



Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | JANUARY 2026

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About our cover: From left, Fred Bakosh, Cheryl Robinson and Travis Long pose with the 1918 firetruck they helped bring back to Wilsall. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL



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Have you ever wondered what it costs to send you the Rural Montana magazine?

Rural Montana

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Co-ops working to reduce wildfire risk

MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association



The Montana Department of Natural Resources recently announced 2025 was a below normal wildfire year, with the 76,000 acres burned statewide being the fourth-lowest total in the past 15 years, yet the 2,200 fires across Montana were the sixth-highest number in the same period. The agency credited a cooler and wetter summer than normal, and quick fire-response times, for keeping the state's fire season in check.

Montana's electric cooperatives are grateful 2025 was a modest fire year, but recognize the 2026 fire season is only a few months away — and they will be ready to do their part to reduce the risk of utility-involved wildfire.

Rural Montana readers have been well-informed about MECA's ground-breaking wildfire mitigation and liability bill, HB490, which earned overwhelming bipartisan support in the 2025 Montana legislative session and was signed into law by Gov. Greg Gianforte. HB490 required every utility in the state, including every co-op, to develop and implement wildfire mitigation plans by the end of 2025. I'm pleased to report every co-op approved and implemented its wildfire mitigation plans well in

advance of the December 31 compliance deadline. While wildfires may be far from our minds during winter, I want our readers to know their co-op is busy replacing power poles, cutting branches and trees, inspecting and replacing equipment, and practicing fire-response tactics to be as prepared as possible for the 2026 fire season.

Following its success with HB490, Montana's co-ops are focused on important wildfire legislation at the federal level. MECA is supporting the efforts of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association to secure passage of the Fix Our Forests Act to facilitate vegetation management and hazard tree removal along powerlines on federal lands. The bill, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives last January, cleared the Senate Agriculture Committee in October and is expected to pass the full Senate in the near future.

These coordinated efforts by utilities and state, federal, tribal and local governments will protect our communities from wildfire and enhance reliability of electricity service. 

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A 1918 Chevy Model T that served as Wilsall's first firetruck has returned to town and is in the process of being purchased by the Wilsall Historical Organization. Here it is parked in front of a mural in which it is immortalized. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

Wilsall's first firetruck finds its way home

STORY AND PHOTOS BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

THERE'S a prominent mural on the side of the Wilsall Mercantile Building, featuring the town's first firetruck — a modified 1918 Chevy Model T — a long-lost treasure that first left Wilsall more than 50 years ago. Now, thanks to a new historical group focused on saving the town's artifacts, the firetruck is back in town and looking for a permanent home.

According to Travis Long, president of the Wilsall Historical Organization (WHO), once the truck was taken out of service, it was offered to the state as a historical item, but then Gov. Tim Babcock declined to buy it. It then spent some time on display in a Chevy dealership in Billings before finding its way back to Wilsall. In 1970, it left town again after being sold to Louis Zastrow of Wisconsin.

The truck is the first of many artifacts the newly formed WHO is hoping to return, restore or save. It was one of only eight Chevy Model Ts to be modified to fight fires, of which only six still exist, Long said.

"We're trying to save Wilsall's history one item at a time," said Cheryl Robinson of WHO, standing in front of the old firetruck parked outside of the school in Wilsall. "And this is our first item."

A legacy of service

Robinson said the firetruck was an important part of the town's history, which is why it was immortalized in the large mural visible alongside Highway 89.

"I know it helped save at least one house in town. And I know that because it's still there!" Robinson said.

TO DONATE

To donate to the purchase price of the 1918 Chevy Model T that served as Wilsall's first firetruck:

Send checks made out to the Wilsall Historical Organization — which is a 501 (c) (3) charitable nonprofit — to the Bank of the Rockies, PO Box 2, Clyde Park MT 59018.

For more information, call Cheryl Robinson at 406-223-9014.



Students from Shields Valley Elementary School in Wilsall gather around the historic firetruck, with many honking the horn or running the siren. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

The truck, though it was restored at least once, looks much like it did when it protected the structures in Wilsall. It has the original hose reel and nozzle, twin 35-gallon water tanks, two very early fire extinguishers that used baking soda and fire brigade buckets — complete with curved bottoms to help prevent them from tipping over. The motor is original, though the crank start has been supplemented with an electric option. The tires are wrapped around metal split-rims, which in turn sit on the outside of wooden spokes. The odometer is mounted on the center hub of the wooden wheel on the front passenger side of the vehicle.

The inline four-cylinder engine, which produces about 37 horsepower, still fires up with a little extra coaxing on a chilly November afternoon in Wilsall — after Long performs the nine-step process to start the truck.

“At a whopping top speed of 20 miles



per hour, you have to leave before the fire starts,” Long joked.

Finding its way home

Robinson said the firetruck was not on WHO's radar until it was posted for sale online, and the local fire department saw it. Another historic group originally spoke with Todd Zastrow, the son of Louis, but nothing came to fruition. That's when Robinson and fellow WHO member Fred Bakosh set the wheels in motion.

“Fred and I went rogue,” Robinson said with a laugh.

They looped in Travis, and WHO was formed. The group then reached out to Todd Zastrow, who told them, “I want you guys to have (the firetruck).”

“We wanted it. How often do you



have a chance to save history?” Robinson asked. “Most of the time it goes by the wayside.”

The trio, along with WHO member Cindy Reihart, went to work raising money toward the \$35,000 price tag of the firetruck. In the meantime, Zastrow “took a leap of faith” Long said, and shipped the vehicle — with its original paperwork — to Wilsall, even though the funds were not yet secured.

Long, Bakosh, Reihart and Robinson had seen photos of the firetruck online, but had not viewed it in person before it arrived.

“It was better than expected,” Bakosh said.

Future plan

WHO has raised about \$7,000 toward the purchase of the firetruck, and is continuing to work on raising the balance. Once that is accomplished, the next goal will be establishing a permanent home. Bakosh would like to see it in a protective glass case near the fire department, or the granary.

After it is stored in a protective enclosure, the firetruck will still make appearances in parades and at school events, such as Fire Prevention Week, Long said.

Once the firetruck is safely displayed, WHO plans to turn its attention to the lone remaining grain elevator in town.

“We've lost two of them, and it's the last one,” Bakosh said, noting the iconic tower is in “good enough” condition to be saved and restored.

“If you watched the Super Bowl last year, the commercials — it was in two of them,” Long said. RM



What is the cost of *Rural Montana* to members?

BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

A few months back, we talked about why electric cooperative members receive *Rural Montana* from their electric cooperative each month. But did you know that your co-op pays about 62 cents per issue of *RM*, or less than a postage stamp?

