

St. Croix Natural Gas Sets AMR Install Record

Three-Month Effort

Special To *Pipeline & Gas Journal*

Being small and nimble has its advantages — just ask St. Croix Valley Natural Gas based in River Falls, Wisconsin. Working with Itron Gold Partner Business Associate, Hydro Metering Technology, this rural utility implemented its automated meter reading (AMR) system in only three months. That's got to make it one, if not the fastest AMR installation on record.

Back in 2000, up to four meter readers armed with paper route books and pencils would take to the field. Their mission was to read some 5,500 meters located in the city of River Falls, the city of Prescott, and the Village of Hammond. With the task requiring 20 eight-hour days to get the five billing cycles read each month, and regional growth expected to continue, the utility reached a crossroad. The 11-employee strong company would have to hire more help to keep reading manually, or it could look to technology.

Don Piepgras, president of the privately owned St. Croix Valley Natural Gas explains, "Hydro Metering Technology arranged for us to visit two Itron AMR installations and that helped us visualize the benefits the system could provide at our own facility. After pulling together a rough cost analysis, Hydro helped us locate a financing company. We worked out a deal with a private leasing company and were able to install the AMR system for roughly the same cost as we would have paid to hire more staff to continue reading manually."

"St. Croix began implementing the AMR technology in February 2001," recalls Paul Frost, vice president of Hydro Metering Technology. "Since the winter months are traditionally a slow period for the operations employees at St. Croix, the utility wanted to leverage their availability, so we provided them with an AMR installation class. The single day course showed them how to retrofit their American and Rockwell meters with Itron encoder receiver transmitter (ERT) meter modules, how to program the device, and ver-

ify the readability of the meter."

According to Piepgras, "Another thing Hydro did that really helped us was to loan us a couple of spare ReadOne Pro units, which are needed to program the ERTs. Used in addition to the ReadOne Pro unit we purchased, we were able to have up to three employees in the field at any given time installing ERTs. If it weren't for the loaner units, the installation would have taken a lot longer."

Hydro also implemented Itron's MV-RS (Multi-Vendor Reading System) software and worked with the utility to ensure the collected meter reading data transferred seamlessly to St. Croix's billing system.

By May 2001, the gas utility was using a vehicle-mounted DataPac and simply driving by meters, collecting reads from more than 99.8% of its ERT-equipped meters. Read time was trimmed down to two nine-hour shifts, office resources were liberated from data entry, and the billing process became more efficient.

Today, 99.7% of St. Croix's 6,700 gas meter base is equipped with AMR technology. Currently the utility uses its DataPac to read one area; while a new Mobile Collection System (MC2) unit, purchased in January 2005, obtains readings from the other two areas served by St. Croix.

"The AMR system is helping us with our gas-balancing efforts by enabling us to implement a practice of reading our entire customer base the same day," said Piepgras. "Presently, using both collectors it's easy to comfortably cover our 130-square-mile territory in ten to

twelve hours. However, we expect that as we gain proficiency with the MC2, we'll be able to read all our meters in less than nine hours."

"We've gone from five billing cycles that took 20 eight-hour shifts to read, down to one billing cycle that potentially, we could have one person read in nine hours. We've gained efficiency in the office because we don't have all that manual data entry, and we rarely get re-read requests because the system is so accurate," explains Piepgras. "Even though we're adding about 300 new meters to our territory annually, we don't foresee meter reading necessitating a change in our staffing levels any time soon." *PE-GJ*

