



Rural Montana

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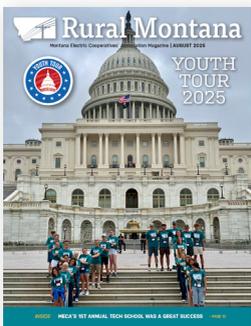
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Co-ops have come a long way

MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association



CENTRAL Montana Electric Power Cooperative Manager Doug Hardy and I had the privilege of speaking at the 80th Annual Meeting of McCone Electric Cooperative in early July. After the meeting, I was approached by a charming elderly lady who told me, "I liked what you had to say, but I *really* liked that other feller."

She told me she grew up on a farm near Circle in the 1930s without electricity, and really appreciated all we did to keep the lights on. She said having electricity made her family's life so much better, and added a story about how the neighbors were wary of "getting the juice in their house," certain they'd get burned by the wires.

This encounter started me thinking about the power pioneers who worked so hard to form co-ops, stand up poles and stretch wire across hundreds of miles to help family, friends and neighbors have better lives.

I think about how far we've come from the time when people like the lady I met in Circle, and my own parents and grandparents, lived without electricity. Their situation was shared by most of rural Montana. When the state's first electric

cooperative was formed in Ravalli County in 1936, only 6 percent of Montana farms had electricity. Other co-ops formed around the state over the following decade, electrifying more than 90 percent of Montana farms within 21 years.

Co-ops today have highly trained personnel operating sophisticated equipment that couldn't have been imagined 80 years ago to serve the ever-increasing demand for power. Yet their mission remains the same: delivering safe, affordable, reliable electricity to Montana's homes, farms, ranches and businesses.

As the new CEO, I'm well aware of the awesome responsibility I have to honor the legacy of those who electrified rural Montana, and to help MECA's members continue to be able to accomplish their mission. The MECA team is fully committed to giving co-op members our best every day to secure a bright future for rural Montana.

To my friend from Circle — if you happen to read this, please get ahold of me at mark@mtco-ops.com or 406-761-8333. I'd really like to hear more of your story. 

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Meet new MECA CEO Mark Lambrecht

MARK Lambrecht has taken the reins as CEO of the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA). He brings with him experience with MECA and electric utilities, and an extensive background in government affairs.

"I am very grateful to the MECA board, staff and members for entrusting me to lead the organization to a future of sustained success. I'm fully committed to giving co-ops my best every day to help them meet their obligations to provide safe, affordable and reliable electricity to their members," Lambrecht said.

Montana roots

A lifelong Montanan, Lambrecht grew up in Billings and Missoula and graduated from Billings Central Catholic High School in 1985. From there, Lambrecht's studies took him to Gonzaga University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in political science. After graduating, he moved to Washington, D.C., to advise U.S. Sen. Max Baucus on natural resource issues. He moved back to Missoula in 1992, to attend graduate school at the University of Montana, earning a master's degree in resource conservation focused on natural resource law and policy.

Lambrecht and his wife Amy have two sons, Lee, 24, and Grant, 27. The family spends a lot of time outdoors hunting, fishing and skiing.

The couple enjoys country swing dancing and attending concerts. Amy enjoys working with her horses in hopes of competing again in shows. Grant is a dentist in Frenchtown, and was a standout competition slope-style skier. Lee is an insurance claims adjuster for the Montana Association



Mark Lambrecht poses with his wife Amy and his two sons, Lee and Grant. | **COURTESY PHOTO**

of Counties in Helena. He was a collegiate bass fisherman and successful high school wrestler. Mark Lambrecht enjoyed coaching both of his sons in youth wrestling and football.

Government

Lambrecht's career first took him to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, then MSU-TechLink. He then worked for an engineering firm completing environmental permits and planning documents for construction projects.

Lambrecht got his first taste of working for electric utilities when he became the regulatory affairs manager for PPL Montana — his first time lobbying.

"I really enjoyed that job," Lambrecht said. "I got to learn all about coal, hydro and natural gas generation and emergency-action planning, and how to be an effective lobbyist. I was devastated to have been one of the thousands of company employees laid

off during the economic crisis of 2009, but it gave me the opportunity and motivation to start my own consulting business."

His primary consulting clients were the Montana Quality Education Coalition, where he worked on school funding legislation for the state's K-12 public school districts, and the Treasure State Resources Association, where he lobbied on behalf of dozens of natural resource-based industries operating in the state. He also co-founded REAL Montana — the Resource Education & Agriculture Leadership program — at Montana State University.

An avid hunter and outdoorsman, Lambrecht jumped at the chance to work as the first director of government affairs for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in 2015. He founded the Sportsmen's Caucus at the Montana Legislature, and was one of the primary authors of the Great American Outdoors Act, championed by Sen. Steve Daines and signed by President

Donald Trump in his first term.

Lambrecht was encouraged by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior in 2020 to apply for a top job with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). He started his service as assistant director of national conservation lands for the BLM at the beginning of 2021. He supervised 44 professionals across seven states and Washington, D.C., and oversaw a \$138 million budget to manage more than 38 million acres of federal lands.

Coming home

Lambrecht said that after the administration changed, the BLM director wanted to assign him to a new politically-focused position with a potential move to Washington, D.C. At the same time, a friend at MECA called to tell him its director of government relations position had opened.

"I was very excited to know that opportunity was available," Lambrecht said. "I really enjoyed my time with the BLM and gained valuable high-level management experience, but the opportunity to work with Montana's co-ops was too good to pass up."

Lambrecht was hired in 2022, and has led MECA's government relations team since.

Back to his roots

Lambrecht has a personal connec-



tion to co-ops and the statewide association. His grandfather, George Lackman, was a farmer near Huntley and one of the early members of Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative (YVEC). Lackman became a director at YVEC, then became a board member at what would become MECA, before becoming president of the statewide organization in 1950. One of his initiatives as president was to develop a statewide magazine, which became *Rural Montana*.