This month we will take a look at what makes up the cost of *RM*, and what *Rural Montana* does to bring you the best magazine we can while controlling those costs.

First, as a product of the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA), *Rural Montana* is not for profit, so we only bill co-ops what it takes to produce the magazine each month. These costs can vary slightly, depending on several factors.

You might be surprised to find out that the

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Your co-op pays about **62 cents** per issue of *RM*, or less than a postage stamp.

”

monthly 20-page magazine, with a circulation of about 138,000, is produced by one full-time-equivalent employee. That means an editor and a designer each spend half of their time on the magazine. The other half is spent performing other communications duties for MECA, such as crafting press releases, appearing on radio or TV broadcasts, filming videos for our Grassroots Action Network, conducting communications training, creating logos for projects, and working on various internal publications and newsletters.

With the exception of reader submissions, all of the content you see in this magazine is produced in house; by one of the member electric cooperatives and republished; or provided by the National Rural Electric Cooperatives Association (NRECA). We are one of the few statewide electric cooperative magazines that don't use any paid freelance content. Freelancers are writers and photographers who sell their stories or photos to publications on a per-use basis.

Producing the magazine in this way keeps our administrative costs among the lowest of the 31 statewide electric cooperative magazines in the country. Using the November magazine as an example, almost 9 cents of the 62-cent cost went

to produce the content and layout of the magazine. Over the past year, the administrative costs have varied from 5 cents to 10 cents per copy each month, with an average right around 8 cents per copy.

The cost of printing the magazine is set every three years, when *RM* goes through a competitive bid process, with the contract typically awarded to the lowest bidder. The magazine is currently printed at a cost of about 16 cents per issue, not including paper and ink, which fluctuates with the market. In November, *RM* paid less than a cent per copy for ink, and just over 9 cents per copy for paper.

The last cost component is postage, and it's a big one, especially after a recent July increase that averaged more than 15 percent, or about 4 cents per copy. In November, it cost about 27.5 cents to mail a copy of the magazine.

We are doing everything we can to try to control the rising costs, much like electric cooperatives and like their members do every day.

We are working with NRECA and our congressional delegation to find a solution to the fastest rising cost — postage. And we continue to do everything we can to minimize the one cost we control — our administrative costs.

While we recognize costs have increased over the years, we still think the magazine is a pretty good value for 62 cents a month, or about \$7.48 a year per member. 

Ross Hasler calls it a career

Column by **ROSS HASLER**
Big Flat Electric Lineman

AFTER 30 years of employment, I've decided my last day at Big Flat Electric Cooperative will be January 2. I was former General Manager Jeanne Barnard's first hire in September 1995 as a meter reader. Shortly after that, I started the lineman apprenticeship program. After 8,000 on-the-job hours of training and bookwork, I passed my journeyman exam.

I thought my knowledge of Phillips and the adjoining counties was good, however, I soon found out we have a huge service area, and I had a lot to learn.



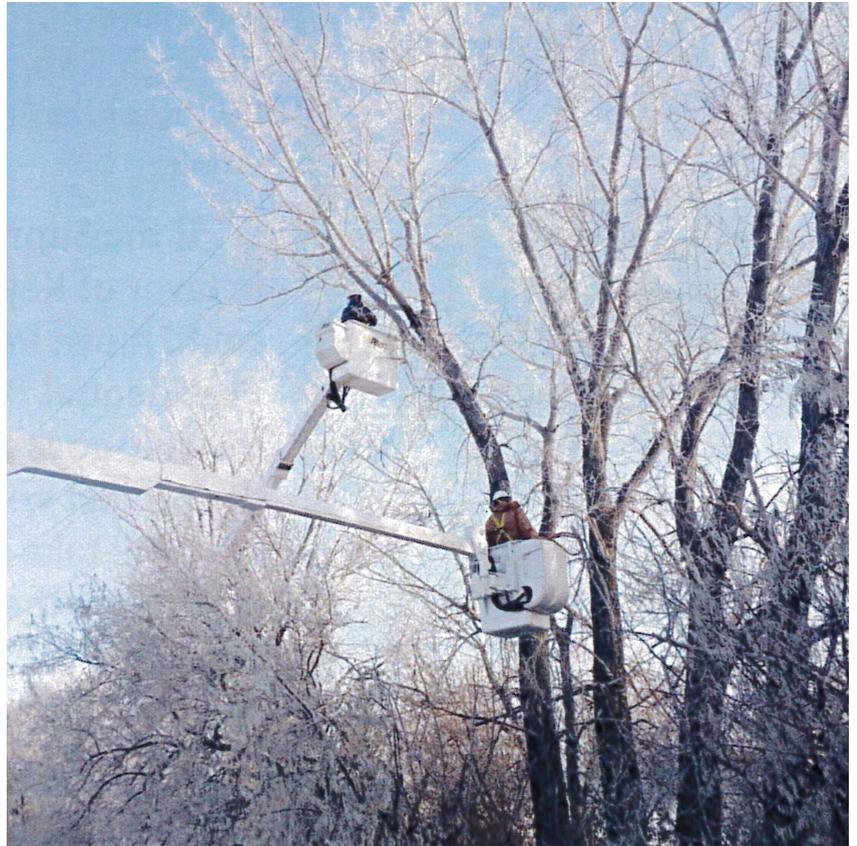
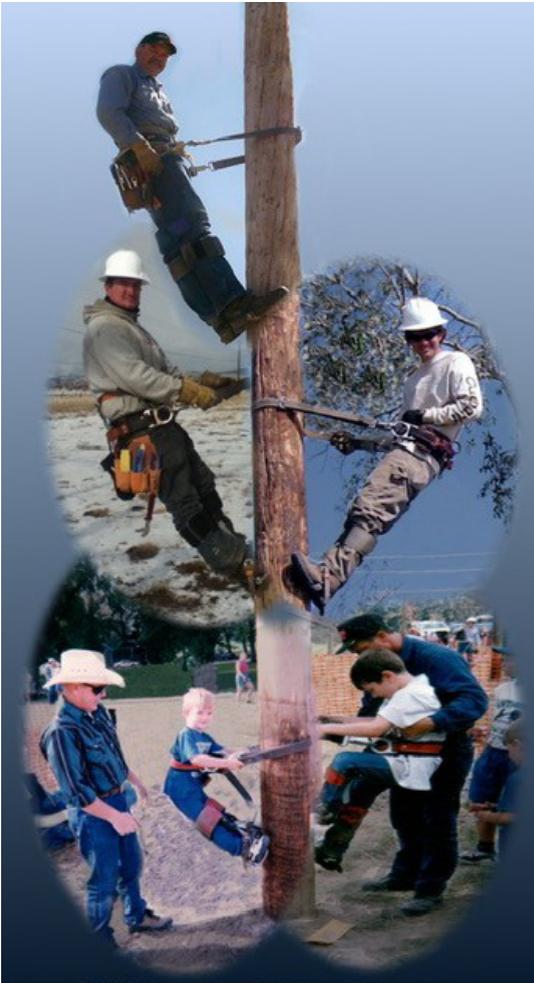
As the years went by, both my sons became journeymen for NorthWestern Energy. My son Kevin worked for NorthWestern Energy here in Malta for awhile.

