

## Elevating a Safety Culture

TEC Loss Control Conference celebrates success, emphasizes the weight of the work

**M**emories from the 2026 TEC Loss Control Conference are sure to include moments that cemented the bonds of the safety community.

There was the young man, Ryan Goodwin—son of Billy Goodwin, San Bernard EC’s safety chief—and his guitar. His electric rendition of the national anthem opened the conference, and a spontaneous gathering around his singing and acoustic strumming stretched one of the evenings past midnight in the hotel lobby.

There was the 6-foot-4-inch sculpture of Willie Wiredhand, carved with a chain saw and lugged from Oklahoma by Ken Macken, NRECA’s director of safety programs. Before Willie was auctioned off during the scholarship fundraiser, he landed in a bunch of cellphone photo rolls.

There was the one-armed man and his wife—TEC’s Curtis Whitt called her his hero. They told the somber tale of navigating from nearly dying on the job to living with renewed hope despite ongoing challenges.

And there was the snake guy, Brett Parker, a full-time firefighter whose more intriguing passion is removing snakes from personal property in the Hill Country. His show-and-tell—and touch—packed a room during a breakout session intended to help lineworkers deal with snake encounters in the field.

That doesn’t include the rest of the lineup of safety and industry experts who stressed the end-



CAYT CALHOUN | TEC

less need for a culture of safety in a workplace where lapses can be so unforgiving. They addressed the gathering of 293 safety and operations professionals—the most in more than a decade—in March at the TEC Loss Control Conference & Exhibit Show in San Marcos. Included in that total were 96 first-time attendees.

The first-timers for the most part represented the youngest generation in the workforce. New faces and new mindsets can sometimes be seen as a threat to the established order of a workplace, especially at an electric cooperative, where careers often last decades.

“You want to make a connection with this next generation?” asked speaker Micah Thompson,

Neil Hesse, PenTex Energy general manager, has a good laugh during the scholarship auction as Curtis Whitt hopes to coax him into spending some money.

### SAVE THE DATE

April 21  
**Basic Electric Distribution Systems Series—Special Equipment: Transformers and Meters**  
Online

May 5–8  
**Metering School**  
Tahoka, Lyntegar EC

May 5–8  
**Troubleshooting School**  
McGregor, Heart of Texas EC

May 12  
**Basic Electric Distribution Systems Series—Safety**  
Online

June 2–3  
**Fundamentals of Electrical Theory School**  
Robstown, Nueces EC

June 8–12  
**Digger Operator School**  
Livingston, Sam Houston EC

June 9  
**Relay Coordination**  
Online

Find [photos from Loss Control schools](#) on the TEC website.

TEC works to add schools to the [2026 calendar](#) as registrations close when the maximum number of students is reached. Waiting lists are available. Click on the desired school above for details.



SCAN FOR A PDF OF THIS ISSUE



**Texas Electric Cooperatives**  
A Touchstone Energy Cooperative

A BIMONTHLY PUBLICATION FROM TEC LOSS CONTROL

### 2027 TEC LOSS CONTROL CONFERENCE & EXHIBIT SHOW

March 16–19 | San Marcos, Embassy Suites

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

loss control training director at the Electric Cooperatives of South Carolina, a statewide association. “What are you willing to change internally about yourself to benefit somebody else?”

Refusing to change, Thompson said, isn’t an option with newcomers in the workforce.

“Guess what? All they know is change,” he said. Thompson encouraged leaders and seasoned lineworkers to welcome newcom-



CAVY CALHOUN | TEC

**Chris Burrows, left, leads a panel discussion of Group 7 workers who helped electrify the Guatemalan countryside in November. Jesse Rivera of San Patricio EC tells the story of being greeted by a tired, sweaty boy who stayed up all night playing soccer because he and his friends finally had lights for their field.**

ers and be open to new ideas.

“You want to help this next generation, be willing to be adaptable,” he said. “Listen to everything they say.”

TEC’s annual conference celebrated more than 150 awards presented to individuals and organizations, and speakers focused on the necessity of a workplace safety culture.

