

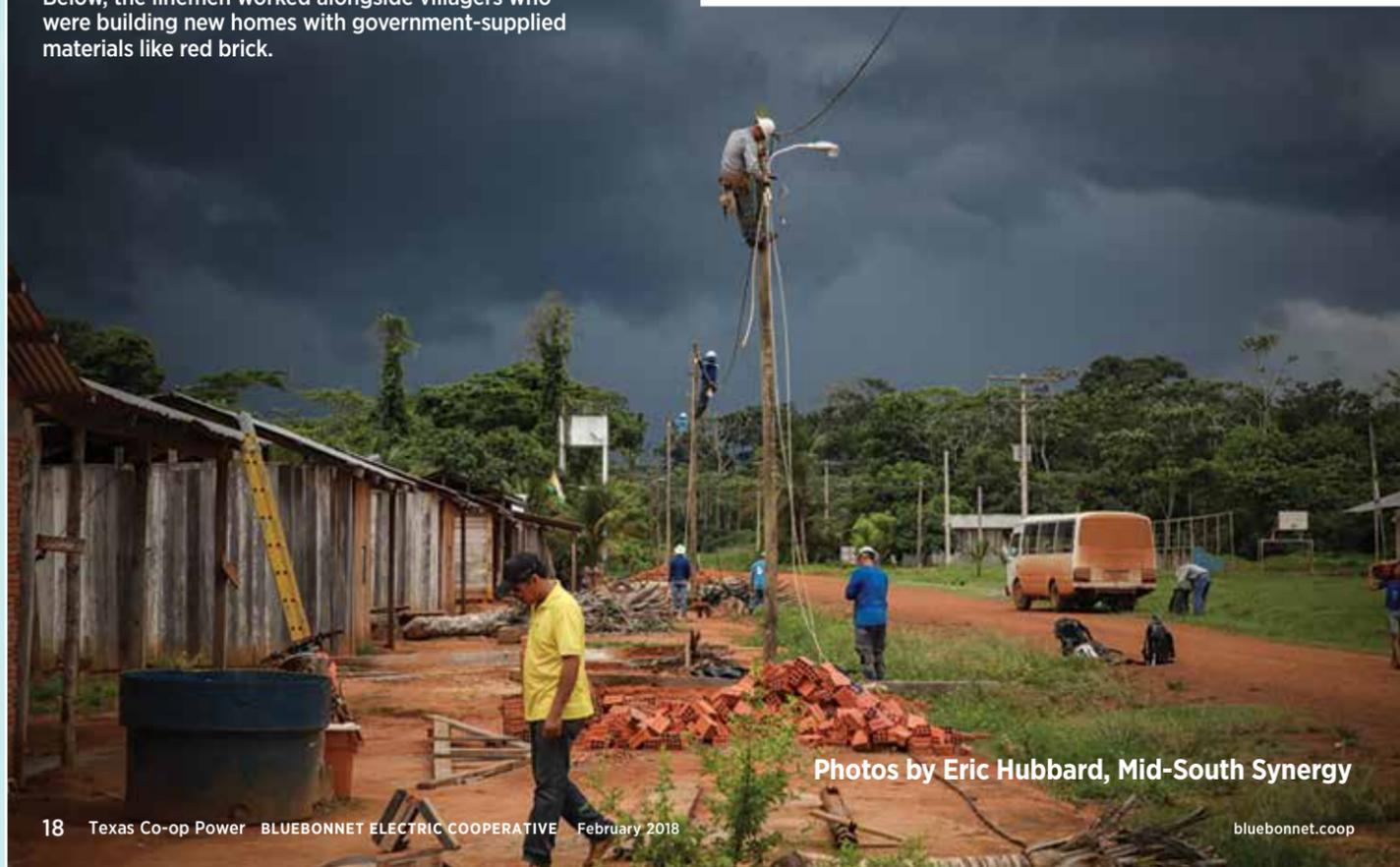
Two Bluebonnet linemen travel 3,400 miles to bring power to remote, rural villages

electrifying

BOLIVIA



Sixteen Texas linemen — including Bluebonnet's Jeremy Lynch, right, and Kyle Kasper — spent 10 days installing power poles, lines and meter wiring in the Pando region of Bolivia, seen in the map above. Below, the linemen worked alongside villagers who were building new homes with government-supplied materials like red brick.



Photos by Eric Hubbard, Mid-South Synergy



By Lisa Ogle

Linemen Kyle Kasper and Jeremy Lynch are used to working in Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's rural areas. But they had never seen anything like the three tiny, unwired South American villages of San Antonio de Maty, Batraja and Jerico in far northern Bolivia. They arrived there in November 2017 to work with 14 linemen from five other Texas electric co-ops.

Their jobs for 10 days: install power poles, attach electrical lines across five miles and connect meters to bring electricity to 125 families and two schools in the Amazon jungle. The villages are in one of the poorest parts of Bolivia, the northern state of Pando with 55,000 residents.