Once, I was working on a joint-use powerline above the NorthWestern Energy line that my son Kevin was

dispatched to repair. So, we were both working together on that minus-30 degree repair, cool – or should I say VERY COLD!

I like being out in the country and visiting with the members. This job has many challenges and will humble you in a hurry if you think you know everything. The inside and outside crews are like family, and they all try to keep the power on. If you have an outage, rest assured we want the power back on as fast as you do.

To the many members who have come to my rescue with a tug out of a mud hole, hot cup of coffee or a better place to cross a creek, thank you. I will miss you all! RM



A father/son moment that won't happen very often. Big Flat Lineman Ross Hasler works on the cooperative's line above his son, Kevin, who was dispatched to repair NorthWestern Energy's line.



Brandy and Joel Barber bought the only cafe in Denton in 2010, and renamed it the Shade Tree Cafe. They also own the only apartment building and the Denton Motel, the only motel in Denton. | PHOTOS BY CATHY MOSER

THE SHADE TREE

Denton's little hometown cafe

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CATHY MOSER | FOR FERGUS ELECTRIC

IN 2010, a “For Sale” sign appeared in the Denton Cafe storefront. The cafe was, and still is, the town of Denton’s only cafe.

Brandy Kilgore and Joel Barber of Denton, who were dating, pondered the purchase of the cafe, seeing it as an opportunity for their future together, as well as to establish themselves more firmly in the community. The young couple understood the purchase would be a leap of faith: neither of them had previous work experience in the

restaurant industry. They took the leap. Suddenly, they were juggling lives as restaurant owners who also served as managers, cooks and waiters.

“We put a lot of thought into buying it, and bought it as a couple because we knew we could depend on each other,” Brandy said. “Neither of us would have bought it alone.”

Joel came up with a new name: Shade Tree Cafe. The couple married the following year.

Joining Brandy for a cup of coffee in

the Shade Tree on an October morning, she told me about ownership of the cafe, as well as ownership of other properties in Denton. She and Joel own the only apartment building and the only motel, the Denton Motel — which offers five units and two RV hookups. While out-of-state hunters lodge or camp at the motel during the fall, Brandy said only a few residents in central Montana are aware of the motel’s existence. One priority for the couple is to rectify this by identifying ways to better advertise

Shade Tree Cafe:

512 Broadway Avenue, Denton

Phone: (406) 567-3035**Hours:** Shade Tree Cafe is open every day of the week:**Monday:** 7 a.m. - 3 p.m.**Tuesday-Friday:** 7 a.m. - 7 p.m.**Saturday:** 8 a.m. - 7 p.m.**Sunday:** 8 - 10:30 a.m., except for the last Sunday of the month**Denton Motel:**

313 Broadway Avenue, Denton

Phone: (406) 380-2031

the Denton Motel.

The Barbers have no need to advertise the Shade Tree Cafe. The red brick building stands on Broadway Avenue, the town's main thoroughfare. Its service to the community since its construction in 1917 has included a grocery, meat market and confectionery. Road-weary travelers, hunters, stockmen and truckers stop in for a meal. A group of local men comes in for morning coffee and sits at a corner table, with a sign above it proclaiming, "Old Farts' Corner." At about the time they finish hashing out the world's troubles and leave the cafe, the Denton ladies arrive for coffee. They, too, choose the corner table. One of them flips the sign, which now reads: "Lovely Ladies' Corner."

The menu at the Shade Tree is typical of those found in other hometown cafes scattered across America. Nothing fancy — burgers and fries, steaks, breaded and deep-fried options, French dips, patty melts, cold-cut sandwiches and other standard fare. The cook determines the daily lunch special, such as chili mac — a ladle of chili heaped atop noodles. A daily salad bar is available and, except for weekends, a soup of the day. Pizza is not on the menu, but order one anyway. The cafe has all the ingredients to make it.

Thursday at the Shade Tree is Maple Bar Day. The maple bars look like a Long John and have thick maple buttercream glaze spread on top. Brandy's



Brandy Barber and her daughter, Salena, work behind the Shade Tree Cafe lunch counter.

grandmother used to make the maple bars, which call for mashed potatoes as an ingredient. They were delicious. Everyone loved them and raved about them. One day Brandy decided to introduce them to Shade Tree customers.

"I hoped for a maple bar like my grandmother made or that was as good as what I made when I was a stay-at-home mom," Brandy said. "But they turned out greasy and had air pockets."

A kind customer who ordered one of the experimental maple bars wrote an encouraging note before leaving the cafe: "Brandy, we took a vote, more potato maple bars, please." The note was signed, "Old Farts."

Brandy said the sweet treat is "finicky," and because it requires a lot of time to make, her mother Karla helps with the mixing and baking. They have since perfected the maple bar.

The recipe for the quiche served at Sunday brunch at the cafe also calls for potatoes. Hashbrowns made fresh from baked potatoes form the quiche's bottom layer.

Quiche, bacon, sausage and fruit are the staples, as is bread pudding, which Brandy said is "really popular." Biscuits and gravy, pancakes, crepes or waffles alternately complement the staples. Brunch is served only on the last Sunday of the month, starting at 10 a.m. and wrapping up around noon.

In the 15 years since Brandy and Joel purchased the Shade Tree, operating the cafe has not always been easy.

"Equipment breaks down, or an employee can't come to work because she's sick or injured," Brandy said of the challenges. The COVID outbreak in 2020 also put the Barbers at a crossroads.

"I wondered and worried, 'how are we going to make it?'" Brandy said. "It was scary, but we stayed open, and God and the locals came through. Running the cafe requires teamwork. Joel and I would not be as successful with this little hometown cafe as we are without the support of family, employees who are dependable, loyal customers or faith in God." RM

GOLDENWEST ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE HI-LINES

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JANUARY 2026

POWER OF SCHOLARSHIPS: Opening doors to education and opportunity



Scholarships play a vital role in shaping the future of students and communities alike. More than just financial awards, they represent opportunity, empowerment and the promise of a brighter tomorrow. By easing the financial burden of higher education, scholarships allow students to pursue their academic goals without the overwhelming weight of student debt.

For many students, the cost of tuition, books and living expenses can be a major barrier to achieving their dreams. Scholarships help bridge that gap, providing crucial financial support that enables students to focus on their studies rather than their finances. This freedom often leads to improved academic performance, greater engagement in campus life and a stronger sense of purpose.

