



## SEC Expands Member Satisfaction Surveys

Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC) exists to provide reliable electricity to its members across 18 counties in central and southern Virginia.

So, how are we doing? SEC wants to know what you, our members, think about your electric co-op.

Knowing that the best way to find out is to simply ask, SEC has begun working with TSE Services, a cooperatively owned market research firm based in Raleigh. Founded in 1998 by North Carolina's electric cooperatives, TSE Services now conducts member satisfaction surveys for cooperatives across the United States.

While SEC has tracked broader member satisfaction levels for a decade or more, the current survey tracking project began in late 2014, when SEC achieved its highest ever score of an 82, one point above the national average for electric co-ops. While two surveys were conducted in 2015, SEC will ramp up to four in 2016, on a quarterly basis, and continue at this pace for the foreseeable future.

Members can expect to receive survey phone calls beginning in early January. Survey questions will seek input about specific transactions done with SEC, as well as overall satisfaction levels.

The goal of the surveying is to “try to get better at what you’re doing,” says Scott J. Saff, manager of research services for TSE Services and the North Carolina Association of Electric Cooperatives. He says getting better will benefit the Cooperative’s entire membership.

Jeff Edwards, SEC’s president & CEO, says the Cooperative appreciates members’ participation in the surveys, which are part of the communications plan approved by the SEC Board of Directors.

“As a business that wants to always provide the best possible service to our members, it’s important that we know what we’re doing well and, more importantly, where we may need improvement,” Edwards says. “While members are welcome and encouraged to call our offices and talk to our employees at any time about their service, we see the surveying as another way to get their input.”

Saff says the actual phone survey firm, FGI Research in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, collects information about transactions that members have had, such as right-of-way maintenance, outages, new service connections, phone call experiences and more. The information gathered is specific and detailed.

Input is also collected from members about their overall perception of SEC in the community. “Both of these things work together, the broader opinion and the specific,” Saff adds.

Survey participants must be members of the Cooperative, and are randomly selected by a computer, according to Saff. Calls come from a 919 area code in North Carolina and are generally made Monday through Saturday from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., although Saff says calls don’t usually go as late on Saturday. He says no calls are made on Sunday or holidays.

Saff says callers will identify themselves as being from FGI Research on behalf of Southside Electric Cooperative. Surveys last between 5-10 minutes. He says the goal is to make the calls as “short and succinct as possible.”

Members can expect survey callers to be patient, and willing to explain or clarify their questions. Saff says they want to take the necessary time to gather the information, while making the call a pleasant and quick experience.

Individuals who may answer the telephone will be asked if they are responsible for paying the electric bill or know about the electric account. They will also be asked how long they have been an SEC member, their average monthly bill and age.

Saff says callers never ask for Social Security, credit card and bank account numbers or any other personal information.

Law enforcement always advises people to never give financial information over the telephone.

Persons receiving calls are asked if they consider themselves a member, owner or customer; how satisfied they are with SEC; their expectations for the Cooperative; and how satisfied they are with other service providers. Individuals who have had transactions with SEC are asked specifically about those interactions. Survey callers will always ask members if they have any concerns or questions that require a follow-up call from a Cooperative employee.

Saff says TSE Services maintains a list of members not to call and keeps track of who's been called to ensure that the same people won't be called again for another 12 months. If someone isn't home, Saff says FGI Research will call back several times.

Interviewers make 400 calls for each survey. Saff says all of the answers are combined into an overall rating. After being gathered, the data is analyzed and put into a report.

So, what have members said? In a recent survey, SEC's overall satisfaction score from all 400 respondents was 8.48 out of 10. The quarterly benchmark was 8.72 out of 10. The benchmark is developed using information gathered from electric co-op members across the nation through thousands of interviews.

Members gave SEC higher ratings for providing reliable service, having competent and knowledgeable employees and restoring electric service when the power went out. Lower ratings were connected to costs and assisting members with managing their energy use. Interestingly, the study report notes that when compared to other services, such as cable TV or Internet providers, cooperatives get among the highest satisfaction marks.



A key benchmarking tool now used by SEC, the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), is derived from these phone surveys.

An ACSI score is a national rating that many businesses use to gauge how well they are performing in the eyes

of customers. It's a "universal way of measuring satisfaction," Saff says. Many Fortune 500 businesses use these same metrics, and SEC wants to measure themselves against the best.

SEC's ACSI score in the latter portion of 2014 was an 82. In 2015, the second quarter score dropped to an 80, but climbed back to an 81 in the fourth quarter (released in late November). Nationwide, the most recent 2015 ACSI data shows electric cooperatives at an 80, while investor-owned electric utilities scored a 74.

Saff says, in general, scores of 80 or higher for utilities are very good.

***For more information about SEC's member satisfaction surveys, contact the Public & Member Relations Department at 1-800-552-2118***

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