Kasper, 34, of Giddings has worked at Bluebonnet for 12 years. Lynch, 38, lives in Red Rock and has worked at the co-op for five years. Kasper and Lynch are the first Bluebonnet linemen to participate in the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's international program, which has been bringing electricity to remote areas around the globe for more than 50 years.

"We are really proud of Kyle and Jeremy for volunteering," said Matt Bentke, Bluebonnet's general manager. "Their hard work and sacrifice to help communities and families in need exemplifies our values and represents what we truly believe in."

Long after the linemen's trip, the reverberations of their work will be felt for generations in the tiny villages, paving the way to cleaner water, improved health, and access to better educational and economic opportunities.

Getting there

For the trip, Kasper and Lynch were each limited to two 50-pound travel bags for personal items plus linemen gear. They had to get multiple vaccinations and pretreat their clothes with the insecticide permethrin for mosquito protection. After a day and a half of flights, layovers and a five-hour bus ride

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From top: In the three small villages where linemen worked, children were a regular presence; transportation in the region is often a family affair on motorcycles along red dirt roads; small homes in the villages are typically made of wood and corrugated metal and lit with kerosene lanterns, candles or battery-powered lights; Bluebonnet linemen Kasper, left, and Lynch with two of their fans (Photo from Kyle Kasper). Many children were fascinated with the linemen's tools and equipment.





Above, a girl from the village of Batraja and her pet monkey (Photo from Kyle Kasper). At right, Kasper at work in Bolivia. He and Jeremy Lynch are the first Bluebonnet line workers to participate in an international program. Below, students at a school in Batraja, one of two schools that got electricity.

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through Bolivia's swath of the Amazon rain forest, the U.S. team arrived in the small town of Puerto Rico. The team was provided with modest cabins and a central building where food was served.

Kasper was anxious to arrive. Lynch admitted, "I was more anxious to figure out what we were getting ourselves into!"

On the road

Every day, the team took an hour bus trip to one of the three villages. At first, rain turned the unpaved red dirt roads into muddy messes. One day one of the buses slid into a ditch and was stuck until a truck driver helped pull it out. After the rain stopped, the roads dried and transformed into clouds of red dust that flew into the buses and coated the crews before the day's work even began.

As the linemen worked, locals were building concrete roads alongside them. "It's kind of amazing," Kasper said. "Their whole road system was under construction."

The Bolivian government is investing in infrastructure in rural areas earmarked for electricity to help the local economies grow, said Zuraidah Hoffman, NRECA International communications manager. The highway project is expected to take about 10 years. Eventually the paved roads will connect the remote villages to one another, as well as to nearby towns and larger cities.

On the job

Days started at 7 a.m. for the linemen, with a breakfast of eggs, bologna, bread, pineapple and papaya.

When Kasper arrived at the first job site in Batraja, his first thought was, "Surely, those aren't the poles we have to climb." The poles were thin, wobbly and made of eucalyptus, an unfamiliar wood.

The crews tried to stabilize the poles by



packing the soil around them with sticks. To their surprise, the wood was much sturdier than it appeared despite being smaller in diameter than Texas power poles. "We had to drill a hole to get a nail in," Lynch said.

Climbing was a challenge. Some poles were curvy, and others were so hard the hooks on linemen's boots couldn't penetrate. Additional concrete poles that couldn't be climbed posed particular problems. Without a bucket truck to reach the top of concrete poles, the crews climbed long ladders held steady by others and tied in place on the ground. Once at the top, they tied the ladder to the pole, donned fall-restraint gear and began work.

The first half of the Bolivia project called for installing poles and power lines in each village. Then, the linemen built meter loops (conductive wires that connect meters to homes) and the local utility distributed meters to residents.

After a hot, humid workday of up to 13 hours, linemen returned to home base to relax, play dominoes in one of a handful of air-conditioned rooms or take a shower in cold water pumped from a nearby river. Dinner was served around 8 p.m., and was typically beef, chicken or fish with beans and rice.

Before bed, the linemen called their families. Kasper and his wife, Laurie, have an

8-year-old son, Kaden. Lynch has two grown children and is set to marry his fiancée, Kalli Meuth, in April.

Their biggest fans

The Bolivian villages consisted primarily of homes, a few schools and rudimentary medical facilities. Batraja had a candy store at one end and a small convenience store on the other. Interpreters helped the linemen communicate with residents.

When they weren't in school, the village children seemed overjoyed that the workers were there and were keenly interested in everything they did. "Some of the kids helped lay out the material we needed at each pole, and sometimes they would bring material to us if we were short of something," Kasper said.

Some youngsters were fascinated by the linemen's drills. After hearing the loud tools for the first time, the kids — in flip-flops or no shoes at all — would run around, mimicking the sound, Kasper said.

