent survival

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## HYDRO REMAINS REGION'S RELIABLE SOURCE, CONTINUED

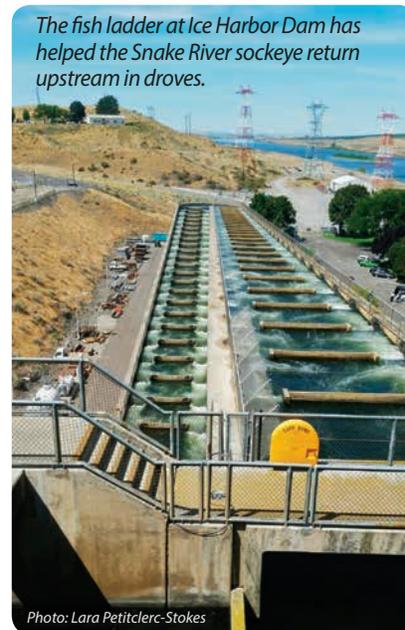
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is not possible even in a free flowing river.

Also overlooked are the multiple, critical benefits the Snake dams provide the region. NWEAC acknowledges they can be used to meet changes in energy demands almost instantaneously. Providing up to 2,650 megawatts of emergency energy to the transmission grid for five days, and a navigation and lock system which moves a variety of products producing over \$3 billion in value are left off the list, among other benefits.

I welcome Ms. Gerlitz' call for an "honest and thorough analysis" of Snake dam removal. The facts and analyses that have been done — exhaustively — over many years simply haven't supported removal

of the dams from a climate change, salmon restoration or economic perspective. Let's see if there



*The fish ladder at Ice Harbor Dam has helped the Snake River sockeye return upstream in droves.*

Photo: Lara Pettilerc-Stokes

is anything new to be learned. What I don't expect to change are continued calls for removal of those dams from NWEAC or other groups no matter the analysis or outcome. ●

*Terry Flores is Executive Director of Northwest River Partners, an alliance of farmers, utilities, ports and large and small businesses that*



*relies on and promotes the economic and environmental benefits of the Columbia and Snake Rivers as well as fish policies and programs based on sound science.*

*For more information, please visit [www.nwrivernpartners.org](http://www.nwrivernpartners.org).*

## FEEDBACK FROM OUR MEMBERS

# OTEC's Membership Survey

## *Coming this fall*

*Beginning in late November you may get a call from DHM Research, a public polling firm OTEC has contracted with to complete our bi-annual member survey. The survey will last approximately 15 minutes and your responses will help your elected Board of Directors set the direction for your electric cooperative.*

This hybrid survey will include two options for our members to choose from — a traditional phone survey and an on-line survey that members can complete at their own pace, on their own time. A survey link will be made available to our membership beginning the end of November.

The survey we will complete this year will focus on a variety of important topics to you and your electric cooperative. Member satisfaction is always our top priority and we are looking for your opinion on the value you receive with your cooperative membership. Our rates remain among the lowest in the region and our reliability exceeds many of the utilities in the northwest and the nation.

In 2015, we completed a member survey that asked questions about economic development and the role of your cooperative in this important regional issue. The majority of our members said they didn't want their rates to be impacted by economic development programs in our communities. This year we will ask similar questions on green energy and your electric cooperative's role in supporting renewable energy development beyond the clean hydropower we all enjoy today.

If you are contacted by DHM research in regards to the OTEC Member Survey, we appreciate your time in answering the questions. We are always looking for feedback on how we are serving you, our members. Your opinion matters and it will help our elected board of directors set the direction of our member-owned, non-profit electric cooperative for years to come. ●

# Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative reminds Pokémon Go players to keep a safe distance.

**T**here are red and blue generations, silver and gold, ruby and sapphire, diamond and pearl. But, these aren't rare gem stones, they are Japanese anime characters in a new augmented reality game called, Pokémon Go, that in the past few months has become a global phenomenon and they are causing a safety concern for electrical cooperatives across the nation.

OTEC encourages users to exercise extreme caution when playing this new game which is drawing players into some dangerous situations. With over 21 million daily active users, the app is the biggest mobile game in U.S. history

"The game allows players to train, battle, and capture Pokémon through 'geocaching,' which is where players use their phones to hunt down characters hiding in the real world," explains OTEC Manager of Communications and Government Affairs Lara Petitclerc-Stokes.

There are 50 electric-type Pokémon characters with names like Zados, Pikachu and Eelektross that players are looking to capture.

"Online threads are reporting the 'electric' type Pokémon can be found near electrical sites," said Petitclerc-Stokes. "That is when OTEC becomes very concerned for the safety of our members and the players."