Beyond the classroom, scholarships offer lasting benefits that extend into students' careers and communities. Recipients often gain access to mentorship opportunities, professional

networks and leadership experiences that help them succeed long after graduation. Many scholarship programs also encourage recipients to give back, creating a ripple effect of generosity and achievement.

In a world where education is key to progress, scholarships stand as powerful tools for equity and advancement. They not only invest in individual potential, but also strengthen the workforce, inspire innovation and build stronger communities. Each scholarship awarded is more than financial aid. It's an investment in the future.

This is why Goldenwest Electric Cooperative (GWEC) is committed to encouraging every student in our service area to apply for our scholarships.

This year, GWEC offers a variety of scholarships, including the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association's scholarship of \$500.

The Basin Electric Power Cooperative scholarship program provides two awards, including a first-place scholarship of \$1,500 and a second-place scholarship of \$1,000, for the dependent of a GWEC member-consumer.

The Marvin Robinson Memorial scholarship is in the amount of \$1,000.

These scholarships are to be utilized for educational expenses, and recipients must enroll in college in the fall of the academic year the scholarship is awarded.

Applicants need to submit their application forms and reference transcripts to GWEC no later than 5 p.m. on Feb. 25. ■

**For more information and applications,
visit gwec.coop/scholarships or
call 406-796-2423.**

Simplify your payments with smart hub



Managing electric bills has never been easier, thanks to SmartHub. The secure, user-friendly platform puts account management right at your fingertips. Whether you are at home or on the go, SmartHub offers a convenient way to view usage, make payments and stay connected with Goldenwest Electric Cooperative.

What is SmartHub?

SmartHub is an online and mobile app designed to give cooperative members complete control over their accounts. It allows users to pay bills, monitor energy consumption and receive important updates – all in one place. With SmartHub, there’s no need to wait in line, mail checks or worry about missing a due date.

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Getting started with SmartHub is simple:

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Beyond payments, SmartHub provides detailed insights into energy usage. Members can view daily, weekly or monthly consumption patterns to better understand their energy habits. The platform also sends alerts for billing updates, outages and cooperative news, keeping members informed and in control.

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Switching to SmartHub saves time, reduces paper waste and offers peace of mind. It’s a modern solution that fits busy lifestyles, while supporting the cooperative’s commitment to efficiency and sustainability.

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Visit gwec.coop to sign up for SmartHub and experience the convenience of managing your electric account anytime, anywhere. With SmartHub, paying bills and tracking energy use has never been smarter. ■

SAFETY SNOWBALLS

When the weather turns cold, the snow piles high and we snuggle inside, Goldenwest Electric Cooperative wants you to remain safe this winter!

Practicing these winter safety tips will have a snowball effect on your safety throughout the entire winter!

Be aware of where electrical equipment is located. Avoid plowing into pad-mounted transformers, cabinets, poles and guy wires while moving snow. Mark electrical equipment near driveways and sidewalks with flags or posts to avoid hitting the equipment with a plow when the snow gets deep.

Always follow the manufacturer's recommendations on how to use your electric generator. Most important is the transfer switch that disconnects the farm or home from the power line and connects it to the generator. It must be a double-throw transfer switch, which prevents the generator from feeding electricity back onto the power line. This protects the lineworkers who may be working to restore your service.

Have a working smoke alarm and test its batteries regularly.

Pile cleared snow a good distance away from power lines to avoid contact with a power line.

Use your space heater safely. Read and follow the manufacturer's operating instructions, never leave a space heater unattended and keep the heater at least 3 feet from flammable items.

While snowmobiling in a roadside ditch, remember power lines and poles are located along those same roadside ditches. Often, poles are reinforced with guy wires which extend some distance from the poles. They may not be easy to see from a speeding snowmobile, especially on a dark, winter night or when they are buried under snow. Always ride at a speed at which you can stop quickly. Ease up on the throttle, especially when near any objects. Know your riding area, too.

As you move snow, hay or equipment, keep watching for those overhead power lines. Look up, look around and always remain at least 10 feet away from any power line.



The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

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BASIN ELECTRIC



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At Basin Electric, we understand that life doesn't stop when the going gets tough. No matter the season or storm our members face, reliable and affordable electricity for our members' homes, schools, and businesses is our mission. We'll do everything we can to keep fans running, the lights on, and the coffee brewing.



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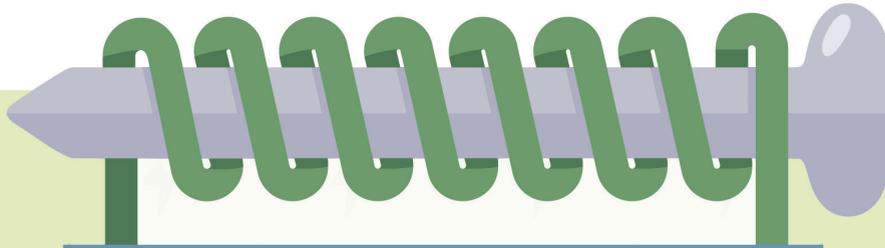
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POP QUIZ

Electricity Terms

How well do you know terms related to electricity? Test your knowledge! **Read the definitions below. Then, look at the word bank to match the correct terms to the definitions.** You can only use the words once, so choose carefully. Check your work in the answer key.



Word Bank:

- Conductor
- Circuit
- Insulator
- Volt (Voltage)
- Static Electricity

1. A complete path that electricity flows through.

2. Something that allows electricity to pass through, such as metal or wire.

3. The standard unit of measurement for electricity.

4. Something that does not allow electricity to pass through easily, such as rubber.

5. Electricity build-up caused by rubbing two surfaces together.



Answer Key:
1. Circuit 2. Conductor
3. Volt (Voltage)
4. Insulator
5. Static Electricity

MONTANA U.S. SENATORS

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 senators. Next month, we will ask a question of the state's two representatives.

THIS MONTH'S QUESTION:

"What are your top priorities for the 2026 congressional session?"

THE SAME QUESTION WILL BE ASKED TO MONTANA'S TWO U.S. REPRESENTATIVES IN NEXT MONTH'S EDITION



Senator Sheehy

Dirksen Senate Office
Building, SD-G55
Washington, D.C. 20510
www.sheehy.senate.gov
Ph: (202) 224-2644

Senator Tim Sheehy

REPUBLICANS won in 2024 with America First Common Sense: secure border, safe streets, cheap gas, cops are good, criminals are bad, boys are boys and girls are girls. President Trump is the strongest political force in American history, who, despite historic Democrat obstruction, has kept his promises.

