

# Helping Hands:

## *An obligation to promote rural electrification*

By Bob Saint

I recently took the opportunity to volunteer two weeks of my time in Nepal for the NRECA International Foundation. I got so much more out of the experience than I gave.

After we left Washington, D.C., my wife, Ann, and I met our fellow volunteer and soon-to-be long-lasting friend, Patrick Muri, at the Los Angeles airport. Pat is from Flathead Electric Co-op in Kalispell, Mont., and is truly a “lineman without borders.”

Armed with a description of a potential project and great enthusiasm, we set out to find a place to build a power line to electrify a rural area in Nepal and teach the Nepalese people about rural electric cooperatives.

When we arrived in Katmandu on Monday morning, after being in the air over 30 hours and crossing the international dateline, our education was about to begin.

Thanks to the generous hospitality of Mahendra Shrestha and his extended family, we met with several U.S. and Nepalese government and non-government officials, toured potential project sites and had a very positive experience.



Bob Saint, NRECA

Everywhere we went, people were friendly and supported our goal of electrifying rural areas in Nepal and forming co-ops to operate and maintain the systems.

Only 11 percent of the Nepalese people have electricity. The government-owned electric utility officially supports the formation of community-owned and operated entities that would lease or own and operate the electric grids in rural areas.

We felt before we left, and feel even more strongly today, that the very successful U.S. rural electrification program of the 1930s and 40s should be used as a model for developing countries today.

We also should use the U.S. experience to develop economic guidance and standardized co-op principles.

We feel it is almost an obligation to share this successful format through the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's International Foundation programs with those who would benefit greatly from electricity.

However, almost universally we were told that building power lines to electrify rural areas was not the total answer to meet the needs of this very poor country that lacks natural resources and adequate infrastructure.

One of the problems in electrified areas is that the people can't afford to pay for the electricity, so there is much theft of electricity, or as they call it, illegal “hooking” onto the grid.

So, in conjunction with providing electricity, we also must stimulate other ways to develop the economy by providing other uses for electricity such as motors for irrigation, sawmills, looms, medical facilities and schools.

We soon found out that nothing happens easily or quickly in Nepal. The government of the Kingdom is not strong and there are almost daily strikes or protests by terrorists, Maoists or other political parties, which disrupt many activities.

Until the political situation is stabilized, dealing with the corruption and inefficiencies of the existing system will be an uphill battle.

But that doesn't mean we should give up or stop trying to help. As the patriarch of Mahendra's family told us, providing electricity to improve the lives of the Nepalese people requires patience, persistence and communication.

We will try to take his advice and not lose sight of our goal of helping the very deserving people of Nepal.

Source: NRECA