"I clearly remember my grandpa George and grandma Kate telling me

how challenging life was on the farm before they had electricity. I feel a deep responsibility to continue what my grandpa and others started back then to improve the lives of rural Montanans," Lambrecht said.

He became more familiar with Montana's electric cooperatives through developing a relationship with MECA lobbyists Gary Wiens and Doug Hardy, while working together during many Montana legislative sessions.

"Gary and Doug left a big impression on me. I admired their effectiveness and integrity. I particularly appreciated their consistent commitment to the best interests of co-op members, no matter the issue," he said.

The next chapter

On July 6, Lambrecht officially became CEO of MECA, succeeding the retiring Wiens.

"It's an unbelievable opportunity to come full circle in my career - understanding where co-ops in this organization started to what they've become," Lambrecht said. "To have a role in helping them grow and face the issues of the future is a responsibility I take seriously."

Lambrecht said the organization is positioned well for the future with an experienced and knowledgeable staff and board of directors, and a supportive membership.

He plans to utilize a strength, weakness, opportunity and threat analysis to identify and implement opportunities to improve the organization and its services to members in the future.

"One other priority is to enhance tribal participation within our organization," Lambrecht said, noting the annual Tribal Relations Summit and work with the Montana American Indian Caucus at the Legislature as examples of this effort.

"I'm committed to bringing to MECA the same energy and commitment to success I've had throughout my career, and I can't wait to get started working with the organization to benefit co-op members throughout the state." RM

Mark Lambrecht and his two sons, Lee and Grant. | COURTESY PHOTO



Youth Tour alum awarded Marine Corps scholarship

BY **RYAN HALL** | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

YOUTH Tour alum and Tongue River Electric Cooperative member Zach Jones recently was awarded one of four nationwide Semper Fidelis Leadership Scholarships.

The scholarship, which was applied for through the Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation, is funded by a Marine veteran and his family. The four winners each receive a \$20,000 scholarship each year for four years, as well as a trip to Chicago to meet the family funding the scholarship.

Jones said he originally applied for a small scholarship through the Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation, which is available to any children or grandchildren of Marines or Marine veterans.

He was told that based on his application, he was eligible for the larger and more prestigious Semper Fidelis Leadership Scholarship.

“That’s a little more of an intensive process,” Jones said.

He said he had to go through a video interview, then a face-to-face interview in order to apply for the scholarship. He was then notified that he was a semi-finalist, then a finalist.

“As you could imagine I was pretty excited when I got the call (that I had won),” Jones said. “I was visiting some family friends at that time, so that night we went out and had a celebratory dinner.”

Jones, a 2024 National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour participant, plans to attend Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where he will major in economics and government.

“I’ll be going right back to where Youth Tour was,” Jones said. “I was actually kind of inspired to apply to Georgetown after visiting D.C. with the Youth Tour.”

After college he may pursue law school, or he might find a new interest as he broadens his horizons.

“I don’t know, but I’ve been interested in possibly becoming a lawyer, so maybe law school or something,” Jones said. “I’m looking forward to finding new interests, and maybe I’ll find something else I want to do.” RM



Youth Tour alumni Zach Jones was awarded the Semper Fidelis Leadership Scholarship. | **COURTESY PHOTOS**



Are energy answers blowin' in the wind?

By **SCOTT FLOOD** | For Rural Montana

WHEN Bob Dylan penned his first big hit, “Blowin’ in the Wind,” more than six decades ago, he was thinking about peace and freedom — not large turbines that generate electricity from powerful winds.

Turbines capable of generating commercial-scale amounts of electricity are a relatively recent development, and electric cooperatives have been quick to embrace the technology. Co-ops have long been among the leaders in deploying wind power, particularly through what’s known as distributed wind generation. Unlike the massive investor-funded wind farms that use hundreds of turbines to generate bulk power for distant towns and cities, distributed wind is used to produce power that will be consumed in the immediate area. That meets co-op members’ needs and helps communities thrive while strengthening the nation’s electric grid.

Electric co-ops have expanded their renewable energy capacity by 192 percent over the past decade. In 2021, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) and the Department of Energy joined in a program to assess the potential for distributed wind energy in rural areas. A pilot site in Iowa with two 10.5 megawatt distributed wind projects is generating more than \$300,000 in annual revenue, reducing costs for members and boosting the local tax base.

Wind energy provides co-ops and the areas they serve with a long list of advantages, starting with the inexhaustible supply of wind and the lack of pollution. Large-scale wind turbines already offer some of today’s lowest-cost power, and advances in technology continue to enhance their output and efficiency. The rural and remote areas served by co-ops are home to some of the nation’s highest-quality wind resources.

Offshore wind turbines offer many



On land or at sea, the operation of the turbines creates some environmental concerns, particularly with wildlife, noise and aesthetics. | **PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREAS SENFTLEBEN**

of the same benefits as those on land, along with one key advantage: wind speeds over the ocean tend to be higher and steadier, allowing the turbines to produce significantly more electricity. According to the American Geosciences Institute (AGI), a wind turbine can generate twice as much electricity from a 15-mph wind as it can from a 12-mph breeze.

The economic development benefits of wind generation are also impressive. Nearly 150,000 Americans currently work in the wind-power industry, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that wind turbine service technicians represent the decade’s fastest-growing career. Besides producing electricity, wind projects generate nearly \$2 billion in taxes and lease payments annually, improving local economic health.

Understandably, wind energy is less suitable in areas where the winds are too light or unpredictable. In addition, installing turbines and their associated infrastructure in remote areas can be complex and costly, outweighing potential economic advantages. Maintenance and repairs in remote areas may also carry higher costs.

Offshore wind turbines can be even costlier to build and maintain. The AGI

points out that it’s difficult to erect turbines in water deeper than 200 feet.