The border is secure, fiscal discipline is returning and we've seen trillions in generational investments in America — but one stubborn problem remains: Biden-Harris inflation that still crushes working families.

Republicans should use the White House and our congressional majorities to implement a new playbook that prioritizes competition, deregulation and empowering the American people over faceless government bureaucrats.

Housing supply constraints have driven prices up in recent years. We must reform zoning laws and cut bureaucratic zoning hurdles to build more homes for less.

Food costs are a top concern — especially meat. Four corporate giants control 85 percent of the meatpacking market, squeezing ranchers, hiking prices for consumers and padding their own margins. Aggressive enforcement of the Packers and Stockyards Act can break that oligopoly, force real competition and lower prices at the checkout.

The same aspirin costs 4 cents at Walmart and \$82 in a hospital two miles away because patients shop blind. We need price transparency. Force hospitals to post real prices upfront, just like gas stations do, and watch costs plummet — no new spending or mandates, just competition finally unleashed.

Americans voted for relief — paychecks that stretch further, kitchens that aren't a monthly crisis and restoring the basic American promise: work hard, play by the rules and you can get ahead. It's time for an all-out affordability offensive in 2026 — shred the red tape, force transparency and unleash competition to deliver results families can feel at the kitchen table and the gas pump. Let's get to work. RM



Senator Daines

320 Hart, Senate Office
Building,
Washington, D.C. 20510
www.daines.senate.gov
Ph: (202) 224-2651

Senator Steve Daines

2025 was a historic year for Montana. With the election of Senator Tim Sheehy and Representative Troy Downing, Montana now has a united delegation representing the Treasure State in D.C. Because of that, we've made major strides advancing Montana priorities in all aspects, from increasing our energy dominance to protecting our public lands, and supporting farmers, ranchers and working families.

On Independence Day, I stood with President Trump at the White House as he signed the One Big Beautiful Bill, which delivered the largest tax cuts in American history. Montana families will see the effects in 2026, when their take-home pay is boosted by over \$10,000 a year and there are no taxes on tips. The Big Beautiful Bill also included my provision to save the Bull Mountains Mine, which protected Montana's energy dominance and saved over 300 well-paying Montana mining jobs. And as a lifelong sportsman, protecting our public lands is one of my top priorities. That's why I was proud to block a provision from being included in the bill that would have sold millions of acres of our public lands.

Of course, there's still more work to be done. My

first priority in January 2026 will be to work with my colleagues to fund the government. We absolutely cannot have another Schumer Shutdown — this does nothing but harm Montana families.

I'm also working on a number of bills to support our farmers and ranchers. Montana beef is the best in the world, and one of my main focuses will be expanding market access for our farmers and ranchers, so they have an even playing field across the globe. I'm also pushing for a robust Farm Bill that will support Montana ag and ensure Montana voices are represented.

Finally, I am fighting for my bill, the *America the Beautiful Act*, to be signed into law. This bill provides critical funding for our national parks and addresses maintenance backlogs, so that people can get outside and enjoy the great outdoors.

Of course, these are just a few of my 2026 priorities. I'll always work to support the needs of Montanans — from our veterans to our children, and from our teachers to our miners. It's my honor to serve you in the U.S. Senate, and I look forward to what 2026 brings. RM

THE ASK A MANAGER PANEL



PAT
PATTERSON
BEARTOOTH ELECTRIC
COOPERATIVE



SCOTT
WESTLUND
SHERIDAN ELECTRIC
COOPERATIVE



JASON
BROTEN
GOLDENWEST, LOWER
YELLOWSTONE AND
MID-YELLOWSTONE
COOPERATIVES

SEND US YOUR QUESTIONS

If you want to ask a question for a future edition of *Ask a Manager*, email your question to ryanh@mtco-ops.com, or call the editor at 406-761-8333.

ASK A MANAGER:

Who has the last say if a data center can be built

Every other month we ask our electric co-op manager panel a question, many of which are provided by our readers.

Our panel consists of Pat Patterson, manager of Beartooth Electric Cooperative in Red Lodge; Scott Westlund of Sheridan Electric Cooperative in Medicine Lake; and Jason Brothen, manager of Goldenwest Electric Cooperative in Wibaux, Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative in Sidney and Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative in Hysham.

This month's question is:

Q: *"My question is who would decide if a data center could be built in a certain area? I seem fairly confident that my co-op makes decisions that are best for its members, but would my co-op have the final say on whether a data center would be built in the co-op's area?"*

*Thank You,
Ray Sierra*



PAT PATTERSON BEARTOOTH ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

Elected community leaders — such as county commissioners — should be the ones determining whether a proposed data center is in the best interest of the community. In most jurisdictions, subdivision and zoning regulations already require large data centers to obtain approval from the county commission. This ensures that the ultimate decision and the vetting process occur in a transparent, public forum, such as county commission meetings.

As a cooperative, we have an obligation to serve, but the cooperative's management and board also have a responsibility to ensure that our member-owners are not adversely impacted by the addition of a

large data center. Any new data center must pay 100 percent of the costs required to serve it, including all necessary infrastructure upgrades.

It is also essential to determine where the energy needed to support the data center will come from. If the cooperative purchases power from a generation & transmission (G&T) provider, we must verify that the G&T has adequate generation capacity available. If not, additional generation resources will be required. Many G&T providers are now requiring cash deposits or letters of credit to ensure they are not left with stranded assets should a large load, such as a data center, reduce or terminate service prematurely.



DATA CENTERS

SCOTT WESTLUND SHERIDAN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

RAY, great question and a little tough to answer, let's take this question layer by layer, as you asked it.

There are many levels of the first part: the co-op's acceptance of the project, the size of the project, power supplier acceptance under new large load rates and the membership.

The membership/board would set up any, "Yes we want it" to "We want nothing to do with it" at the board table.

When Bitcoin mining was going strong, this cooperative board was apprehensive on allowing any into the region due to its transient nature. Better said, "They could be here tonight and gone tomorrow."

Tough to run a co-op like that, so we adhered to the wishes of the board.

When it comes to decisions on data centers, we would vet the company and the program to make sure there are no shady actors entering the system.

While not chasing data centers actively or taking

calls for data centers yet, we expect them soon. When that happens, we will start our process for vetting. But if one courts us, as a cooperative, we are obligated to serve, after our vetting process is satisfied.

You ask an important question that all cooperatives need to be aware of: With the drive for data centers in high gear nationwide, there will be shady characters entering into the mix.

As member servants to the cooperative, it is our duty to screen these out and only move a project forward that is legitimate.

On the final part of your question: Yes, the cooperative would have final say whether a data center is built within the region, but again, it's hard to say no when we are obligated to serve.

It's a balancing act.

The foundation is what the membership wants in its region, and is all about the culture of said membership.

