



Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | JULY 2025



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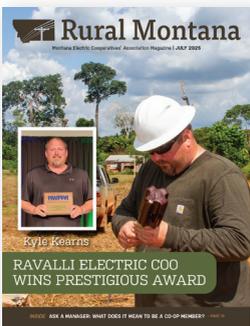
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About our cover: Kyle Kearns of Ravalli Electric Cooperative works in Bolivia in 2020. He recently was recognized with a top safety award.

Rural Montana

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What gives me hope

By **GARY WIENS**, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association



FOR several years, one of America's foremost energy industry journalists had a podcast in which he interviewed various industry experts, always closing with this question to his guests: "What gives you hope?"

It seemed to me a smart way to end each episode because many times his guests had somewhat disparaging perspectives to share during the podcast. But the question, "What gives you hope?" ensured the interview ended on a positive note.

That's really the way things should be. We can and must be keenly aware of all the negative things going on. This awareness is vital to solving problems. Yet to move forward we must remain hopeful.

And that's how I am this month as I retire from more than 32 years in the electric industry working for Montana's electric cooperatives, most recently as the CEO of their statewide association.

In this industry, we see many challenges ahead. These include rising electricity costs, potentially explosive growth in demand, a stranglehold of federal regulations, and an obsession among some with getting rid of always-available baseload power such as coal and natural gas, replacing it with unreliable intermittent wind and solar energy. Then there's the insane idea of breaching or removing federal hydropower dams, one of the cleanest, most renewable and reliable sources of electricity anywhere.

But I remain hopeful. Why? For starters, there's the Law of Physics, which basi-

cally states that power must always match load. When it doesn't, bad things happen. It's an inescapable reality, and why intermittent energy resources alone can't keep the lights on. The question is how far down the road of intermittent energy America will go before it gets fed up with rolling power blackouts. My thought is we won't go very far because if we do, it'll impoverish our country.

I'm also hopeful because we still have elections and the energy path we were headed down with the previous federal administration was a major reason why people wanted change. The path of the new administration to preserve and grow reliable energy resources, in part by eliminating harmful regulations, is very encouraging.

But my biggest reason for hope are our electric cooperatives, both in Montana and nationwide. They remain unwavering in their mission to ensure reliable and affordable energy, primarily because they're consumer-owned, not-for-profit utilities. They hold growing, well-deserved respect among policy makers as non-partisan truth-tellers, unafraid to speak out and take action.

All of these reasons and more are what gives me hope. To my beloved cooperative family, thank you all for your support and encouragement over the years. Farewell and God's blessings to all.



Ravalli Electric COO wins prestigious safety award

22-year safety champion Kyle Kearns awarded NWPPA Career Commitment to Safety Award

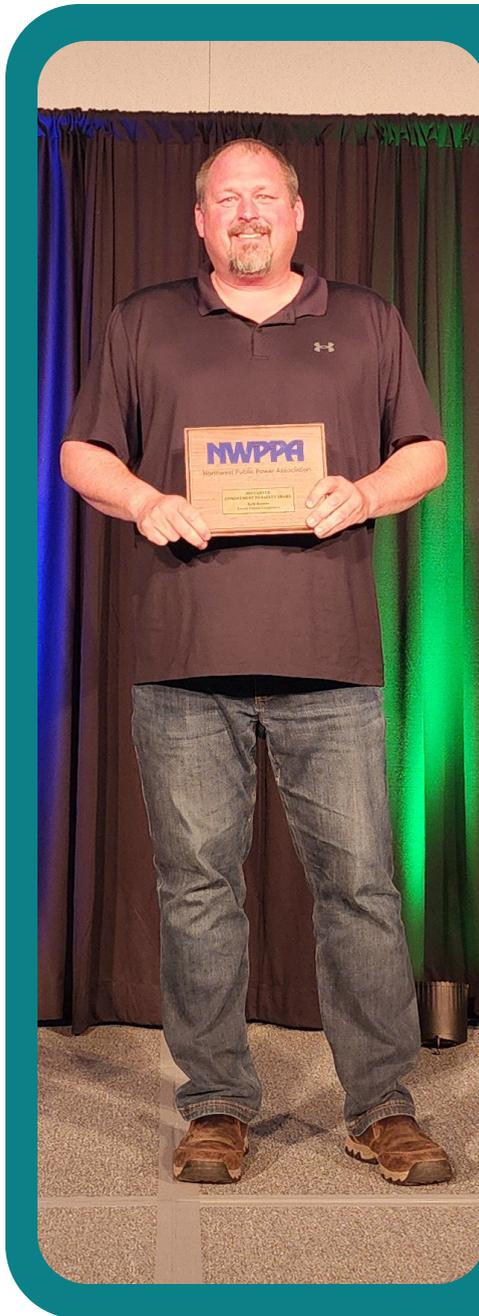
KYLE Kearns, chief operating officer at Ravalli Electric Cooperative, was recently recognized by the Northwest Public Power Association (NWPPA) with the 2025 Career Commitment to Safety Award at the association's Engineering & Operations Conference in Spokane.