Turbines may suffer damage from the high winds and waves produced by hurricanes and other tropical weather. Installing power cables to safely transport the electricity back to land can also be expensive.

On land or at sea, the operation of the turbines creates some environmental concerns. Birds and bats that fly into blades and towers may be injured or killed. The spinning turbine blades can also be a source of noise for people living nearby. In addition, many people view the tall structures as eyesores. That’s particularly true with offshore wind turbines situated near coastal areas popular with tourists.

It’s also worth noting that the economics of wind energy often rely on state and federal incentives. Without those enticements, electric co-ops and commercial developers may find other forms of generation to be more affordable.

So, while the answer to the energy needs of co-ops may indeed be blowing in the wind, getting there will demand plenty of time, money, innovation and some good-old-fashioned problem solving. **RM**

Lower your power bill, charge your EV during off-peak hours

By **CHRIS LEE** | *For Rural Montana*

As electric vehicles (EVs) continue to grow in popularity, it's increasingly important for EV owners to understand the impact of charging during peak demand hours, and how to leverage off-peak charging rates and incentives effectively.

Thoughtful EV charging, particularly during off-peak hours, is a win-win for the EV owner through lower rates, and by helping electric cooperatives balance electrical load.

What is peak demand?

Peak demand is when electricity use is at its highest in an area, typically during busy energy-use times for homes, businesses and industries. More appliance use, business activities and even weather can create spikes in demand, making it more challenging for your electric co-op to keep the grid stable and manage costs.

While electricity may feel unlimited when powering household devices, it's actually a finite resource constrained by the co-op's capacity to purchase (or produce) electricity and distribute it throughout the local grid. To serve the grid during times of peak demand, electric co-ops may need to activate additional generation resources or purchase higher-cost electricity from the market. These efforts, while necessary to maintain reliability, can lead to increased expenses and impose strain on grid infrastructure.

Off-peak charging strategy

Montana's electric cooperatives play a vital role in managing energy demand and ensuring reliable service for all members. For co-op members who own EVs, off-peak charging provides a



Thoughtful EV charging, particularly during off-peak hours, can help EV owners through lower rates. | **PHOTO CREDIT: JOE NOMIAS, PIXABAY**

strategic solution to help reduce strain on the grid while also lowering costs — because charging when demand is lower eases pressure on the electric grid. This helps avoid costly infrastructure upgrades and supports a more reliable, efficient system that benefits everyone in our community.

Off-peak periods — typically during early morning hours and late at night — are times when the overall demand for electricity is lower, allowing co-ops to offer more affordable rates and incentives to shift energy consumption.

Charging your EV during off-peak hours may mean taking advantage of reduced electricity rates or incentives, helping you save money compared to charging during peak demand times.

Smart scheduling means more affordable EV ownership and better energy budgeting.

The benefits

Off-peak charging provides a win-win solution for members and electric cooperatives by offering cost savings, improved grid reliability and environmental benefits. This practice not only enhances the appeal of EVs, but also aligns with the cooperative values of reliability, sustainability and affordability, helping build a smarter and more efficient energy system for future generations.

Contact your local electric cooperative to learn about off-peak hours and rate options for EV owners. **RM**

COOL SAVINGS:

Refrigerator and freezer efficiency tips

By **MIRANDA BOUTELLE** |
For Rural Montana

Q: What are some ways I can improve the efficiency of my refrigerator and freezer?

A: When exploring ways to be more efficient with refrigerators and freezers, we often find ourselves stuck between convenience and conserving energy. While you can upgrade to newer equipment, care and equipment habits can be just as important to saving energy.

Here is some guidance on equipment energy use, including tips to keep your current equipment running efficiently and ways to limit overuse of refrigeration in our homes.

The U.S. Department of Energy helps us understand what to look for in our existing equipment and new appliances. In general, the larger the refrigerator, the more energy it uses. The most efficient models are typically 16 to 20 cubic feet.

Models with the freezer on top tend to use less energy than bottom freezers or side-by-side units. A refrigerator 15 years old or older uses about 35 percent more energy than an Energy Star-certified model.

Let's explore some tips to keep your refrigerator running efficiently.

Keep it organized

One of the biggest issues with refrigerator energy use is opening the door or keeping it open. An organized fridge makes food items easier to find, minimizing open-door time and keeping cold air inside. Place items in the same spots so they are easier and faster to find. I tell my kids to take a quick look inside at the options and close the door while they are deciding what to eat.



Keeping the vents and door gaskets clean can help keep your refrigerator working at peak efficiency.



Keep it clean

Regularly cleaning the gasket — the flexible strip around the perimeter of the fridge door — ensures a tight seal between the door and the unit to keep cold air inside. If the gasket is not sealing tightly, it should be replaced. Removing and cleaning the vent at the bottom of the unit can help airflow. For the coils at the back, use an extended cleaning brush instead of moving the fridge and risking injury.

Keep food safety in mind

The Department of Energy recommends setting your refrigerator

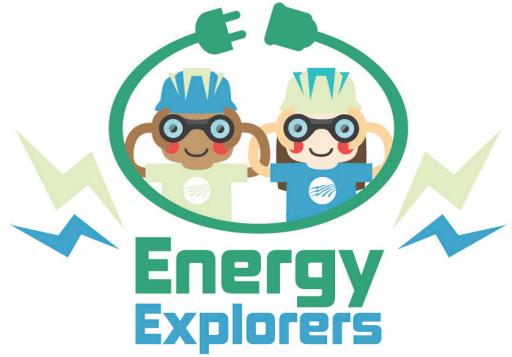
temperature between 35 and 38 degrees, and the freezer at 0 degrees.

