

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ... SENIOR LAND SURVEYOR

# MATT WEEKS



*By Dain Sullivan*

**Light snow falls** from the morning darkness Dec. 16, as Matt Weeks pulls up to a gas pump in Mandan, ND. A couple hours of road time lie between him and his destination, and it's time to fill up.

The Basin Electric senior land surveyor is traveling from the cooperative's Headquarters in Bismarck, ND, to meet with land representatives north of Grassy Butte, ND.

This particular meeting won't take place in a conference room – or an office building, for that matter. It takes place in the field.

The meeting involves Basin Electric's 345-kilovolt Antelope Valley Station to Neset Transmission Project, which was approved by the North Dakota Public Service Commission in April 2014. It received the last required federal approval to begin project work in September 2014.

Since then, Weeks has been on his toes, working with Basin Electric's project team, contractors and outside parties by providing survey files for various archeological and biological survey teams that evaluate proposed line access routes, which are ultimately approved by individual landowners.

Basin Electric announced plans to build the transmission line from its Antelope Valley Station north of Beulah, ND, to Tioga, ND, in December 2011. Construction is under way, being completed in segments, with expectations of the entire project being in service by 2017.

## A man of maps

Weeks pulls his white pickup truck into Basin Electric's construction field office at the Charlie Creek laydown yard, just a few miles from where the day's meeting will take place. He's welcomed by another surveyor at the front gate, and the two take a few minutes to get up-to-speed on the day's agenda. The

meeting isn't for another half hour, so Weeks decides to park and head into one of the two work trailers onsite.

There are four such laydown yard sites that sit between Grassy Butte and Antelope Valley, Weeks says.

Sporting heavy boots, jeans, a tucked-in shirt and light-gray vest jacket, he plops into a roller chair and grabs a sheet of paper. He begins drawing out a portion of the transmission line, pointing out areas where Basin Electric is working to access, place and maintain power poles.

"We need to get access to our line in this area," Weeks says, pointing to an area he outlined from memory.

That's where the day's meeting comes in. On behalf of the entire cooperative, Weeks and his colleagues are assisting to define access areas. These access areas will eventually allow the group to drive vehicles to the line, which will serve rapidly growing electricity needs in the Bakken.

Weeks stands out of his chair and points to the opposite wall, which is covered in large black and white plat maps overlooking the section corners and property lines he oversees.

Often on the go, Weeks normally uses his iPad to glance at plats. He doesn't have it handy, however, so he turns to old-school print to point out where the meeting will take place minutes later.

## Discussing the line

After a short drive, Weeks steps onto a highway approach and extends his hand to a land representative. The two are also joined by three other surveyors – one is a Basin Electric employee, and the other two are consultants hired to help with the workload.

Despite the endless traffic noise, slick ice and unforgiving wind engulfing the highway, the group proceeds to discuss the project. Everyone is bundled from head to toe, except for Weeks, who – seemingly indifferent to the bitter cold – swipes through his iPad maps as everyone looks over his shoulder.

The group begins pointing to mapped areas that require additional survey monuments, which are essentially 3.5-inch aluminum caps marked with

credentials of surveyors like Weeks.

Weeks offers to mark the areas immediately, but the group decides it can wait.

Weeks and his crew have been respectful and done their homework when it comes to planning structure placement down to the foot, and many field requests are made that will eventually lead to a drafted plat before construction.

## Boots on the ground

With opening discussions done, everyone drives across the highway to begin examining the various structure locations. A few flags mark areas that will be avoided during construction and operation of the line, due to the previous surveys that identified cultural and biological avoidance areas. Some flags also address specific landowner requests.

The area discussed on this particular day is lined with an existing cattle trail. That's what makes it a sensible spot – there's better access, Weeks says.

The group arrives at a fence entrance and begins walking through ice-glazed prairie grass. They eventually form a circle around one monument, which sits near a clearing where cattle have been moved in the past.

The area should be okay for access, as long as they stay away from a nearby boundary. Everyone agrees, and they move on to a few more sites.

Not every site is easy to walk, however. That's where an off-road terrain vehicle with tracks comes in handy for Weeks and his team.

"There should be a structure on top of this hill," he says, pointing to a steep mound.

His colleagues zip up the hill with the special vehicle to examine the top, returning shortly to report what they saw.

Minor tweaks are made to the project, and the group continues to move along the highway.

There's good collaboration, and construction plans are falling into place.

At the end of the day, the cooperative spirit is definitely alive as Basin Electric works on the new line. A balance of respect and understanding eventually give way to the beginnings of a plat.

"My work is just about done," Weeks says.