The NWPPA Career Commitment to Safety Award recognizes one person each year in the Pacific Northwest who has outstanding proficiency in safety, has demonstrated leadership in safety in their utility and the industry, and has made a significant contribution to safety within the industry over their career. This award is open to all employees of NWPPA-member utilities who exemplify outstanding commitment and leadership in safety.

"When reading the description of the NWPPA Career Commitment to Safety Award, Kyle Kearns is hands down the first person I think of who fits this award to a tee," said Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA) COO Lea Potoczny, in nominating Kearns for the award. "Not only does he greatly contribute to his own cooperative, Kyle has spent countless hours working with MECA to help in its safety efforts while also offering his leadership abilities."

Kearns, who had "no clue" he was going to be honored with the award prior to the presentation, said he appreciated the recognition, but his success in safety is more than a one-man show.

"There's a lot more that goes into it than one person though, it's a team effort," Kearns said, noting that his



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— **LEA POTOCZNY,**
MONTANA ELECTRIC
COOPERATIVES' ASSOCIATION
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

”

cooperative is supportive of his efforts and his travels in the name of promoting and improving safety.

Kearns has been a safety champion at Ravalli Electric for more than 22 years, and his commitment to safety extends far beyond his own utility. Since 2014, he has served on the MECA Safety and Loss Control Committee, promoting safety awareness and best practices. In 2019, he became chair of the MECA Line Superintendents Group, fostering a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement among cooperatives. Through his leadership, Kearns has strengthened the idea-sharing network that encourages cooperatives to support one another in their safety efforts. He also is a key contributor to the Rural Electric Safety Achievement Program, or RESAP.

Kearns played a vital role in the 2020 National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) International Project, serving as team leader for a group of 13 lineworkers who electrified a rural Bolivian village. He not only oversaw the safe construction of powerlines, but was responsible for the overall well-being of his team in an unfamiliar environment with unique safety hazards. He ensured every team



member not only completed the project successfully, but also returned home safely. His approach to safety is not just about compliance — it is about fostering a culture where safety is an intrinsic value.

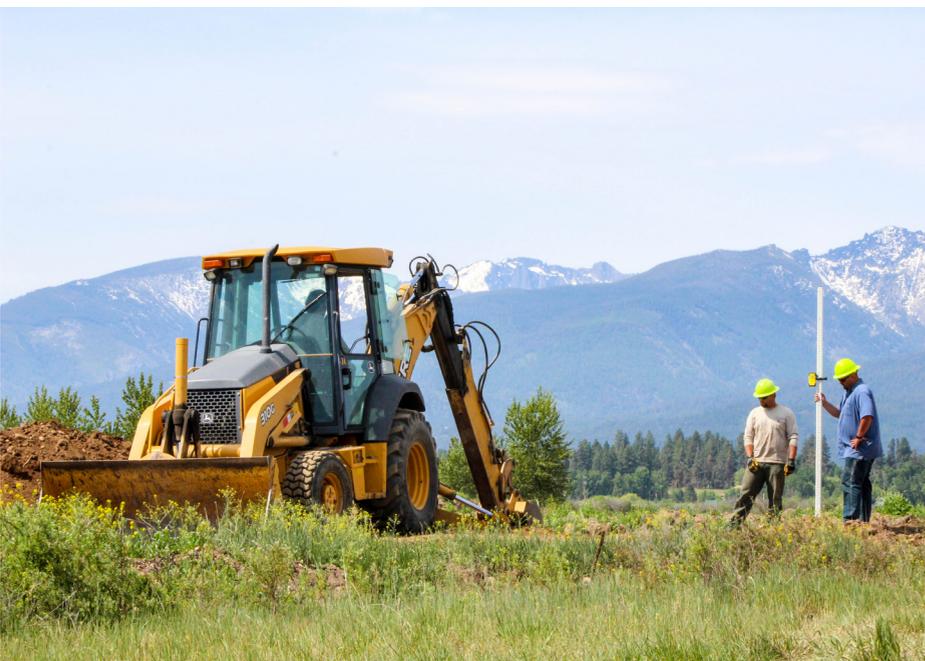
“As the project coordinator, I consid-

ered myself the luckiest person when he submitted his name for this role because I couldn't think of anyone else that could do a better job than Kyle,” Potoczny wrote.