If you have a second refrigerator or freezer, here are some things to consider that can help you save energy:

- Do you need it plugged in year-round? Perhaps you can keep it empty and unplugged for part of the year. Maybe you only really need it during the holiday season. Unplugging it for the months you aren't using it will save energy, and you'll still have it as a backup when you need it.
- If you are a hunter or buy meat in bulk, set a goal to empty out your freezer before you restock. This allows you to avoid food waste and unplug the extra appliance when it is not needed.
- If possible, consider the location. Keeping the second fridge or freezer in a cool basement versus a hot garage requires less energy. RM

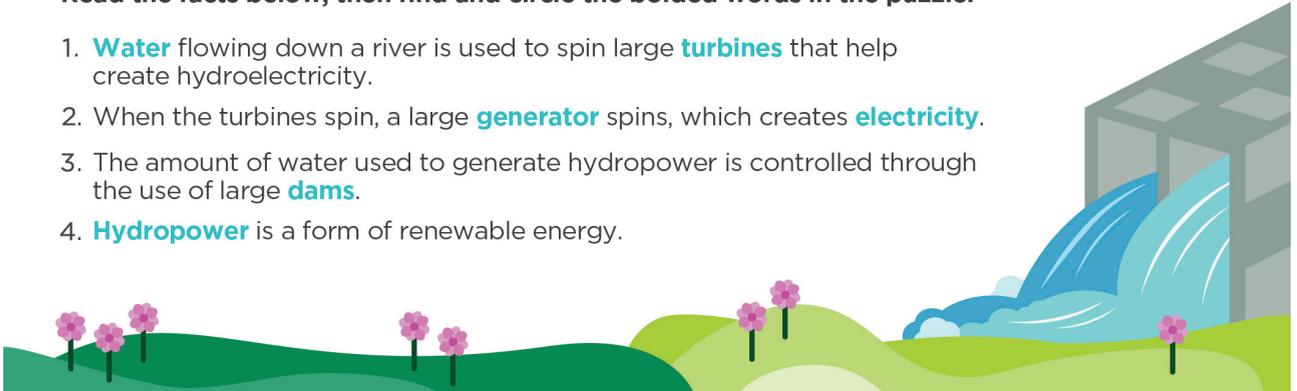
HYDROPOWER WORD SEARCH

You know that it's never safe to mix water and electricity at home, but did you know that large amounts of flowing water can be used to create electricity? This process of generating electricity from the movement of water is called hydropower.



Read the facts below, then find and circle the bolded words in the puzzle.

1. **Water** flowing down a river is used to spin large **turbines** that help create hydroelectricity.
2. When the turbines spin, a large **generator** spins, which creates **electricity**.
3. The amount of water used to generate hydropower is controlled through the use of large **dams**.
4. **Hydropower** is a form of renewable energy.



J	R	E	E	R	Y	R	L	L	R	S	W	Z	M	H
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T	G	E	I	P	Z	S	M	X	X	Y	I	F	E	O
M	K	G	O	R	A	B	N	K	H	K	P	T	H	U
V	N	W	P	Q	L	Y	P	A	D	J	S	Z	Y	O
X	E	A	K	J	A	Z	T	Q	P	O	P	I	B	X
R	B	W	A	B	D	O	K	C	I	Q	C	T	K	O
S	Y	B	B	P	Y	S	D	O	F	D	H	B	R	D
W	X	E	D	W	U	G	N	V	H	D	Q	W	P	S



MONTANA U.S. REPRESENTATIVES

In order to allow ample space for responses, Rural Montana alternates asking Montana's senators and representatives the Dateline D.C. question each month. This month features the representatives. Next month, we will ask a question of the state's two senators.

THIS MONTH'S QUESTION:

During a recent wildfire summit in Montana, a meteorologist shared a forecast of above-average temperatures and below-average precipitation through the summer and into the fall. With all signs pointing to an active fire season, what can be done on the congressional level to help Montana if these forecasts come to fruition?

THE SAME QUESTION WAS ASKED TO MONTANA'S TWO U.S. SENATORS IN RM'S LAST MONTH'S EDITION



Rep. Downing

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Representative Troy Downing

RESponsible forest management is top of mind for every Montanan, especially during fire season. Since taking office, I've supported several measures that promote responsible stewardship of our forests.

One of the first major steps we took in the House was passing the Fix Our Forests Act, a landmark reform aimed at restoring active management practices and helping prevent catastrophic wildfires.

More recently, Senator Sheehy's Aerial Firefighting Enhancement Act of 2025 was signed into law by President Donald Trump. I was proud to vote "yea" on this bill when it came to the House and cosponsored the House companion bill. I'm confident this legislation will bring much-needed support to our aerial firefighting teams.

In June, President Trump signed an Executive Order to strengthen wildfire prevention and response, an unprecedented move that underscores his commitment to this issue. The order

directs improvements in mapping and data-sharing, expedites the transfer of surplus aircraft and identifies burdensome regulations that hinder wildfire mitigation. These common-sense reforms reflect the importance of federal, state and local cooperation.

Lastly, Secretary Rollins' recent rescission of the Roadless Rule marks a significant win for Montana. Previously, 58 percent of Montana's national forest lands were tied up under this rule. Its removal opens the door to responsible management, road access and much-needed infrastructure work in areas that have long been neglected.

Montanans can rest assured — I will continue working with the Montana delegation and the Trump Administration to restore sound forest-management practices. Together, we'll find common-sense, Montana-made solutions that strengthen wildfire readiness, protect our natural resources and keep our communities safe. RM



Rep. Zinke

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Representative Ryan Zinke

I have been working hard on these issues since being elected to Congress, and have recently taken some serious steps in the right direction in an effort to manage our forests better and prevent the large-scale fires that are all too common in Montana.

I've long said that overregulation is one of the biggest obstacles to proper forest management and wildfire prevention. That's why, in this year's Fix Our Forests Act, I introduced language to ease restrictions on building roads on public lands, a common-sense solution to a problem that has hampered timber access and needlessly complicated wildfire response for years. When you can't build a road or cut a tree, it's impossible to manage our forests effectively or get firefighters where they're needed most.