“Culture is what drives us to do what we do,” said Wylie Davidson, a speaker who specializes in the topic. “We do what’s important to our bosses, don’t we? And that goes from the top all the way down—not just our supervisor but the training environment.”

He stressed that a robust safety culture is built upon open lines of communication and freedom to ask questions and speak up. That gives employees the confidence that they have a platform to share thoughts and ideas.

“Be aware of your surroundings,” Davidson said. “Watch out for those that maybe aren’t paying attention. Don’t be the reason for their bad day. Be aware of what your actions are. Be aware of how you impact the team.”

Mark Stubbs agrees.

“Silence is never safer than speaking up,” said Stubbs, general manager at Farmers EC, who spoke about the far-reaching effects of a serious incident.

Scott Balentine, a 34-year-old Farmers EC lineworker, died working to restore power after May 2024 storms pounded North Texas.

“It was the worst day of my career,” Stubbs said. “You don’t get over it.”

He urged lineworkers to commit to work routines that include:

- Thorough tailboard meetings before each project
- Personal protective equipment being inspected and used
- Tools checked, not blindly trusted
- Communication that is clear, correct and repeated until everyone understands the plan

“These are the levers that save lives,” Stubbs said. “They’re not glamorous, but they’re very powerful.”

**Two events in 2025 were spotlighted**, one somber and one commendable.

Kerrville Public Utility Board employees spoke about the devastation during the July 4 Guadalupe River flooding, including Mike Wittler, the general manager and CEO who also received one of three Lifesaving Awards at the conference for his rescue of an older woman from her flooded home.

More than 135 people died that holiday weekend, many swept away by the raging water. At KPUB, even as employees faced the loss of loved ones and damage to their own property, they charged into the destruction that included a substation under up to 8 feet of water and 110 broken poles. Ten river crossings were destroyed, adding to the challenge.

But the municipal utility tripled its workforce thanks to mutual aid assistance from multiple organizations, including Central Texas EC and Bryan Texas Utilities.

Amid the chaos, KPUB had power restored in five days with no incidents.

Lineworkers from TEC’s Group 7 co-ops told of the three weeks they spent in November bringing electricity to remote parts of Guatemala. The crew of 22 Texans framed 87 poles, ran 5 miles of power lines and hung six transformers in rugged conditions to bring power to 135 homes, one school, and a handful of churches and stores across the villages of Yalicar and Entre Rios.

The project continued NRECA International’s 13-year quest to bring light to communities in Central and South America. The guys on stage said the line work is what they are trained to do. But it was the people who were finally getting a bit of relief in their mostly primitive living conditions that touched the Texans’ hearts.

“I think that’s what I liked so much about being over there—

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2



CAYT CALHOUN | TEC

**Brett Parker, a captain with Canyon Lake Fire/EMS and owner of Hill Country Snake Removal, holds a bull snake as he teaches how to distinguish between venomous and non-venomous snakes.**

“I miss all the kids’ faces,” said Paul Rodriguez, Karnes EC.

**Among the award winners** was Sam Houston EC’s Gary White, who has served as a guest instructor for Loss Control for many years and received the Unsung Hero Award.

“I felt I was in a room full of deserving people,” said White, who joined the co-op world 40 years ago and has been Sam Houston EC’s director of safety and training since 2021. “It was a real honor to be recognized, but I still see it as me doing my job.”

San Bernard EC received the GE Safety Award, which General Electric bestows based on a scoring system that includes Rural Electric Safety Achievement Program accreditation, the disabling injury index, and records for driving and injury incidents.

San Bernard EC also led the list of seven co-ops honored for sur-

they really treat you like family without even knowing you,” said Carlos Rubio of Jackson EC.

Martín Flores Jr., Jackson EC, said the experience made him feel like a real hero.

But in June 2025, it was the story of a contact injury that nearly killed him and resulted in the amputation of his left arm that left its mark. Curtis Whitt, TEC’s Loss Control manager, sat down with the Belchers for a conversation about how a family overcomes the emotional and physical challenges of such a trauma. As Whitt framed the conversation: “When Superman loses his cape, what now?”