"Electric utilities cannot control where the Pokémon appear on this game, making it important for players to make sure they are capturing their Pokémon from a safe distance. We want to remind our members to stay safe while playing this mobile game," said Petitclerc-Stokes. "Remember to stay alert at all times and be aware of your surroundings. When you see a Pokémon character you want to catch you don't have to trespass onto other



property or place yourself in harms way. All you need to do is just click the character."

OTEC reminds members that electricity is very dangerous and that entering electrical substations is both a crime and can be potentially deadly. Never attempt to gain access into one.

Additionally, OTEC encourages parents of children who play the game to talk to them about how to be safe around electricity.

### **Important safety tips:**

- **Stay away from all electrical equipment: power lines, transformers, substations, and electrical work sites.**
- **Never jump on, sit on, kick, or stick anything inside a transformer, including padmount transformers.**
- **Do not climb power poles or throw things into power lines.**
- **Stay away from power lines that have fallen because they can still be energized.**
- **Climb with care. Power lines near trees also pose a danger; exercise caution and check for power lines before climbing a tree. ●**

**Have a question for the board?**  
 Email: [BoardSupport@otecc.com](mailto:BoardSupport@otecc.com)

**Upcoming Board Meetings:**  
 September 20 October 25 November 15

## RECIPE OF THE MONTH

# Pork Chops with Apples and Stuffing



6 pork chops/pork steaks  
 1 tablespoon oil  
 1 package (6 oz.) Stovetop Stuffing Mix  
 1 21 oz. can apple pie filling  
 (optional: add 1/4 tsp. cinnamon)

## A Call for Recipes

Every bi-monthly issue of "News from the Trail" features a local recipe.

Many thanks to Ms. Pam Peyron of Baker City, OR for submitting her delicious recipe for pork chops with apples and stuffing.

Do you have a favorite recipe you'd like to share? Submit it along with a .jpeg photo of the final product, your name and address to [newsletter@otecc.com](mailto:newsletter@otecc.com) or mail to Newsletter, PO Box 226, Baker City, OR 97814. If your recipe is selected for our next issue, you'll get a \$10 bill credit.

## Directions:

Brown pork chops in oil, both sides with salt and pepper.

Prepare Stovetop stuffing according to package directions. (I fry up onions, celery, and garlic to add to it.)

Grease 9x13 glass baking dish. Spread pie filling in baking dish. Place browned pork chops on top. Spoon stuffing over chops. Cover with aluminum foil and bake 40 minutes. Uncover and bake 10 minutes longer. Enjoy!

## MANAGER'S MESSAGE

# OTEC earns high marks for low rates from CFC

Each year, in an annual assessment of financial trends among electric distribution cooperatives nationwide, the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Financial Corporation (CFC) compiles and releases final data from its Key Ratio Trend Analysis (KRTA).

For 2015, after a series of 145 separate ratios and being compared against 308 similar co-ops that borrow exclusively from CFC, OTEC had the second lowest irrigation rates in the state of Oregon (9th lowest irrigation rates nationwide).

Moreover, OTEC came in 2nd for the lowest large commercial rates in the state (14th lowest large commercial rates nationwide).

Rounding out a decade of relatively flat economic growth, it is impressive that OTEC is consistently able to maintain low rates and strong financials. In total, our average retail cost of energy per



**WERNER BUEHLER**  
 General Manager

kilowatt hour (7.7 cents/kWh) is 7 percent below the state median.

Additionally, we have been operating on a thinner margin in regards to our debt service when compared with our peers and we still exceed our loan covenants — which makes our lenders happy.

With the energy usage of OTEC's residential membership 200 kWh below the state average, OTEC is selling approximately 20 percent less power to its residential members than other cooperatives within the state.

Yet of the 308 co-ops that participated in the financial assessment, OTEC ranked 4th for the lowest rates in the state, 21st lowest rates nationally.

On a national level, and in a time where electrical utilities are faced with major challenges in how they ensure cost recovery, we look outstanding in these categories.

With continued requirements for heavy capital expenditures to modernize our infrastructure, declines in electrical demand from energy efficiency and conservation, regulatory mandates to meet higher energy targets and increased installation of member-owned distributed generation — we are selling less power and still doing all of these remarkable things. We are operating more efficiently and it speaks volumes to the good work our OTEC employees do each and every day.

Our cooperative members can be proud in knowing they are receiving the cleanest hydropower in the nation at the lowest possible rate. OTEC is now one of Oregon's largest distribution cooperatives and serves approximately 31,000 meters in Baker, Grant, Harney and Union counties with a network of 3,000 miles of transmission and distribution lines. Clearly, when compared with similar cooperatives of the same size, our membership is getting a significant bargain. ●