

Crews from all over pour in to help area recover from Fran

By BETTIE FENNEL

Staff Writer

Hurricanes Andrew, Hugo, Opal, Bertha, and now Fran.

Jim Boozer and other South Carolina Electric & Gas employees have mopped up after all of them.

They're just a few of the 6,500 contract workers Carolina Power & Light Co. hired to restore power after Fran swept through the area Thursday night. About 1,000 of them are in the Wilmington, Wallace and Whiteville areas.

Four County Electric Membership Corp. and other publicly owned electric cooperatives in the region have also gotten help from hundreds of their counterparts outside the state.

Tree crews, linemen and support personnel are here from all Southeastern states and as far north as Pennsylvania and Illinois and as far west as Arkansas and Louisiana, CP&L officials said Monday afternoon.

After traveling several days to get here, they faced hot, sweaty work from dawn to dusk, with some not knowing if they would have a cool place to sleep or a hot meal afterward.

But they say they're glad to help because they next hurricane may hit their area. This is why they're willing to leave their families behind, unsure when they will see them again.

"Our families have gotten used to us leaving," Mr. Boozer said.

Ernest Byrd, a security supervisor from Columbia, S.C., said he left his wife and two sons, 5 years old and 8 weeks old, to help restore power in Wilmington.

"They have forgotten how I look," Mr. Byrd said with a chuckle.

Mr. Boozer supervises one of five crews with South Carolina Electric & Gas in Wilmington. He expects to be here until Friday.

Traffic is one of the crew's biggest problems. Fast drivers distract workers. On Monday, Eugene

Hamilton, a part-time worker who gets called out on emergencies, yelled at a driver speeding past on Castle Hayne Road.

"They speed up when they see us out here," Mr. Byrd said.

But other residents have been more appreciative. Mr. Boozer said people have brought them coffee, soda and cake. One woman offered to make the workers a pot of chile.

The crew came with its own equipment, security to control traffic, and other workers, including mechanics to repair vehicles and change flat tires.

"You have a lot of flat tires when you're on a job like this," Mr. Boozer said.

A Georgia crew of utility workers arrived in town Friday night and found their Market Street hotel had no power.

"It was a long night," said Steve Stinson, a lineman with Georgia Power in Dalton, Ga., who slept without air-conditioning after driving 530 miles to Wilmington. He and other Georgia Power workers have since moved to the Landfall Park Inn, a new hotel that wasn't scheduled to open until later this month.

"Everybody has been real supportive," Mr. Stinson said. "We've met only one customer who hasn't been nice to us."

Van Chappell, of Cartersville, Ga., wearing a T-shirt stamped with Hurricane Opal, said one resident insisted crews restore his power without disrupting his compost bin. The workers did.

Other residents were more grateful.

"I think Georgia Power has the greatest bunch of guys," said Charles Steel, who lives on Country Club Road. Mr. Steel said the workers promised residents Sunday afternoon that their power would soon be restored, and they kept it — despite torrential rain.

"It was pouring like the devil . . .," he said. "I know they would rather be home watching a football game."



Staff photo by JAMIE MUNLRIEF
Mack Johnson of Florida Power and Light works on restoring power in a neighborhood off North Kerr Avenue on Monday.

S.C. veterans of 'Hugo' assess N. Topsail damage

Rescuers are through looking through rubble for missing persons in North Topsail Beach after town officials said everyone was accounted for.

But the damage assessment from Hurricane Fran is still under way.

On Monday, a search and rescue team from John's Island in Charleston County, S.C., drove four-wheel-drive vehicles across the beach, compiling damage reports. So far, Onslow County has reported total damages of \$233 million.

The 10-member team, veterans of Hurricane Hugo in 1989, started on the five-hour drive with eight chain saws, three days worth of snacks and water and no plans for a place to sleep or shower.

"As soon as we realized the hurricane was not going to hit us, we started mobilizing our team together to assist in any way possible," said Mike Barba, who left a wife and three young daughters in South Carolina.

The John's Island team has been among the rescuers looking for survivors on North Topsail Beach island.

On Friday, a couple and their child who were swept from their home and held onto a telephone pole for three hours were found safe and taken off the island.

The John's Island team found a skinny kitten, now named "Top-

sail," and on Monday came across William Ellis and Lula Henderson, an elderly couple who stayed in their beach home. The couple were running out of supplies, but the team members searched their truck and handed over canned beans, tuna, cheese and crackers.

"Thank the Lord," Ms. Henderson said.

— MISTI LEE