Lori explained that, as harrowing as the three-and-a-half months they spent at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas was, including more than a dozen surgeries and countless hours of therapy, getting back home to Hico was a turning point that presented new challenges.

“Honestly, that was when everything hit me, because in the hospital, I did feel kind of sheltered, even through the shock and the horror of the initial incident,” she said. Doctors, nurses and counselors guided the Belchers through virtually every minute of every day as Gregg made his slow recovery.

“At home, we had to figure out what was left,” Lori said. “And it was different. You know, everything was different.”

Gregg explained how he had the mindset common to lineworkers: Electrical contact happens to other people because he’s 10 feet tall and bulletproof.

“What I’d like to tell everyone is, you know, think about how many people that’s going to affect if you’re that guy,” he said. “It goes a long ways, a lot farther than you think.”

Gregg is proud of how hard he pushed himself when physical therapy began at the hospital. It was slow and painful, but he was determined not to remain helpless—and to get home to his dogs and horses.

He confessed there was even stronger motivation to be discharged.

“I had to try to get out of there before they cut something else off.” ■

passing 1 million hours worked without a lost-time incident, achieving nearly 1.9 million hours.

In addition to KPUB’s Wittler, David Tomczak of San Bernard EC and José Oranday of TEC received Lifesaving Awards.

**Videos** detailed their dramatic actions. Forty employees received Good Samaritan Awards.

Thirty-seven of the organizations that participate in the Loss Control program, including co-ops, municipal utilities and contractors, were recognized for achieving at least one year with no lost-time incidents. The city of Fredericksburg led the way with 40 years.

**One of the most moving sessions** of the conference featured Gregg Belcher, a Hamilton County EC lineworker, and his wife, Lori. Gregg, a 31-year veteran of line work, was already well-known in the co-op community for his assistance as a guest instructor at Loss Control schools and for his longtime participation in the Texas Lineman’s Rodeo.

## CONFERENCE RAISES \$87,165

Raising money for the TEC Loss Control Scholarship program is the main purpose of fun activities at the conference. An auction of 85 donated items, golf tournament, raffle and donations raised \$87,165. Since 1994, the auctions alone have raised \$850,000.

In 2025, the fundraising allowed TEC to award 53 scholarships of \$1,500 each.

# TEC SAFETY WATCH



1  
CAYT CALHOUN | TEC



4  
CAYT CALHOUN | TEC



2  
CAYT CALHOUN | TEC



5  
CAYT CALHOUN | TEC



3  
CAYT CALHOUN | TEC

1. Lori Belcher talks about her and Gregg's path through his traumatic injury. "Anybody who knows Gregg knows he's tougher than boot leather," said Curtis Whitt.

2. NRECA's Ken Macken with the Willie Wiredhand sculpture he created with a chain saw. Trinity Valley EC employees took Willie home after making the highest bid on it at the auction, \$1,000.

3. Alexis Perez, girlfriend of Southwest Texas EC lineworker Marco Gomez, jumps at the chance to hold a Great Plains rat snake.

4. Micah Thompson urges employees not to be dismissive of young co-workers joining the workforce: "We're going to blame them for the year they were born, and they got no control over that."

5. Ryan Goodwin plays the national anthem.

# TEC SAFETY WATCH



CAYT CALHOUN | TEC



CAYT CALHOUN | TEC



CAYT CALHOUN | TEC



CAYT CALHOUN | TEC



CAYT CALHOUN | TEC

1. TEC's Brooke Robertson hands a gift bag, which all first-timers received, to Aaron Tonn of Fayette EC.
2. From left, San Bernard EC's Billy Goodwin, with TEC Loss Control instructor Charlie Aleman, accepts the GE Award from GE's Oscar Rochin.
3. Gary White of Sam Houston EC is the recipient of the Unsung Hero Award.
4. Attendees check out a test switch adapter that Tesco Metering had on hand during the exhibit show. Tesco was one of 53 vendors at the conference.
5. Macken uses an analogy when he explains how complacency haunts coaches of the best football teams in the country just as it haunts the utility industry. But he said fatalities and injuries can be eliminated: "I'm just nutty enough to believe we can have an undefeated season."