Another big step was my Aerial Firefighting Enhancement Act, which has now been signed into law. This bill reauthorizes the Department of Defense to sell its excess aircraft for the purpose of aerial firefighting. This will strengthen our fleet and ensure that our brave firefighters have the vehicles and equipment they need to combat the year-round threat of catastrophic wildfires.

Over the last several decades, our forests became overgrown and mismanaged. We all know what needs to be done to prevent wildfires. With the help of the president, House and Senate Republicans are putting in policies and laws that will bolster our ability to fight wildfires quickly and effectively, and prevent the horrible fire seasons we have unfortunately become familiar with in recent years. RM

Each year electric cooperatives throughout the state send incoming high school juniors and seniors on an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington, D.C., for a week to learn more about the history of the United States and electric cooperatives.

They visit monuments and museums, meet other electric cooperative youth from across the country and get to ask questions of the state's congressional delegation.

Here is how this year's trip impacted participants, in their own words.

JOIN NEXT YEAR'S TOUR

Send in your essay to win a trip to Washington, D.C., next year. See mtco-ops.com/youthtour.

YOUTH TOUR IN THEIR WORDS

My unforgettable trip to Washington, D.C.

By **MADELINE MORRIS** | Lincoln Electric Cooperative



THIS trip meant so much more to me than just visiting Washington, D.C. It taught me that I can accomplish a great deal if I set my mind to it.

I learned this lesson from Mike Schlappi's inspiring speech on Thursday night. Mike has been paralyzed for most of his life, since the beginning of his high school career. He spoke about how he always wanted to give up, describing his thoughts and paralysis as a rock in the middle of his road.

Although he faced moments of doubt, he never gave up. Today, he is encouraging young people like me to keep going, even when life presents obstacles. He taught us that even if people at school make you feel inadequate, you are still capable of achieving great things.

Additionally, witnessing the Changing of the Guard at Arlington National Cemetery was even more breathtaking than I had imagined. Before the trip, I didn't understand the significance of the ceremony, but now I can share the whole story. Watching the Changing of the Guard made me realize that the soldiers who died were not only protectors of our land, but also protectors of our people. They sacrificed their lives for us and our families so we could be here today. Some of these soldiers were unrecognizable due to the injuries inflicted by our enemies. This monument holds great significance for both our history and our future.

In the middle of the week, we took a cruise, where I stepped out of my comfort zone and engaged in conversations with strangers from other states. Most of the cruise attendees were from Colorado, North Dakota, Georgia and Wyoming. That night taught me that it doesn't matter where you come from or what your background is. What truly matters is that people like us were brought together to do amazing things and create lasting memories. We spent the night talking and dancing, forging connections I will cherish forever.

Overall, I loved this trip in many ways, and it will remain etched in my mind for the rest of my life. RM

It's the people

By **MARYSSA SKINNER** | Missoula Electric



WHEN looking back on my experience at the 2025 National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour, I'll remember all of the memorials, museums and meals I was lucky enough to enjoy — but even more than that, I'll remember the people who were there to experience it with me.

Going into this trip, I was nervous about one thing: making friends. I jumped into this opportunity knowing no one, but from day one, I made connections I didn't expect to happen so quickly. We started as a group of teenagers from all across Montana, but we were able to connect because of this opportunity we had together.

As the days went on, we slowly learned more about each other and shared more laughs, and it began to feel like I had known them all of my life. One of the coolest things was noticing how the more time we spent together, the more our phones were being put down. At dinner, the conversations became longer and more genuine — and my heart began to grow with a love for these people I didn't see coming.

This was an experience that has truly changed my life for the better. I grew as a person in ways I didn't even know I needed, and I'll forever be amazed by everything this trip gave me. I loved my time in Washington, D.C., but I loved the people I met even more. RM



YOUTH TOUR

Feature | Youth Tour

SEE MORE YOUTH TOUR CONTENT ON PAGE 17



How D.C. taught me about electric co-ops

By **MAKENZIE KUJAVA** | *Sun River Electric*

THIS entire trip has been an eye-opener for the amazing things that electric cooperatives accomplish. The fact that all of our electric cooperatives provide the opportunity and financial support to go on this trip shows how much they care. I loved everything that we participated in.

When we got to D.C. on Sunday, we went to a Co-op 101/Advocacy Class. During this class, we got to watch a video about how electric cooperatives started. This opened my eyes to the importance of electric cooperatives in rural areas. We also went over the Seven Cooperative Principles, and it made me realize how electric cooperatives help our communities. Finally, they helped us come up with things to talk about with our senators. They helped us think about problems that affect our communities that may not affect non-rural areas.

On Thursday, we attended the NRECA All States Events. We got to meet some members of the NRECA board and alumni of the Youth Tour. This helped me realize the opportunities this trip, as well as the electric cooperatives, provide for their members. They introduced all of the 2025-2026 Youth Leadership Council participants. They also brought in some speakers. They both talked about facing adversity: mentally and physically. Maggie Martin, the national representative for the Youth Leadership Council, talked about perfectionism and mental health. Mike Schlappi, author and gold medalist, told us his story about getting shot and how he overcame everything. Both of their stories spoke to me, and hearing them inspired me.

These two things that the NRECA put together for the Youth Tour participants made me realize things about electric cooperatives and their relationship to rural communities. The trip's events taught me things that can help me with my future. I loved going on this trip and am extremely grateful for the opportunity. RM



Incredible experience

By **GABRIELLA ZOOK** | *Goldenwest Electric*

IF you ever get the opportunity to visit our nation's capital, I suggest you consider taking it. I won't call it a once-in-a-lifetime trip, because I already know that I'll be going back someday. But this experience, made possible by Goldenwest Electric Cooperative, was something entirely unique, and I'm so grateful I got to be a part of it.



