



## Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative Relies on Panasonic Toughbook 31s to Keep the Power Running

### CHALLENGE

SMECO was looking for a rugged, mobile solution that would stay connected even in remote areas and during extreme weather conditions.

### SOLUTION

Panasonic Toughbook 31s running NetMotion Wireless Mobility XE mobile VPN software allow field crews to stay connected in the field and receive work orders in real time.

### RESULT

The mobile solution has greatly improved the efficiency and productivity of the field crews, especially in times of power outages, as they are able to stay connected to the home office and restore service as quickly as possible.



Toughbook 31

**SMECO**  
People. Power. Progress.

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Southern Maryland Electric Cooperative (SMECO) is a utility power provider responsible for providing electric service to roughly 150,000 customers in Southern Maryland. As an electric cooperative, SMECO is responsible for keeping customers' power up and running—even during extreme weather. Its mobile crews range in size from one to four people with 90 to 100 crews in the field.

Before moving to a mobile computing solution, SMECO depended on radio dispatches and handwritten notes to communicate and direct mobile crews. However, notes were often lost or not filed properly, and crews were spending a lot of time on the radio with dispatch. SMECO recognized a modern dispatch system was necessary in order to efficiently track and manage work orders. The primary goal was to integrate mobile computers with SMECO's outage management solution to issue computer-assisted dispatches.

In 2007, SMECO deployed rugged laptops in its mobile technician crews' trucks in order to keep crews constantly connected while in the field. **In order to fully realize the benefits of the mobile solution, SMECO needed a laptop that could withstand the heavy vehicle vibrations and inclement weather conditions, while staying connected throughout the day. After evaluating a number of rugged computer vendors, SMECO selected Panasonic's fully-rugged Toughbook® 30, with integrated Verizon Wireless mobile broadband and GPS, for its durability and functionality in and out of vehicles.**

After attempting to use standard VPN software, SMECO knew it needed to consider a more reliable solution as VPN connections were dropping frequently in the field. SMECO selected NetMotion Wireless Mobility XE® mobile VPN software. “The Mobility XE platform allows us to maintain connectivity to our mobile workforce all the time,” said Ken McKenzie, IT Infrastructure Manager, SMECO. “We’re using the NetMotion software to connect back to SMECO headquarters, so crews can get outage information and work orders.”

The previous system proved to be unreliable and inefficient, causing many headaches for IT staff and field crews. **The Panasonic Toughbook and Mobility XE solution allows SMECO's field crews to be more productive by significantly reducing lost VPN connections and maintaining continuous connectivity. In addition, the integrated GPS in the 125 fully-rugged Toughbook computers allows SMECO to assign jobs to field crews in real time based on their current locations.** The new solution has provided many benefits for SMECO's IT department. Even when the Toughbook 30s take a beating in the field, they still come in working, which makes the line crews' jobs much easier.

Reporting capabilities have also improved significantly. SMECO is accountable to government organizations like the public utilities commission and EPA. When these groups request data, SMECO is able to quickly and easily pull reports based on the management systems in place. The reporting system also helps monitor executive oversight and support programs through easily identified return on investment (ROI). Through the Mobile XE platform, SMECO's IT managers can easily identify disconnected devices and manage overages on Verizon Wireless accounts.

**“We’ve seen improvements in field morale, as well as the efficiency of the crews themselves, which has solidified management’s decision to mobilize its crews,” said David Timmerman, Network Administrator, SMECO.** “We’ve stuck with Panasonic and refreshed with the Toughbook 31, next-generation fully-rugged laptop, because of our experience with the Toughbook 30. Its ruggedness and ability to be used in the field on a regular basis and in extreme weather conditions, such as Hurricane Irene, has been invaluable.”

Although the Toughbook 31s mainly stay mounted in the trucks, occasionally they are taken out to a substation or a meter itself. During Hurricane Irene in 2011, crews working the outages relied heavily on the Toughbook laptops. It is very important for the field crews to know where the problems are and to be in constant contact with the home office. During outage situations, there are concerns of safety because of down power lines and places where there may still be live lines, while trying to restore service to customers. Managers can look at the Mobility XE console to see where crews are located in the field and who is connected to receive updated work orders, as well as pull statistics and push out software updates.

During storm situations, crews are focused on outage restoration and damage assessments. They are examining broken poles or snapped lines, so the laptops must be extremely durable, able to stay connected and run 24/7. The Toughbook 31 and Mobility XE solution has been extremely reliable for day-to-day meter readings and credit card collections, as well as providing service in disaster situations.

**Efficiency has improved greatly since managers know where crews are at all times and can direct them to where problems are faster. Crews can now address outages much faster, as one manager can click a button and send 20 jobs to one crew instead of one-off jobs.** It has also reduced the verbal communication because field workers are no longer constantly calling into headquarters, which allows orders to be received faster with less room for error.

In 2012, SMECO began using the Panasonic Toughbook H2 for drafting and design applications, such as redline drawing and stakings. When new properties need metered service, engineers must go out and design the connections and meter box placement to be constructed later. Before the H2, engineers were drawing by hand or trying to use a regular laptop. The tablet form factor is ideal, as it allows them to easily carry the device into the field for planning and then back into the office to dock and work at their desks. SMECO continually investigates new solutions that allow its engineers and field crews to provide the best possible service to customers.

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