

# ONTARIO HYDRO LINE CLEARANCE PROGRAM<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Increased attention to customer service and to environmental initiatives has created significant changes in Ontario Hydro's traditional line clearing programs. A new management system is being implemented that relates forestry work program outputs to Corporate targets for reliability, customer satisfaction and safety. This system will assist in justifying budgets in the face of increased pressures for line clearing dollars.

What constitutes a well managed line clearance program? A well managed line clearance program provides for improved work program planning, and a reporting system that feeds this planning while providing for enhanced levels of control and accountability. The success or failure of the program is measured by the customers—they keep the scorecard. It is our responsibility to listen to them and deliver some "predictably positive experiences". To describe Ontario Hydro's line clearing programs four discrete areas require examination: the history of these programs, the ongoing problems and challenges, the recent changes and attempts to deal with them and how to finance these changes.

A brief history. In 1930 Ontario Hydro hired twenty-two people to form the forestry operation. These tree experts assisted in delivering reliable electric service to the customer. This year, 1990, marks the sixtieth anniversary of forestry operations. Today we employ approximately 700 people in the forestry/environment field. The annual budget is \$60 million. Service is provided for one million customers. About 75% of the work is accomplished by in-house staff.

For many years the successful addition of staff resulted in increased levels of completed and reported work. We progressed in lowering clearing cycles, and in the categories of customer relations, work quality, improved work methods and equipment, and in safety.

Work programs were planned, budgets obtained and resourced based largely on local ex-

perience, local bargaining prowess and local conditions. These conditions changed dramatically across the Province in terms of terrain, environment, and available equipment. We completed line clearing and brush control, largely through herbicide application, on a feeder basis. We implemented systems to measure the forestry contribution to reliability and to the work actually accomplished.

Although this was a workable management program and a definite improvement to "customized fire fighting" we still faced some serious challenges. Unfortunately the reporting systems bore little relationship to the planning systems. In some cases the units were different, and there was significant variation in work accomplished even between similar adjacent areas. The accomplishments were difficult to predict in the absence of firm work standards. This resulted in weak management control and little customer input. The required workload was difficult to determine both locally and centrally. Therefore Ontario Hydro had difficulty in predicting the impact of not accomplishing the work program.

How have we responded to these challenges in order to provide a well managed line clearing program sensitive to customer and the environment? We established, and set targets for the three main corporate parameters or reasons for doing forestry work as follows: i) our contribution to a reliable, secure supply of electricity to the customer. Our surveys have shown this, along with reasonable pricing, to be the customers first priority, ii) customer satisfaction with forestry related business, and iii) our contribution to a safe, hazard free environment for the public and staff.

As well, we made customer and environmental commitments to do the following: i) to contact customers personally prior to any tree work being done on their property. Previously letters of notification were used, ii) to reduce

1. Presented at the annual conference of the International Society of Arboriculture in Toronto, Ontario in August 1990.

the quantities of herbicide used by 35% by 1993. Actually the reduction last year was more than 80% on the distribution system; but at considerable cost and with much reduced results, iii) to offer an effective tree planting program to replace customers 'landscape trees', and iv) to clear privately owned lines.

All of these initiatives are well founded and consistent with Ontario Hydro's commitment to proactive environmental protection and sustainable development. As well, the customers and the public were telling us that's what they want. Not surprisingly, however, these changes require increased levels of funding. This is particularly true because of the high unit costs to treat brush manually and mechanically versus chemically. As well, early accomplishment indicators foresaw backlog problems within the next five years.

How will these programs and initiatives be funded? The main vehicle to substantiate the need for forestry resources in Ontario Hydro is an instrument known as the "Five Year Business Plan for the Retail System". Updated annually, the exercise allows for dollars to be rotated among programs such as lines, forestry and customer service to where the needs are greatest.

Competition for line clearing dollars has escalated to the point that we've had to review previous "dire predictive" methodologies to have an effective input to the Business Plan. The pending "General Sales Tax" means higher rate increases and contributes to a general tightening of the Corporate position on maintenance funds.

The emphasis now has to shift to the actual, demonstrated forestry contribution to the retail business. So it becomes a question of what am I getting for my line clearing dollars? And what does it all mean? A new strategy for managing the forestry program clearly requires develop-

ment. We will have to set standards to forecast and measure trees treated, line kilometers controlled, trees planted, customer request work, etc. This is the output side of the business in a simple "input—output" model. The required inputs are labour, equipment and dollars.

We can then link these outputs to the corporate parameters of why we do forestry related business in the first place. For example, a certain level of funding will yield a specified level of work output which in turn provides a level of reliability that we deem "acceptable", along with a high degree of customer satisfaction within specified degrees of safety.

This provides for improved work program planning and a reporting system that feeds this planning, while providing for enhanced levels of control and accountability. All of the components of a well managed line clearance program that is responsive to change and to customer involvement are present.

The bill paying customer will get more value for the dollar in terms of a safe, secure supply of power, and enhanced levels of customer service.

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**Résumé.** L'attention accrue pour le service aux consommateurs et pour les initiatives environnementales a créé des changements significatifs au sein des programmes traditionnels de dégagement des réseaux chez Hydro-Ontario. Un nouveau système de gestion a été mis sur pied pour relier les programmes de travaux forestiers aux objectifs de la corporation pour la fiabilité ainsi que la satisfaction et la sécurité du consommateur. Ce système a pour but de justifier les hausses croissantes de budgets pour le dégagement des lignes.