This past June, I joined about 1,500 other students across the country for a week in Washington, D.C., as part of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour. It was a fast-paced mix of history, landmarks and seriously good food. Our days started early and ended late, filled with learning, walking (so much walking) and trying to take everything in. Although I'm from North Dakota, I traveled with the Montana group since our power comes from a co-op in Wibaux.

Over the course of the week, we visited 25-30 major sites, including the White House, the Library of Congress, the National Archives and the Supreme Court. A couple of our evenings were occupied with events such as dances, boat cruises and baseball games (although between you and me, I enjoyed those significantly less).

One memorable place was the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. We got caught in a downpour between sites, which left us drenched and laughing underneath a tree on the sidewalk. What should have been miserable was actually a hilarious memory in the making.

The trip wasn't always easy. It was exhausting and overwhelming at times. But I'm proud that I went, and that I got to learn so much about the inner workings of our amazing country.

To Goldenwest Electric, thank you for this experience. Winning this trip pried me out of my comfort zone, made it possible for me to see some incredible things, and helped me grow as a person. I'll always remember and be grateful for this opportunity. RM



Four electric cooperative employees participated in the drone track, taught by Chad Nelson of General Pacific during the recent MECA Tech School. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

Inaugural MECA Tech School sets high bar for the future

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

THE inaugural Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA) Tech School was a success, and plans are already underway to make it an annual event.

"One word — pride," MECA Safety/Loss Control Instructor Jerry Lemm said while standing in a field owned by a Sun River Electric Cooperative member during the event. "I'm so proud of how these guys and the crew came together to put on this event."

The Tech School was a 2½-day training with two tracks, one focusing on rubber gloving and one focused on the use of drones in the electric utility field.

Lemm said MECA COO Lea Potoczny always asks the various manager and employee groups what they would like to see in training, and a more detailed rubber-gloving class that could be developed and built upon, rather than the same class being taught periodically, was requested. That was the start of the Tech School idea.

"It finally came together this year with the help of many, many people," Lemm said.

He added that once the Tech School idea started to form, he wanted to do



Co-op employees were given the chance to work on lines while the instructors offered tips during the field day portion of the Tech School. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

something more than just the rubber gloving track. The first thought was hot sticking, a technique used to work on energized lines.

"I wanted to get it more than rubber gloving," Lemm said. "We looked at hot sticking, but hot sticking is kind of a dying art in our industry."

However, the use of drones in the utility industry is on the rise. From inspecting components on the pole to

looking for vegetation infringing on the line, drones are used more frequently than ever before.

Lemm contacted Chad Nelson with General Pacific, an instructor and drone vendor, who said he had never been part of something like the Tech School. The second track was then developed.

Both tracks featured a classroom day and a field day, the school wrapped up with joint sessions for half a day to



finish up the event.

“I think the hands-on training, working with one of the instructors, that was valuable,” said lineman Brent Battenfeld of Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative, who participated in the rubber-gloving track. “It really went good for the first year.”

Randy Gaa, a lineman with Sun River Electric Cooperative, already was commercial drone certified, but he said the drone track was still very valuable.

“This was extremely eye opening,” he said. “I’ve never flown the big 350 (a large drone model used for line inspections). I wanted to get my hands on a high-end drone.”

Gaa added that through the course he learned the importance of compliance — that even after passing his commercial drone pilot license test, he must retain the knowledge he used to pass the test.

“There’s a compliance portion that is my responsibility to obey to protect my co-op,” Gaa said.

“Overall I think it was an overwhelming success,” Lemm said. “Even the minor hiccups we had will make it a better program next year and in the years to come.”

He added that he was surprised the event went so well in its first year, especially the field day, but looking back at it and seeing who the repre-



MECA Safety Trainer Jerry Lemm cooks up some steaks for the Tech School event.

sentatives of the Lineman Subcommittee were that planned the event, he shouldn’t have expected anything less.

“Absolutely I was surprised, but I should not have been given the people who were the boots on the ground,” Lemm said.

He said the plan is to make the Tech School an annual event, and to eventually grow it to be similar to the popular Cody Hot Line School.

“In typical Lemm fashion, bigger and better is where I always want to go,” he said. “I think the people involved see the value. I think there’s an appetite to make it an annual event and to grow it. I think it will take on a life of its own, and if the interest is there, additional topics and a second field day are possible.” **RM**

“

It finally came together this year with the help of many, many people.



— Jerry Lemm,
MECA S/LC Instructor and an organizer of the Tech School

”



SEND IN YOUR RECIPES

Recipes for *RM* magazine are submitted by cooperative members across the state. First, second and third place monthly winners are awarded \$30, \$20 and \$10 prizes, respectively. Send your recipes to *RM* Recipes, Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403, or email rural@mtco-ops.com. **Please include your name, hometown and an address. If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.** For September, send in your best recipes that use peppers or chiles (bell, jalapeno, poblano, bird's eye, peppercorn, chipotle, dry or fresh etc.) by August 14. Please send in October recipes anytime: Your favorite recipes that use corn. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

**1st
PLACE**

Sausage Quiche

Misty Hammerbacker | JEFFERSON ISLAND

INGREDIENTS

- 1 pie crust
- 1 pound ground sausage
- 1/3 cup chopped onion
- 1/3 cup green pepper, chopped
- 2 oz. cream cheese
- 3/4 tsp. garlic powder
- 1/2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
- 3 T sour cream
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 3 eggs
- 1/2 cup shredded Mexican blend cheese

DIRECTIONS

In a 1-1/2 qt. baking dish, put in one deep-dish pie crust.

Cook sausage until almost done and add the onion and green pepper. Cook until done. Remove from heat and drain.

Stir cream cheese, garlic powder and Worcestershire sauce into the sausage mixture.

