

## Dale Jones - TCT

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

How far is it from rural Kansas to New York? To Los Angeles? Atlanta? London? Those cities may be half a continent or half a globe away, but thanks to the advances of modern telecommunications, they are virtually within just the touch of a button. Today we'll meet a rural telecommunications company which is leading the way in bridging those distances for its members. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dale Jones is CEO of Tri-County Telephone, now known as TCT. Dale grew up in far western Kansas near Oakley. He studied telecommunications at the Northwest Area Vocational Technical School, got started in the telecom business and worked his way up through the ranks. In 1999, he became CEO at TCT, a member-owned telecommunications cooperative.

TCT, like many rural telephone companies, began as a group of farmers and rural residents who banded together to bring in telephone service. The original three counties of TCT are Dickinson, Morris, and Marion. TCT's service area reaches over into Geary and Lyon counties as well. TCT was a founding company of Kansas Cellular and is one of the owners of Nex-Tech Wireless.

Dale Jones is one who anticipated the vast advances in telecommunications that would happen through the years. It began with plain old telephone service, now called POTS for short, carried through copper wire. Then the Internet and other new applications stimulated a need for more capacity and more bandwidth, called broadband.

"Dale had the foresight to invest in fiber," said Angie Schwerdtfeger, public relations specialist for TCT. Fiber optic cable provided an immense jump in bandwidth compared to copper wire.

"One single strand the size of a human hair can now carry 300 (television) channels, POTS, Internet, and security information," Dale said. Under his leadership, TCT invested in installing buried fiber to the home and other entities. This is a significant benefit to businesses, schools, libraries, and hospitals, enabling faster and more diverse forms of communication.

TCT continues to grow. TCT has retail stores in Council Grove and Abilene where a person can get a tablet, television, or any other digital device.

"I was the 13<sup>th</sup> employee," Dale said. "Now we employ 55 people."

He places quality service at the top of his priority list. "We want to create a path that enhances the lifestyle of our members," Dale said.

In fall 2015, TCT received an award from NTCA, the rural broadband association. NTCA is a national association representing nearly 900 independent, community-based telecommunications companies. NTCA launched an initiative to highlight local efforts to provide access to and adoption of broadband in rural communities. Part of that initiative is the designation of "Smart Rural Communities." TCT was one of 12 companies in the nation to receive this honor in 2015.

The Smart Rural Community designation isn't only for the company involved. It is also for the communities which the company serves. In TCT's case, that means the designation applies to Council Grove and neighboring towns plus rural communities such

as Ramona, population 94; Dunlap, 82; and Parkerville, population 73 people. Now, that's rural.

"It's not just having the fiber in place, it depends on what you're doing with it," Dale said. Those communities winning the award are those who have made the investment in and maximize the opportunities of a strong broadband network. TCT worked hard to find broadband applications that would benefit its members.

For example, local banks were able to go to online banking. Local ranchers were able to livestream their purebred cattle sale online, attracting customers from all over the nation. Businesses in the industrial park could connect with customers worldwide.

"We want to bring the latest technology to our subscribers," Dale said. "We are no longer isolated. Thanks to telecommunications, there's no distance anymore."

How far is it to New York? Los Angeles? Atlanta? London? Due to the advances in technology and the investment of this innovative telecommunications company, residents of rural Kansas can be connected to these faraway places virtually instantly. We commend Dale Jones and the people of TCT for making a difference with such technology. This is evidence that they are truly smart rural communities.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.