[Click here](#) to see more photos from the 2026 conference.

## Lifesaving Awards

### José Oranday

#### Texas Electric Cooperatives

After hours, Feb. 28, 2025, José Oranday came upon a rollover wreck on Interstate 35 near Cotulla. Oranday, supervisor of the TEC warehouse in Dilley and a Cotulla volunteer firefighter, rushed to a burning pickup truck and pulled a woman from the passenger seat. He said he regrets not arriving sooner, when he might have been able to save the woman's husband, who was ejected from the truck and killed.

### David Tomczak

#### San Bernard EC

Soon after leaving SBEC's Fields Store office Aug. 18, 2025, David Tomczak, a contractor inspector, came upon a serious two-car accident involving four men. Without hesitation, Tomczak pulled over to assess the scene and directed a contractor for SBEC, who had also stopped, to call 911. Tomczak quickly found a man with a compound fracture and severe bleeding. Tomczak grabbed his first-aid kit, put on gloves and began applying pressure to control the bleeding. He also instructed the contractor to check the second vehicle and advised those involved to remain seated until EMS arrived. Tomczak maintained control of the situation until paramedics arrived and then assisted in applying a splint and sling to the injured man.

### Mike Wittler

#### Kerrville Public Utility Board

Mike Wittler had his hands full July 4, 2025, as massive Guadalupe River flooding overwhelmed the Kerrville Public Utility Board. Wittler, the utility's CEO, faced a substation under up to 8 feet of water and 110 broken poles. Ten river crossings were destroyed, adding to the challenge. Then, sometime before 7 a.m., Philip Stacy, his friend and a former KPUB board member, called. Stacy's 80-year-old mother-in-law, Mary Jeanne Cors, was trapped in her home, water up to her waist, with no way out. Overwhelmed emergency responders said they would be unable to reach her right away. Wittler rushed to Cors' house and rescued her.



JOSÉ ORANDAY



DAVID TOMCZAK



MIKE WITTLER



[Click here](#) to see a list of all the awards presented at the conference.

## Photo Challenge Winner

Kealeigh Alex of Jackson EC captured this image in September 2023 after a tornado ripped through the Cordele-North Edna portion of the co-op's service territory. Line crews worked in the mud, in the middle of a pasture, changing out 27 snapped poles.



KEALEIGH ALEX | JACKSON EC

## Journeyman Benefit From Ongoing Education

**TEC LOSS CONTROL** continues to garner encouraging feedback from students who attend two newly created schools that target experienced lineworkers. The Journeyman Refresher Schools, which debuted last August with a focus on transformers and metering, add to TEC's robust lineup of 60-plus schools that generally focus on employees new to the electric utility industry.

Through four refresher schools, which includes the March debut of the second option TEC offers, focusing on apparatuses and leadership, Loss Control has reached 58 students. Of those, 49 had at least six years of experience, and 14 had 16-plus years of experience.

"I really like getting a refresher on topics I learned at the beginning of my career," wrote one of the students in a questionnaire after attending the Journeyman Refresher School—Transformers and Metering in February in Tahoka.

Other aspects students cite as being most valuable include:

- "A deeper dive into transformer and meter connections. And a better understanding on why transformers and meters do the functions they do."
- "The transformer hookups that are unusual and how to go from a three-pot bank to a two-pot bank if you have a bad one."
- "In-depth description of transformers and different types of hookups for different voltages."
- "The depth of training and breaking down the connections and wiring."
- "Refreshing skills on voltage regulators."
- "In-depth discussion about situational troubleshooting."

