

Popped pole puts out phones

Downed fibre-optic cable also affects Internet, debit cards, 9-1-1

Communications systems as far north as Wollaston Lake came to a screeching halt early last Saturday morning, after a stolen truck slammed into a power pole fitted with fibre-optic cable.

At approximately 4:45 a.m. on July 2, a stolen blue Dodge truck smashed into a power pole on the corner of gravel-paved Louis Rd. and Boardman St. The pole was one of several in La Ronge that carries fibre-optic networking cable, used for a wide range of telecommunications.

When the RCMP and SaskPower employees arrived on scene, the driver of the truck was missing and the road was littered with cables. Fearing the results of live electrical wires left on the road, the police gave instructions that all the

lines be cut, and the SaskPower staff complied, not realizing that one of the lines was a key fibre-optics cable. "The RCMP was just being prudent," SaskPower spokesperson Larry Christie said Monday.

As a result of the cut, Internet access, bank machines, and debit and credit card machines in local businesses were all disabled. The CBC radio signal was knocked out, as were the two new stations from Prince Albert. MBC Radio continued broadcasting as usual from its offices in the La Ronge Industrial Park.

Telephone service was also disabled in parts of La Ronge and outside town limits, because of reliance on fibre-optics for the sub-stations that switch service from the La Ronge central office to Air Ronge, private resort areas such as Wadin Bay, and communities all along the northern phone grid, including Stanley Mission, Southend, Wollaston and the uranium mines. Long distance calls to and from

La Ronge were also prevented for the same reason.

After SaskPower replaced the pole, SaskTel repair crews were called in from Prince Albert to splice

In the meantime, La Ronge area businesses were put in the awkward position of telling customers they couldn't use their debit cards for payment, receiving in return everything from

Some businesses had customers leave, either in frustration or to try to get cash out of an ATM or bank machine – which also proved impossible. Information trickled in through the rumour mill and some updates from MBC Radio, but businesspeople were frustrated by the lack of concrete details. "I wasn't told anything," said Gold Country Mohawk supervisor Crystal Toth, whose Air Ronge gas station and grocery store was also without phone service.

The area's 9-1-1 emergency system was also knocked down. Senior La Ronge Emergency Medical Services (EMS) technician Nancy Dron was housebound for the entire day with police, fire and EMS radios, with all emergency calls being routed through to her as a temporary dispatcher. Dron and her colleagues were amongst the first to discover the number of affected services, as they attempted to figure out why their FleetNet radios (which work off cell towers), cellphones, and calls to 9-1-1 and to the Prince Albert dispatch centre weren't working. They also started spreading the word about the downed Interac system when their attempts to pay for breakfast failed.

By 10 a.m., Dron, EMS owner Eric Bell, acting fire chief Kevin Molnar and La Ronge

mayor Joe Hordyski, with the RCMP participating by phone, were gathered for a hastily-called meeting to set up an alternate dispatch system for the area's emergency services. Dron's day off served them well, although no calls ultimately made it through to the back-up number, which was advertised on MBC. As complaints came in within minutes of the phone system becoming operational, Dron fears that the news of their back-up plan didn't spread as well as they had hoped.

"I don't know if people were trying to call 9-1-1 today. I have a feeling they might have," she said. "We (EMS) didn't take anybody in (to the La Ronge Health Centre) because we didn't get any calls, but I heard... they were busy in there today."

While the situation was extremely frustrating for northern residents, SaskTel won't be putting in a back-up system to prevent future service disruption, spokesperson Michelle Englot said. "SaskTel doesn't guarantee uninterrupted phone service, because we are dealing with technology... and things do occur," she said. "It's hard to provision for a freak accident."

The RCMP are still investigating the incident, as the driver of the stolen truck has not been found. There is no official word on whether alcohol was a factor.

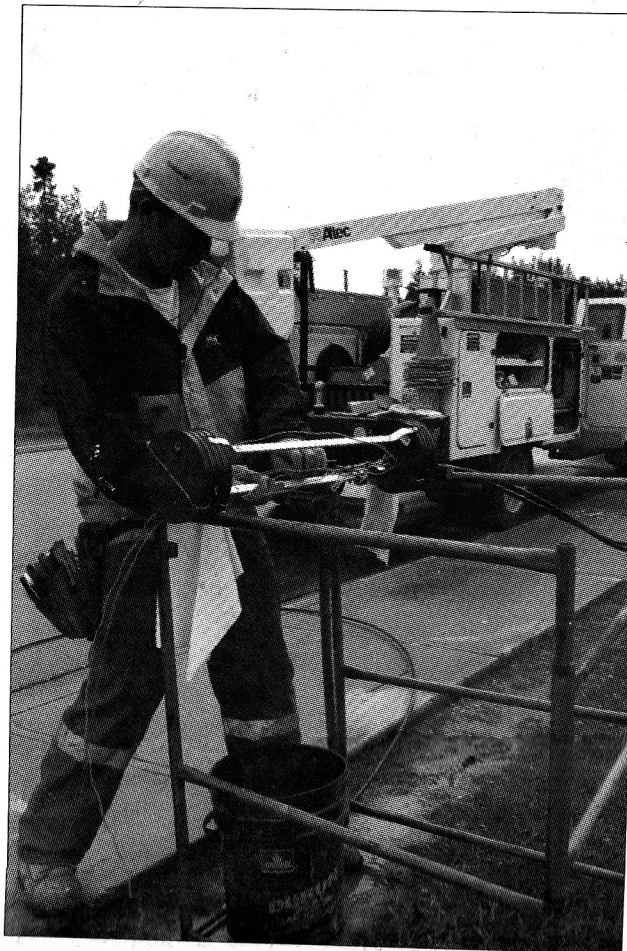


Photo by Carmen Pauls Orthner

A SaskTel fibre-optics technician performs the delicate repair work required to bring the North's communications system back into operation.

cabling between affected poles, and do the precision work required to replace the hair-sized fibres that so many communications systems depend upon. The problems were finally fixed by 4:55 p.m., 12 hours after the crash.

polite understanding to outright hostility. "Even though we had a sign on the door, people didn't see the sign," said La Ronge Co-op produce manager Trina Kenney. "Everybody expects to pay with debit... No one carries cash any more."

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