Put meat mixture in bottom of baking dish (in pie crust). Top with shredded cheese. Whisk together eggs, sour cream and heavy cream. Pour over sausage mixture.

Bake for 60 minutes.

You can put more shredded cheese on top if desired.



**2nd
PLACE**

Creamy Bratwurst Stew

Ruth Kleinjan | STEVENSVILLE

INGREDIENTS

- 1-3/4 pounds potatoes, cubed
- 2 medium carrots, diced
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 medium green pepper, diced
- 2 pounds bratwurst, sliced
- 1/2 cup chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon basil
- 2 cups half & half

DIRECTIONS

Place all ingredients into a a slow cooker, and cook on low for 6 to 7 hours.

If thickening is needed, add 1 T cornstarch to 3 T water, whisk together and add to the stew.



**3rd
PLACE**

Pork Low Main

Mel Hayes | LIBBY

INGREDIENTS

- 6 T light soy sauce
- 4 T hoisin sauce
- 2 tsp. sesame oil
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 1 bag (16 oz.) slaw mix
- 1 pound ground pork sausage
- 1 pound spaghetti noodles, cooked

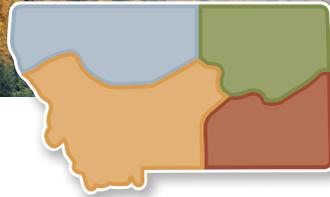
DIRECTIONS

In small sauce pan, combine soy sauce, hoisin sauce, sesame oil and sugar. Cook on medium heat until thickened, about 15 minutes.

Brown pork in a large skillet, add slaw mix and cook until vegetables are just softened.

Add the sauce and noodles to the skillet. Combine well, heat through and serve.





NORTHWEST

August-September

Bigfork Summer Playhouse celebrates 66th season — *Catch Me If You Can, Shrek, All Shook Up and Something Rotten, 8 p.m., and 2 p.m., for more information and schedule, go to bigforksummerplayhouse.com, 837-4886 | BIGFORK*

August 2

Eureka Quilt Show — *Outdoor quilt show, vendors, food court and sale all throughout town, Historic Village and Main Street, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., 688-4567 | EUREKA*

August 2

Kevin Fun Days — *Car, truck and motorcycle show and more, 450-5176 | KEVIN*

August 4, 11, 18, 25

Downtown Kalispell Walking Tour — *Northwest Montana History Museum, 10 a.m., 756-8381 | KALISPELL*

August 10

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Dawn Beyer — *Free outdoor concert, Indian Springs Ranch, 5 p.m., 297-0197 | EUREKA*

August 15

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Shakespeare in the Parks - Henry V — *Free, Historical Village, preshow music and food by Holy Moly BBQ at 5 p.m., show: 6 p.m., bring chairs or blankets to sit on, 297-0197 | EUREKA*

August 17

Paws Splash Bash — *Exclusive dog-only pool party, no humans in the pool, Woodland Water Park, 2 to 5 p.m., 309-5627 | KALISPELL*

August 19

Kalispell Women's Connection Luncheon — *Guest speaker is Frances Erler, 1830 Hwy. 35, 11:30 a.m., call 261-9894 for reservations or information | KALISPELL*

September 5

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Toast of the Town annual fundraiser — *Silent auction, wine tasting, hors d'oeuvres, \$25, Indian Springs Ranch, 5 p.m., 297-0197 | EUREKA*

September 5-7

North West Antique Power Association — *Olsen Pioneer Park, Fri: noon to 4 p.m., Sat: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. | KALISPELL*

September 8-11

Association of Christian Birth Professionals International Conference: Come and See — *Glacier Bible Camp, acbpinc.org/conference/ | HUNGRY HORSE*

September 12-13

Flathead Celtic Festival — *563 McMannamy Draw, Fri: 3 to 7 p.m., Sat: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., 282-4478 | KALISPELL*

September 13-14

Whitefish Food & Wine Festival — *Grand tastings on both days, Haskill Creek, 1 to 5:30 p.m., whitefishfoodandwine.com for tickets and information | WHITEFISH*

September 19-20

Flathead Quilters' Guild presents the 2025 Quilt Show: Something Scrappy — *Flathead County Fairground Expo Building, Fri: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sat: 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., flatheadquilters.org | KALISPELL*

SOUTHEAST

August 2

Red White & Boots Ball — *Fundraiser supporting Operation Juliet's Mission, The Paper Mill, 6 p.m., 702-372-3949 | BILLINGS*

September 6

Shepherd Jamboree — *Auctions, kids' activities, food and drink benefiting Shepherd Lion's Club, Shepherd Community Center, 11 a.m., 855-5875 | SHEPHERD*

SUBMIT YOUR EVENTS

To list an event, send it to: RM Events, PO Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403 or email us at: rural@mtco-ops.com — Submit items by August 14 for September events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.**

SOUTHWEST

August 1-2

Montana State Fair — *Concert lineup: Jo Dee Messina - July 27, Tucker Wetmore - July 28, The Oak Ridge Boys - July 29, Smash Mouth - July 31, Scotty McCreery - Aug. 1, Lecrae - Aug. 2, Montana Expo Park | GREAT FALLS*

August 1-2

Cabin Fever Quilters 24th Annual Quilt Show "American Beauty" — *Superior High School, in conjunction with the Mineral County Fair, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., 591-5753 | SUPERIOR*

August 2

Wise River Community Festival — *Wise River Community Center, 208-716-2929 | WISE RIVER*

August 2

Robert's Run — *10k, 5k, or 1 mile, Hamilton High School, 7 a.m. to noon, www.robertsrn.org, 461-0981 | HAMILTON*

Aug. 2, 9, 16, 23, 30,

Sept. 6, 13, 20

Dillon Farmers' Market — *Near Jaycee Park, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., 925-9420 | DILLON*