RM

JASON BROTHEN GOLDENWEST, LOWER YELLOWSTONE RURAL AND MID-YELLOWSTONE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES

COOOPERATIVES are member-based organizations and were established to serve their members' needs and requests for electric service. Cooperatives' membership agreements and bylaws do not allow discrimination for any reason.

When a member requests service, they fill out an application for the size and type of load they will have. That determines the rate class they will go under. Larger loads may require us to do a study to determine what, if any, upgrades will need to be made to serve the load. This can include upgrading the distribution system, substation or the transmission system. In some cases, the study of larger loads includes generation resources needed to serve the load. The member is

responsible for the cost of any upgrades required.

Counties or cities may have zoning regulations or requirements that limit where, and what type of businesses, can be sited in different areas. Cooperatives do not have a say in this determination. Our mission is to provide electrical service to our members safely and reliably, not to determine what types of businesses to serve.

New loads, regardless of type, provide growth in kilowatt-hour sales. Managing growth so as not to negatively impact our current members is a big part of our decision-making process. Growth helps to keep our rates stable for all our members. That is another part of our mission, along with providing safe and dependable electric service. RM



SCARE TACTICS

SOME SOLAR SALES STAFF LYING ABOUT ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES BEING SOLD

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

THERE are many reasons to consider installing a solar array at your home — fear that your electric cooperative is being sold to NorthWestern Energy is not one of them.

In November, *Rural Montana* received the following suggested question for our *Ask a Manager* feature from Jeff Rader of Emigrant, a Park Electric cooperative member:

“My question is, how likely or how possible is it that NorthWestern Energy (NWE) will buy out Park Electric Cooperative? A solar system salesman said that NWE is negotiating to buy out various cooperatives in order to fuel a couple of AI (artificial intelligence) facilities coming into Montana.”

This isn't the first time this tactic has been used. A salesperson in Missoula Electric Cooperative's service area was reported to use a similar tactic a little over a year ago, though data centers were not mentioned.

According to NorthWestern Energy, the state Public Service Commission and the manager of both co-ops

mentioned by the sales personnel, no sale of any electric cooperative to the state's largest utility is imminent or even in discussion.

“It's unacceptable for anyone to twist news headlines into false claims to pressure Montana homeowners into buying a product,” said Jo Dee Black, public relations specialist for NorthWestern Energy.

“Here are the facts: On Jan. 1 (2026), NorthWestern Energy's ownership of the Colstrip Plant will increase from 15 percent to 55 percent. This step ensures reliable, affordable energy for Montana families and businesses, and opens the door to economic growth opportunities through expanded generation capacity,” Black said. “What's not true? NorthWestern Energy is not in talks to buy any electric cooperatives in Montana.”

While Montana's electric cooperatives are self-governed by boards of directors elected by their members and do not fall under the jurisdiction of the state Public Service Commis-

sion (PSC), NorthWestern Energy, as an investor-owned utility, is regulated by the PSC. That means any sale or purchase involving NorthWestern Energy would be subject to approval by the commission.

“Any comments suggesting that NorthWestern Energy is in final negotiations to purchase Montana electric cooperatives are inaccurate as transactions like this would require approval from the PSC,” PSC Executive Director Alana Lake said. “The commission has not received any notification, filing or indication that NorthWestern intends to acquire any cooperatives.

“If NorthWestern were to pursue such acquisitions in the future, the PSC would open formal proceedings to thoroughly evaluate whether the proposal serves the public interest. That process would include full opportunities for stakeholders — including the Montana Consumer Counsel, consumer advocates and the public — to provide input and scrutinize the impacts on Montana ratepayers,” Lake added.

“At this time, no such proceeding exists, and the PSC has no information suggesting that one is forthcoming,” she said.

Park Electric Cooperative General Manager Matt Haggerty echoed those comments when asked if his co-op had entered into any negotiations with NorthWestern, or any other utility, to be bought.

“No we have not, and per our bylaws it would take a vote of the membership to approve that,” Haggerty said.

He added that getting the membership to approve such a sale, if it was ever proposed, would be difficult, as the co-op’s rates currently average about 40 percent below NorthWestern’s.

“It would increase our rates substantially,” Haggerty said.

Missoula Electric Manager Mark Hayden said he also has never had discussions with NorthWestern Energy about selling the cooperative, adding that door-knocking salespeople using that scare tactic amounts to a scam.

“It’s just another scam, and we are constantly on alert trying to keep our members from falling for these deceptive tactics,” Hayden said.

Impacting reputable dealers

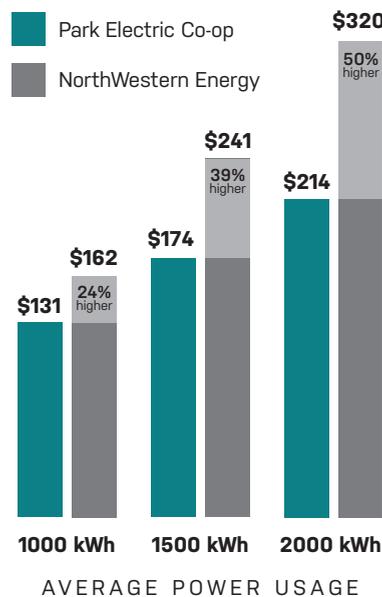
In addition to alarming co-op members, the sales tactics employed by door-knockers for solar installers, many of which are out of state companies, impact the reputable Montana solar panel businesses.

“I have not heard this most recent tactic, that’s a new one to me, but there’s a dozen others I’ve heard. Every week is a new thing,” said Orion Thornton, partner/CTO of Onsite Energy of Missoula and Bozeman. “We would not ever use that kind of tactic. We don’t ever try to stretch the truth or tell people a lie to sell a system.”

Thornton said Onsite, which has been Montana-owned and operated for 20 years, and other reputable solar installers and dealers in the state are invested in their communities. They care about making sure a solar system



Park Electric energy rates vs. NorthWestern Energy



fits the needs of a customer and accomplishes their goals.

That is not the case with most companies that employ door-knockers to sell their products, then send crews from out of state once a certain number of systems are sold, he said.

“These companies are not going to be around. They are not here to support the Montana energy community. They are just here to make as much money as they can,” Thornton

said, adding that he knows of only one or two Montana companies that employ door-knockers.

“That’s the biggest unfortunate part of these lies to me is that people are being taken advantage of,” he added. “These people literally might be one of our neighbors or an older grandma getting scammed to a certain degree out of their hard-earned money.”

He said of secondary concern is the damage done to the solar industry. When some companies use dishonest sales tactics, it can cast a shadow across the entire industry, including the reputable dealer.

