

BPL is all the rage in rural Internet

Popularity of high-speed effort like one in Martinsville area echoed nationwide

By Norm Heikens norm.heikens@indystar.com

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MARTINSVILLE, Ind. -- Difficult though it was, Fred and Robin Livesay ran three businesses from their home just outside town with a pokey dial-up link to the Internet.

South Central REMC lineman Troy Fisher (background) installs hardware alongside Jeff Musgrave. -- Kelly Wilkinson / The Star

Now they have a new Internet service that sends information over electrical lines, and they wonder how they lived without it.

In November, the retirees' electric utility, South Central Indiana REMC in Martinsville, made their home a test site for "broadband-over-powerline." The service sends and receives signals over the same wire carrying their electricity -- and is being tried at dozens of sites across the country.



Plug a computer into a special Internet modem that in turn plugs into a wall socket, and they're connected.

"We were kind of skeptical," Fred Livesay said. "I mean, how are you going to put it on electrical lines?" But, he added, "it has made life much better."

Electric utilities are joining long-distance telephone carriers and cable television companies in a rush to expand high-speed Internet service.

But many rural areas have been left out. That hampers people wanting to work from home, students doing homework online and businesses needing to communicate with customers and suppliers.

New technology has enabled more than 40 field trials of broadband-over-powerline across the country, said Sam Spencer, editor of BPL Today, the online newsletter covering the industry. Manassas, Va., is furthest along, having offered it commercially for about a year, Spencer said.

Cinergy's experiment is thought to be the largest

Launched as a pilot in May, Cinergy, based in Cincinnati, had outfitted more than 40,000 homes there with the equipment by the end of last year, though spokeswoman Kathy Meinke wouldn't say how many had subscribed to the Internet service.

However, she said half of those subscribers had switched from cable or DSL. Cinergy hopes to expand the service into Indiana this year, but isn't certain when, Meinke said. Cinergy serves 62 Central and southern Indiana counties, but not Marion County.

South Central REMC and Cinergy aren't the only utilities with Indiana connections tinkering with the technology. Lebanon Utilities plans to introduce the service by mid-summer in the Boone County community and compete with similar services offered by telephone and cable firms. Information Technology Manager Randy Parsons said Lebanon Utilities hopes to enlist subscribers at a quarter of the 7,500 locations it serves.

South Central found in a survey that virtually none of its customers in a proposed pilot area close to Martinsville had access to high-speed Internet, so Chief Executive Kevin Sump launched the pilot project in November in the hope of offering the service even to its far-flung customers in Brown County.

"We're confident that if the pilot works, we can do it throughout the whole system," Sump said.

Speed's the thing

Broadband-over-powerline travels in shortwave frequencies similar to those used by amateur radio operators.

Users plug computers into modems the size of small books that in turn plug into electric outlets. Regenerator boxes hooked to the powerline every half-mile filter out static and boosts the signal.

Most operate at up to 500 kilobits per second -- 10 to 20 times faster than dial-up, similar to DSL and slower than cable. However, new technology could match cable speeds. Speed and convenience translate to more desirable homes, said Martinsville real estate broker Wayne Ready.

Market value

A home with high-speed Internet access sells for about \$1,000 more and is on the market two to three months less than a comparable house without the access, Ready said.

"If there's not a way they can get that service in the particular neighborhood, they'll shy away from that house," Ready said.

The Livesays used to find other things to do while waiting on their slow Internet connection. Fred Livesay steered drug development at Eli Lilly and Co., and Robin held executive positions at the University of Indianapolis before they retired and started their companies, each with a Web site.

Robin operates a training and employee development consulting firm, and Fred Livesay breeds Charlois cattle with an Ohio relative. They recently started Timberlight Manufacturing Co., which makes solar-powered flickering memorial candles for cemeteries.

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Call Star reporter Norm Heikens at (317) 444-6532.