August 3

Garlic Braiding — *Homestead Organics Farm, 2 to 3:30 p.m., tickets and info at events. humanitix.com/garlic-braiding | HAMILTON*

August 4, 18

Shields Valley Farmers Market — *Veteran's Park, 4:30 to 7 p.m., 686-4084 | WILSALL*

August 7

Dinner in the Park — *Dinner is provided for a nominal price, music is free, Jaycee Park, Dinner at 5:30, music at 6 p.m. | DILLON*

August 8-9

Victor Days — *Two days of live music, food trucks, beer gardens, market and games; parade and classic truck show on Sat., 360-6743 | VICTOR*

August 11

Shields Valley Farmers Market — *Holliday Park, 4:30 to 7 p.m., 686-4084 | CLYDE PARK*

August 16

Free Self-Defense Seminar — *World Taekwondo Academy, 10 a.m., 546-0643 | VICTOR*

August 16-17

Bitterroot Celtic Games and Gathering — *Daly Mansion, Sat: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sun: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., www.bccg.org, 274-8886 | HAMILTON*

August 23

14th Annual Montana Clean Energy Fair — *Premiere event for comprehensive, clean-powered living in the Big Sky State. 100 Central Avenue Block, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. | GREAT FALLS*

August 27

Plein Air contest event — *Ravalli County Fair, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., 642-3785 | HAMILTON*

August 27-30

The Beaverhead County 4-H Fair — *Beaverhead County Fairgrounds, 925-9420 | DILLON*

August 27-30

30th Annual Ravalli County Fair — *Fair and rodeo, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., 363-3411 | HAMILTON*

August 29-30

Cobblestone Quilt Show — *Over 100 quilts and other items, Cobblestone Schoolhouse, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., 861-5480 | ABSAROOKE*

Aug. 29-Sept. 1

'Montana's Biggest Weekend' — *Dillon Jaycees PRCA Rodeo, including Ranch Rodeo, wild horse race, Clint Black in concert and Labor Day Parade, 925-9420 | DILLON*

September 13

Weed Wacker Ball — *Dinner, Silent Auction, Live Auction, Wise River Community Center, 5 to 9 p.m., 925-0708 | WISE RIVER*

YOUNG MONTANANS

RM invites youngsters to send in original art and poems. If we use it, we'll pay you \$10. **Mail to:** Young Montanans, P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403.

Email: rural@mtco-ops.com. **Include:** Your name, age, address and your cooperative. *If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.*

SEND US YOUR FALL
DRAWINGS AND POEMS



Rya Fisher, 9, Rudyard | HILL COUNTY ELECTRIC

Arianna Leonardi, 17, Hamilton | RAVALLI ELECTRIC



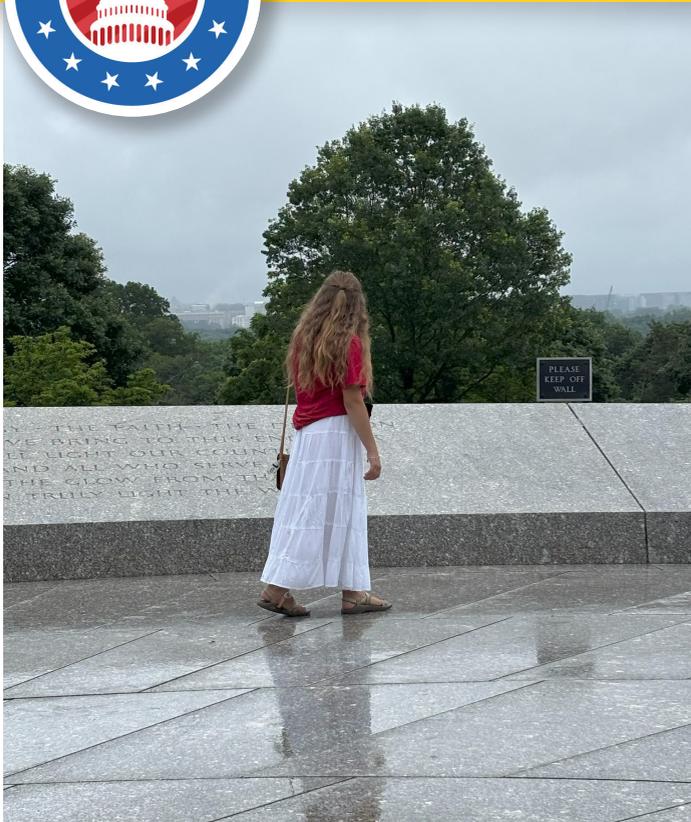
Noa Schreibeis, 13 Billings | YELLOWSTONE VALLEY ELECTRIC

Luke Kinsman, 8, Kalispell | FLATHEAD ELECTRIC





YOUTH TOUR 2025



Hasalyn Schairer, Ravalli Electric Cooperative, reads JFK quotes in Arlington National Cemetery. **Photo by Sommer Green, Big Flat Electric**



Illustration by Savannah Nelson, Vigilante Electric

Where am I?

Poem by **KAYLEIGH NISLEY** | *Southeast Electric*

The sky is gloomy, the air bitterly cold
I am surrounded by thousands of white
stones

All architecture and buildings are very old
Under each white stone are 206 bones.
Where am I?



Valor and honor run deep in this place
A ceremony is given for the unknown.
Nothing is left behind without a trace
Proper thankfulness through the ceremony is shown.
Where am I?

As I stand with a hand over my heart
My mind remembers the sacrifices made
I am grateful for the sacrifice on their part
Their lives for freedom was the trade.
Where am I? I think you know – Arlington National
Cemetery.



Photo by Abrielle Rooney, Glacier Electric



MECA photo



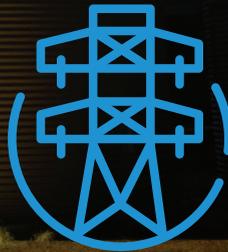
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Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

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