Find a reputable dealer

Thornton said to avoid being taken advantage of, and possibly falling for sales tactics based on lies, look for Montana solar companies – with headquarters and personnel in the state.

“Ask the salesperson, is your company the actual installation company who are doing the work on my home,” Thornton said. “Most of the local companies are all in house.”

Hayden added that anyone considering a solar array can also contact their electric cooperative to ensure they get the right fit.

“I would encourage a member who is considering solar to contact Missoula Electric Cooperative,” Hayden said. “We will work with them to make sure the system meets their needs and is a good value for them.” RM

1st
PLACE

Chile Relleno Meatballs

Diane Carter | MOLT

INGREDIENTS

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1/3 cup dry bread crumbs | 1 medium onion, chopped |
| 1/4 cup red wine or milk | 1 clove garlic, minced |
| 1 T parsley, chopped | 2 T oil |
| 1 egg | 1 can tomatoes |
| 3/4 tsp. salt | 1/2 cup wine or water |
| 1/8 tsp. pepper | 1/2 tsp. sugar |
| 1 lb. ground beef | 1/2 tsp. salt |
| 1 can (4 oz.) green chiles | 1/2 tsp. oregano |
| 5-6 oz. block jack cheese | Reserved T chiles |

DIRECTIONS

Mix crumbs and milk, let stand a few minutes. Blend in parsley, egg, salt, pepper and beef.

Remove seeds from chiles and cut 8 strips about 3/4 inch wide and 3-1/2 inches long. Chop 1 T chiles and save for sauce.

Cut cheese into 8 1-inch cubes. Wrap each cube with a chile strip and cover with meat mixture, shaping it into a meatball.

Place meatballs in uncovered dish in 450-degree oven for 15 minutes. Remove from oven and pour sauce over meatballs. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes, or until done.

SAUCE: Sauté onion and garlic in oil. Add tomatoes and water, sugar, salt, oregano and chiles. Bring to boil and simmer 30 minutes.

For best flavor let cooked meatballs sit in sauce over night and bake remaining 30 minutes before serving.



2nd
PLACE

Cindy's Pork & Ricotta Meatballs

Laurel Deniger
SEELEY LAKE

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 cup day-old bread, cubed
- 1/4 cup whole milk
- 1-1/2 lb. ground pork
- 1/2 cup ricotta cheese
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 shallot, minced
- 2 T Italian parsley, chopped
- Zest of 1 lemon
- 1/2 tsp. ground coriander
- 1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp. course salt
- 2 T olive oil (for frying)
- Fresh basil and grated Parmesan cheese (optional)

DIRECTIONS

Soak bread in milk until absorbed, then squeeze out excess liquid.

Combine all ingredients except olive oil and form into 12-15 meatballs, about 1/3 cup each. Fry in olive oil.

Top with basil and grated Parmesan cheese when serving, if desired.



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 February send in your favorite Valentine recipe (Date-night entree, dessert, candy, etc...) by January 15. Please send in March recipes any-time: Your favorite Irish or green(ish) recipe. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

3rd
PLACE

Chicken Piccata Meatballs

Bev Mix | MISSOULA

INGREDIENTS

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| 1/2 cup dry bread crumbs | 2 garlic cloves, minced |
| 1/3 cup grated Parmesan | 1/3 cup chicken broth |
| 1 large egg, lightly beaten | 1/4 cup white wine |
| 1 tsp. garlic powder | 1 T lemon juice |
| 1/4 tsp. salt | 1 jar (3-1/2 oz.) capers, drained |
| 1/8 tsp. black pepper | 2 T butter |
| 1 lb. ground chicken | Parmesan cheese and lemon wedges (garnish) |
| 2 T canola oil | |

DIRECTIONS

In large bowl, combine first 6 ingredients. Add chicken; mix lightly but thoroughly. Shape into 1-inch balls.

In a skillet, heat 1 T oil over medium heat. Brown meatballs, drain.

In same skillet, heat remaining 1 T oil over medium heat. Add garlic, cook for 1 minute. Add broth and wine to pan, increase heat to medium-high and cook for 1 minute, stirring to loosen brown bits from pan. Add capers and lemon juice; bring to boil. Add meatballs. Reduce heat; simmer, uncovered for 5-7 minutes, stirring occasionally, until meatballs are cooked through.

Remove from heat; stir in butter; stir until melted. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese and serve with lemon wedges.





BONUS
RECIPE

Bacon-Wrapped Meatloaf

Teresa Gaylord | KALISPELL

INGREDIENTS

- 1 lb. ground turkey
- 1 lb. sage sausage
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1/2 tsp. basil
- 1 tsp. Italian seasoning
- 1/2 tsp. garlic powder
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1 T Worcester sauce
- 1 can cream of mushroom soup, undiluted
- 2 cups oatmeal
- 8 slices bacon
- Barbecue sauce (for serving)

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Mix all ingredients except bacon and barbecue sauce in a large bowl.

Shape into a loaf. Spray loaf pan with cooking spray and place meatloaf inside.

Make basket weave design with bacon and place over meatloaf.

Bake 1-1/2 hours, checking at 1 hour, until internal temperature reaches 160 degrees.

Serve with BBQ sauce.



Events Calendar

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 January 15 for February events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.**

NORTHWEST

January 13

Northwest Montana Photographers meeting — Fellowship Church, 7 p.m., 260-0086 | COLUMBIA FALLS

January 18

John White Series presents Wolf Biologist Diane Boyd — Northwest Montana History Museum, 2 p.m., 756-8381 | KALISPELL

January 20

KalisPELL Women's Connection "Something from Nothing" luncheon featuring Paul Erier — Guest speaker is Judy Johnson, 1830 Hwy. 35, 11:30 a.m., call 261-9894 for reservations or information | KALISPELL

January 21

Columbia Falls Women's Connection Luncheon — Guest speaker is Judy Johnson, 827 9th St. West, 11:30 a.m., call 892-3621 for reservations | COLUMBIA FALLS

February 1

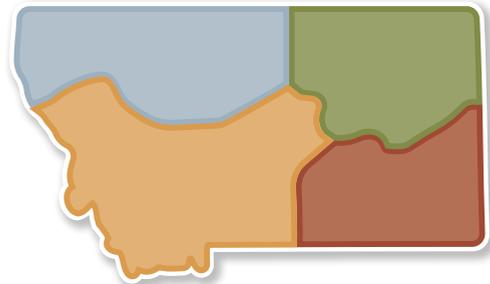
John White Series presents Kira Powell on fire lookouts — Northwest Montana History Museum, 2 p.m., 756-8381 | KALISPELL

February 15

John White Series presents Souta Calling Last on Blackfoot place mapping — Northwest Montana History Museum, 2 p.m., 756-8381 | KALISPELL

