

Powering Up

Sarah Rogers is the new guardian of Florida's supply of electricity.

by Jennifer Lugo • jenniferlugo@tampabay.rr.com

WHEN PEOPLE ASK SARAH ROGERS what she does, she answers as simply as she can.

Even so, "I never get a follow-up question," she laughs.

Rogers calls herself a math geek. Her position is somewhat obscure. The tall 47-year-old is the new president and CEO of the Florida Reliability Coordinating Council Inc. (FRCC), based in Tampa, a non-profit overseer of all things electric.

Say what? Yeah. That's about as far as Rogers gets in conversations, too. In simple terms, the FRCC is a non-profit agency whose job it is to ensure the reliability and adequacy of Florida's power grid.

 Read online at www.maddux.com

Still listening?

The job comes with some potential shockers: After the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005, gas production facilities in the Gulf of Mexico were highly impacted and constrained, Rogers says, and that's dangerous since more than one-third of electric generation produced in Florida comes from natural gas.

"The supply is more at risk than anyone thought," Rogers says. "We learned we're probably too dependent on natural gas for electricity."

FRCC worked with the Public Service Commission and the Governor's office to raise awareness of the issue, and the Public Service Commission is now encouraging fuel diversity. Utilities in the state are responding, Rogers says, by diversifying their planned generation expansions for the future.

Rogers worked for Progress Energy during Florida's infamous string of hurricanes – first Charley, then Francis, Jeanne and Ivan. "It was unreal," she says. "It was the most mentally challenging situation I've faced. We worked 12-hour shifts for weeks on end, directing and coordinating the rebuilding of the transmission infrastructure and the hundreds of crews from out of state."

FRCC, Rogers' new employer, is funded by its members, which include utilities and independent power producers, and NERC (North American Electric Reliability Council). NERC was founded by electric utilities in response to the great blackout of 1965 in the northeastern United States, the largest in history. The northeast power system broke up within seconds of the initial disturbance, and within minutes millions of people were without electricity for hours. The blackout brought to light the

Tom Berndt



lack of high-level planning and oversight needed to prevent such outages, and restoration efforts were hampered because of differing practices and procedures.

The Electric Reliability Act of 1967, passed as a result of the blackout, created regional reliability councils from groups of interconnected power systems. NERC was then formed to oversee the regional councils in developing common operating policies and procedures. NERC now has eight regions across the country, and FRCC is one of them. Rogers is one of just two women heading NERC's eight electric acronyms.

"I'm definitely a woman in a man's world," she says.

Kevin Wailes, general manager for the city of Tallahassee Electric Operations, says Rogers was a shoo-in for the job. "Sarah brought both significant experience and the skills that are really a direct match with a lot of the issues that are facing FRCC."

At FRCC, Rogers is charged with guarding against cata-

strophic “cascading” electrical outages. “Think of the electrical grid as a system of roads,” she explains. “We’re looking at bridge failures and multi-car pile-ups versus two-car accidents.”

What kind of shape, then, is Florida’s grid in?

Electrically-speaking, the state is an island. Its electrical supply is made up of two geographical areas – a small segment of the panhandle and the rest of the peninsula. The tip of the panhandle is serviced by Alabama utilities. The peninsula east of the Apala-



chicola River is served by the FRCC and its 27 members.

Florida’s geography gives it a natural electric advantage. Not having immediate neighbors to the west, east or south reduces the risk of being sucked into another state’s power crisis. And there’s only one electrical interface with the rest of the U.S.

“Less interconnectivity is a good thing and a bad thing,” says Rogers. “If an event occurs like a big blackout, we’re able to isolate ourselves from the rest of the United States electrically – so that’s a good thing if the problem is somewhere else in the U.S. The bad thing is we have to be solely responsible for ourselves.”

Because of that, the Public Service Commission requires higher reserve margins for Florida electricity providers – about 10 percent more

than what’s required for other East Coast states.

In addition to managing Florida’s electric “traffic,” Rogers says the FRCC is about to amp up its capacity. “Historically, we’re a forum for our 27 members to address operating and planning issues, marketing issues, and we facilitate that. Now we’ll also have the role of an enforcer of standards.”

Currently the standards that utilities adhere to – from the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) – are voluntary. FERC is an arm of the government that oversees interstate commerce of gas and electric utilities. In June, Rogers says, FERC plans to make those standards mandatory and levy fines on non-compliers. The FRCC has applied to become the enforcer for its region. “We had a good-cop role,” she says. “Now we’ll have a bad-cop role.”

Because of the extra work, Rogers expects to hire about five employees next year. That means FRCC will employ a little more than 20. Rogers, who most recently managed some 800 employees, seems quite comfortable with that number and her new role. Her sizeable office – private bathroom included – is on the top floor of the Towers at Westshore, with a bustling view of Tampa International Airport.

Rogers took over the position when J. Ken Wiley retired in 2006. Her resume includes 22 years with Progress Energy and its precursor Carolina Power & Light Company. Since 2004, as vice president of transmission, she managed some 100,000 miles of transmission lines in Florida and the Carolinas. Between 2000-2004, Rogers oversaw Progress Energy’s Florida electric restoration following Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne. During that time she interacted with FRCC leadership.

“I know all the players, and they know me,” says Rogers.

One of the biggest players is Florida Power & Light (FPL), the state’s largest electric utility company and the owner of more than half of the state’s transmission lines. FPL is the Florida council’s designated “security coordinator.”

You could say it acts as an “electric border patrol.” From a control room in Miami, FPL employees monitor the state’s power grid. If an electrical crisis looms in the north, they can pull the plug on the connections Florida has to the rest of the U.S. They also stay in contact with 12 control areas throughout the state. If Florida had an electrical emergency, control room employees could pick up a phone hotline and simultaneously reach all of the state’s control areas.

The control room is amazing, Rogers says, but lately she’s more into people and the gray areas between the mathematical black and white. “Impacting with people is so different than impacting with systems. That’s what I like most about a leadership role.” ■

>> Sarah Rogers

FAVORITE TV SHOWS

Survivor, Lost, Prison Break

HOBBIES

Poker, travel, reading, calculus and differential equations

ON HER BOOKSHELF

Dean Koontz and other “escapist paperbacks”

COMPANIONS

Three dogs – two black labs and a boxer

EDUCATION

Electrical Engineering degree, San Diego State University; Master’s degree in Business Administration, Duke University