Spending time with the kids was one of Lynch's favorite parts of the trip. One day, a preschool-age girl walked up to him and made clear she wanted to be picked up and hugged, he said. Despite the language barrier, the children "showed the most appreciation



CoServ Electric's Christopher Hammonds, kneeling, and Bluebonnet's Kasper, right, build a meter loop, the conductive wires that connect a meter to a home.

for the work we were doing," Lynch said.

The linemen spent a little time playing sports with the children and introduced them to American football. "Most of the kids didn't even know how to hold or throw it," Lynch said.

Life in the village

Villagers' homes are lit by kerosene lanterns, candles and battery-powered lights. Cooking is done outdoors in open-fire wood stoves. A typical village home is made of wood with a corrugated metal roof. It usually has a bedroom, kitchen and sometimes a primitive toilet area. The small rooms have dirt or wood floors, sheets hanging as doorways and open-air windows.

New, improved homes are being built, though, with materials supplied by the government. Those new houses have concrete floors, red brick exteriors, mortar walls and septic systems.

Without electricity, residents have no appliances. Without refrigerators, fresh food is necessary. Children snack on fruit all day.

Pigs and skinny dogs roam freely in the villages. A few families have pet monkeys.

Being in a South American jungle, the linemen came across some interesting bugs and animals. In addition to plentiful mosquitoes, the area is home to poisonous snakes, huge tarantulas and big, colorful, furry asps with

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River adventure

On their one day off, the Texas linemen and the interpreters were all smiles at the start of a surprise fishing trip up the local river, courtesy of an interpreter and the Bolivian River Navy. They split up evenly on each side of the 30-foot, bare-bones wood boat in order to stay upright. The day got late, expected fishing gear still hadn't arrived and it seemed like a good time to return to their base. Then the engine stopped. Passengers had to pry boards from the boat and grab sticks to paddle back, until a villager came to their aid. (Photo from Kyle Kasper)

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stings that pack a wallop.

Most family incomes come from cultivating Brazil nuts or constructing the new highways. Other locals spend their days



A beautiful but poisonous asp caterpillar was one of the many bugs, snakes and creatures encountered in the jungle (Photo from Jeremy Lynch).

maintaining life in the village: fetching water from the river, washing clothes and cooking. Most villagers travel on dirt bikes and a common sight is a whole family piled onto one.

The linemen's finished work will connect to a 20-amp breaker at each home, providing enough electricity for a few outlets and a couple of lights, or possibly even a long-awaited refrigerator. "They won't have to rely on candlelight," Lynch said.

It's another step toward economic growth that will eventually allow them to start buying appliances, radios and TVs, Hoffman said.

Saying goodbye

On the team's last day in Bolivia, residents from each village attended farewell festivities in San Antonio de Maty. Locally produced Brazil nuts were central to the food and dances. The children put on linemen shirts and hard hats and pantomimed the work they had watched. The role of Bluebonnet's Kyle Kasper was played by the tallest, skinniest kid in the crowd. Then the children pulled the linemen in for a traditional dance.

"Seeing their way of life, the difference between what they have and what we have," really left an impression, Lynch said.

"It really makes you grateful for what you have here," Kasper added.

That last night came to a most fitting end: A breaker was turned on at a house in the village, and there was light — powered by electricity. ■



About the project

Mid-South Synergy, the electric cooperative that borders Bluebonnet's service area to the east, led the Texas linemen on the Bolivia project in partnership with NRECA International.

The nonprofit NRECA International seeks to improve the quality of life for rural communities in developing economies. It has helped establish 250 rural utilities in Africa, the Philippines, Haiti and other countries and has been working with Bolivian cooperatives for more than 50 years.

Each year, NRECA International partners with American electric cooperatives to send an average of 75 line workers and other employees to remote parts of the world.

Go to electrifybolivia.coop to learn more. Pedernales, CoServ, Bartlett and United electric cooperatives also participated.

The villagers put on a closing ceremony and celebration to thank the crews for their work. The event included traditional dances, above left, and a skit in which the children donned the linemen's gear to imitate them, left. The crews from all six Texas electric cooperatives, below. Their work will improve the lives of the residents in the region for many years.

Application deadlines are near for Board seat candidates, scholarships

■ Candidates for three seats on Bluebonnet's **Board of Directors** must submit petitions, filing fees and completed application for nomination forms by **4 p.m. Feb. 7**, at any of our five member service centers in Bastrop, Brenham, Giddings, Lockhart and Manor. The seats up for election are District 1, Caldwell, Gonzales, Guadalupe and Hays counties; District 2, Travis County; and District 3, Bastrop County. Get information about eligibility and the application on bluebonnet.coop: click on About, then Leadership, then the Becoming a Director link or call a member service representative at 800-842-7708.

■ Bluebonnet will award 60 \$2,500 **scholarships to graduating high school seniors** planning to pursue higher education at academic institutions or trade and technical colleges. The deadline to apply is **March 9**. Applications are at bluebonnet.coop: click Community, then Scholarships.

If you have questions, call Karen Urban at 512-332-7961 or email her at karen.urban@bluebonnet.coop.