March 1

John White Series presents Marty Boehm on the early days of ALERT — Northwest Montana History Museum, 2 p.m., 756-8381 | KALISPELL



SOUTHWEST

January 15-17

47th Annual Montana Pro Rodeo Circuit Finals — Montana ExpoPark Pacific Steel & Recycling Arena, 7 to 10 p.m., 727-8900 | GREAT FALLS

January 21-22

MAGIE — Montana ExpoPark Pacific Steel & Recycling Arena and Exhibition Hall, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., 727-8900 | GREAT FALLS

January 30-February 1

Wallace Marine Boat Show — Montana ExpoPark Exhibition Hall, Fri: 4 to 7 p.m., Sat: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., 727-8900 | GREAT FALLS

February 10

Wildfire Mitigation and Preparedness Class — Ravalli County Economic Development Authority, 6 to 8 p.m., 375-9416 | HAMILTON

February 25-28

Northern C Boys' & Girls' Divisional Basketball Tournament — Montana ExpoPark Pacific Steel & Recycling Arena, 727-8900 | GREAT FALLS

SOUTHEAST

January 10

Pub Station Presents Paula Poundstone — Petro Theatre, 8 p.m., 919-653-0443 | BILLINGS

January 18

Nate Bargatze: Big Dumb Eyes World Tour — MetraPark First Interstate Arena, 7 p.m., 256-2400 | BILLINGS

January 30-February 1

Building & Remodeling Expo — MetraPark Expo Center, 256-2400 | BILLINGS

February 19

Health & Safety City College Expo — For high school students, register online at www.msubillings.edu/future/springexpos.htm | BILLINGS

February 25-March 1

Billings RV & Boat Show — MetraPark Expo Center, 256-2400 | BILLINGS

STATEWIDE

All year

Blood Drives — Various locations, see website for full schedule, redcrossblood.org.

Blood Drives — See website for full details, vitalant.org.

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 YOUR WINTER DRAWINGS
AND POEMS**



Jeremiah Spencer, 13, Billings | **YELLOWSTONE VALLEY ELECTRIC**

Diana Korchmar, 12, Kalispell | **FLATHEAD ELECTRIC**



Lily Korchmar, 10, Kalispell | **FLATHEAD ELECTRIC**

Bennet Frase, 12, Lakeside | **FLATHEAD ELECTRIC**



READER PHOTOS

SEND US YOUR FAVORITE PHOTOS/ARTWORK

Please include: the photographer's/artist's name, address and hometown in the entry. *If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.* If we use your entry we'll pay you \$25-\$100 (depending on size and location).

Send entries to: rural@mtco-ops.com. No more than 20 MB at a time. No prints please.



Awesome Aurora

The Northern Lights provide the perfect backdrop to a monument honoring Native Americans near Cut Bank. **Photo by Jason Berg of Cut Bank.**



Speedy Slalom

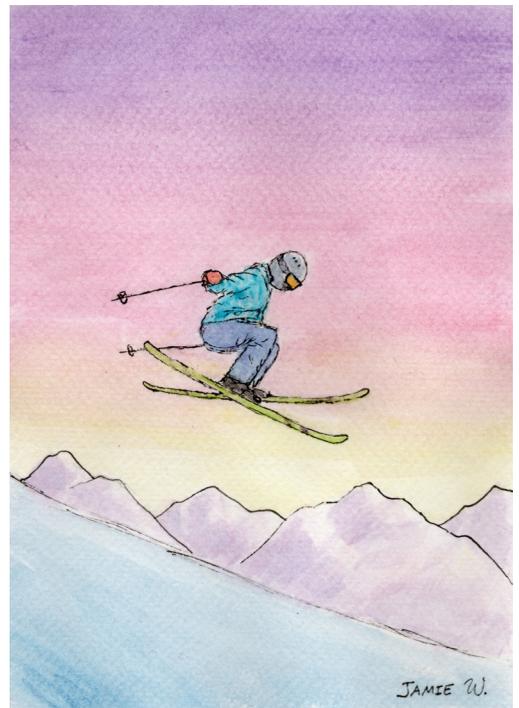
A Montana State University skier competes in the MSU Bobcat Invitational at Bridger Bowl last year. **Photo by Keith Nathan of Bozeman.**

Sky-High Skier

A skier catches air in this pen and watercolor. **Painting by Jamie Weiss of Stevensville.**

Celestial Combine

The Milky Way appears above a combine. **Photo by Emmett Thiesen of Kalispell.**



Beat the winter peak



Did you know electricity costs more during peak hours of usage?

When it comes to electric demand, electric utilities and grid operators watch two variables closely: winter peaks and summer peaks. These are the times of the year when electric demand is highest – and electricity is most expensive – and they vary depending on where you are in the country.

That’s why we encourage members to use less electricity during peak demand hours. Usage peaks often occur in the morning when people wake up and again in the evening as temperatures drop and people return home.

If you can lower your use of electricity during these peak hours, you can help Goldenwest Electric Cooperative keep rates stable.

WINTER PEAKING

Cold regions of the country, including the Upper Midwest, are winter peaking, because of the demand for electric heat during the winter months. Summer-peaking regions experience high electric demand during hot months, as air conditioners are on overdrive. Dual-peaking regions have both a winter and summer peak.

Factors such as below-normal temperatures push the wintertime peak higher. Severe cold snaps, like that experienced in 2021, can lead to record-setting demand for electricity and put the electric grid under significant stress.

During the winter months, the electric grid must meet the higher demand for electricity to prevent power outages and maintain a stable supply.

In January 2025, Basin Electric Power Cooperative, the region’s power supplier, experienced a new all-time high member billing peak.

Basin Electric typically peaks during the winter months because of winter storms and extreme cold temperatures.

HELP BEAT THE PEAK!

To avoid usage during peak hours:

- Do laundry during the day or later at night.
- Avoid using the dishwasher or other major appliances during these hours.
- Turn down the thermostat by 2 to 5 degrees.

Contact Goldenwest Electric Cooperative to learn if there are ways you could help reduce your on-peak demand. Demand response programs help you manage your energy use by voluntarily reducing power consumption during peak hours to help stabilize the power grid. ■



A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

GOLDENWEST ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE INC.

P.O. Box 177, Wibaux, Mont. 59353
Phone: 406-796-2423

OFFICE HOURS:
Mon. through Thurs. 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

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Kent Kahl Vice-President
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David Franz Director
Lana Maychrzak Director

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Jessica Welch Centerpage Editor

Reporting outages

Trouble calls may be placed to the office 24 hours a day. After normal working hours, the phone will be forwarded to one of our lineworkers who are on call. Please check with your neighbors to see if they have power, along with resetting your breakers below the meter prior to calling Goldenwest.