Phil Henricks, one of the instructors for the journeyman schools and a regional supervisor in the Loss Control program, said the students seek a deeper grasp of the procedures and apparatuses in the

**Here are the journeyman schools and locations for the rest of 2026:**

### Journeyman Refresher School—Transformers and Metering

July 28–31, Bryan  
August 25–28, Livingston

### Journeyman Refresher School—Apparatuses and Leadership

June 16–19, Bryan  
June 16–19, Tahoka  
October 20–23, Merkel

[Click here](#) to learn more and register.

industry even after years of construction and outage work. "They do ask really good questions," Henricks said.

In some cases, he said, a fuller understanding of their everyday tasks and the broader role they play in their organization's system suddenly takes hold. "The light bulb kind of comes on for them," he said.

The average age of a lineworker experiencing a contact injury is 35. That's likely somebody who has been in the industry 15 years. TEC started the refresher schools to ensure the safety net for those workers stays strong. ■

## Derly Carrizales Retires From Medina EC

**IT'S NO SURPRISE** Derly Carrizales landed in a co-op career, considering his upbringing.

He lived in a house owned by Medina EC, where his dad was line foreman. His mom, not officially an employee, was the phone and radio operator when storms rolled in.

Carrizales and his siblings helped with communication duties too, and he hung around his dad's co-workers whenever he could. On weekends, he helped his dad read meters. Naturally, Carrizales followed his dad into line work.

After 43 years at Medina EC, Carrizales retired Jan. 2 as the safety manager. His proudest moment was receiving the Ray Pantel Award at the 2024 TEC Loss Control Conference.

"It was a tribute to all my family back then, and my wife and kids

today, and all my co-workers throughout the years," he said.

Two of Carrizales' children continue the family tradition. Liandra Lopez works as a business development coordinator at Medina EC, and Derly Carrizales Jr. is a journeyman lineworker at Nueces EC.

Carrizales served as a guest instructor at TEC Loss Control schools while he was a lineworker. All three of his children received Loss Control scholarships, and that prompted him in the past to donate handmade outdoor chairs to the conference's auction, the largest fundraiser for the program's scholarships. ■



CAYT GALLHOUN | TEC

## STAFF

**Martin Bevins**, VP, Comm. & Member Services  
(512) 486-6249, [mbevins@texas-ec.org](mailto:mbevins@texas-ec.org)

**Curtis Whitt**, CLCP, Loss Control Manager  
(512) 694-0232, [cwhitt@texas-ec.org](mailto:cwhitt@texas-ec.org)

**Wesley Caldwell**, CLCP, LC Regional Supervisor  
(512) 942-9351, [waldwell@texas-ec.org](mailto:waldwell@texas-ec.org)

**Phillip Henricks**, CLCP, LC Regional Supervisor  
(806) 438-0067, [phenricks@texas-ec.org](mailto:phenricks@texas-ec.org)

**Tami Knipstein**, LC Program Coordinator  
(512) 486-6271, [tknipstein@texas-ec.org](mailto:tknipstein@texas-ec.org)

**Charlie Aleman**, Loss Control Specialist  
(737) 738-4474, [caleman@texas-ec.org](mailto:caleman@texas-ec.org)

**Jay Esquivel**, Loss Control Specialist  
(737) 403-6749, [jesquivel@texas-ec.org](mailto:jesquivel@texas-ec.org)

**Mike Finnell**, Loss Control Specialist  
(512) 942-9673, [mfinnell@texas-ec.org](mailto:mfinnell@texas-ec.org)

**Chris Muennink**, Loss Control Specialist  
(737) 215-7449, [cmuennink@texas-ec.org](mailto:cmuennink@texas-ec.org)

**Devery Rosenquist**, Loss Control Specialist  
(325) 668-8626, [drosenquist@texas-ec.org](mailto:drosenquist@texas-ec.org)

**David Slimp**, Loss Control Specialist  
(940) 393-5542, [dslimp@texas-ec.org](mailto:dslimp@texas-ec.org)

**Ronnie Wiggins**, CLCP, Loss Control Specialist  
(512) 709-1177, [rwiggins@texas-ec.org](mailto:rwiggins@texas-ec.org)

**Tom Widowski**, Editor  
(512) 486-6246, [twidowski@texas-ec.org](mailto:twidowski@texas-ec.org)