Kearns also serves as a team leader for many onsite visits in RESAP, volunteering countless hours to this program, on some occasions driving well over 500 miles in order to lead a team and help the participating cooperatives improve their work practices. It is a program he truly believes in and is passionate about.

“Over the years, and the time and effort I put into RESAP, and then going to Bolivia. And being engaged not only in our own co-op but the state-wide stuff, it's good to be recognized,” Kearns said.

“Kyle Kearns is truly the definition of a safety leader, amongst many other great things,” Potoczny wrote. “I've had the pleasure of working with Kyle for many years, and the time and effort he contributes on a daily basis is much appreciated and admired by those who are lucky enough to get to be around him.” 



Why do you receive *Rural Montana* magazine?

BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

I recently met with communications and member services staff from co-ops throughout the state to conduct strategic planning for this magazine, to ensure that you — the readers — are getting the most value out of this publication.

In that conversation, a question came up that I never considered answering before: Why do Montana electric cooperative members receive *Rural Montana*?

For anyone who has grown up co-op in rural Montana, it may seem like an odd question. RM has always been there, in the mailbox, month after month for more than 70 years. It has become a reliable old friend, and a trustworthy resource.

But for those new to rural Montana and electric cooperatives, why do they receive this magazine is a very valid question.

The simple answer is to keep you informed. For almost every electric co-op member in Montana, your co-op newsletter is in the magazine. That's where you find information about annual meetings, community service projects, rates and scholarships. Many co-ops even use the magazine for their official notices of their respective annual meetings.

We at the statewide office also use these pages to tell you important information, such as updates on policies or legislation, or to ask for your help in write-in campaigns to support or oppose legislation, and to celebrate co-op success stories.

Rural Montana has always been known for feature stories on people from co-op country, and in recent years we have taken pride in becoming a trusted news source as newspaper coverage in Montana (and the country) has shrunk. We were

there for the christening of the USS Montana nuclear submarine in Norfolk, Virginia, and took pride in our *Whole Dam Story* series last year on the lower Snake River dams.

Though I think we can all agree our world is getting more digital by the day, cellphone data service and high-speed broadband Internet have still not reached all corners of the state. Our Readers Survey a couple of years ago showed that more than a quarter of electric cooperative members in the state still don't have either cellphone data or high-speed Internet at home. So, for now at least, mail remains king when vital information needs to be sent in Montana.

Rural Montana is the most effective way for cooperatives to communicate important information with their members. Social media (follow us on Facebook and Instagram) and the Internet (have you seen our new RM webpage with easier to share digital stories at www.mtco-ops.com/rural-montana?) are also great resources and will become more utilized in the near future, but for now few things in Montana are as reliable as getting information through the mail.

And at less than the cost of a postage stamp (about 60 cents a copy), we believe it is also the most cost-effective way for your co-op to communicate with you each and every month.

That's why you receive this publication each month, and we hope you are happy you do. As always, if you have suggestions for us, or for your co-op pages, contact me at ryanh@mtco-ops.com, by phone at 406-761-8333, or call your local co-op. 

Tips for older homes

By **MIRANDA BOUTELLE** | *For Rural Montana*

Q: How do I improve the efficiency of my older home while keeping its charm?

A: I love old homes. The details and craftsmanship have always drawn me to them. The features of older homes can make them less efficient than modern construction, but it doesn't have to be that way. You can keep the charm and make your home more efficient.

Start by prioritizing the invisible upgrades that make your home more comfortable and efficient. When we were kids, I don't think any of us thought, "When I grow up, I want to spend my hard-earned money on insulation." It's not as exciting as new countertops or a remodeled bathroom, but air sealing and insulation can save you money every month. Then you can apply the savings to aesthetic improvements.

Many older homes are not properly insulated. Insulation has several benefits beyond sealing your home and keeping outdoor air from seeping in. It reduces outdoor noise, makes your home quieter and improves your overall comfort.

Always properly air seal before you insulate. Older homes with pocket doors, coved ceilings, dumbwaiters, doors to attic spaces and laundry chutes allow indoor air to escape through the cavities, gaps and cracks around these classic features. Sealing off open cavities around those features often requires plywood, rigid foam or drywall fastened into place and then caulked around the edges.

Keep an eye out for framing features that cause drafts. Balloon framing is a type of construction where wall studs run all the way from the foundation



Prioritize the invisible upgrades that make your home more comfortable and efficient, such as adding blown-in insulation to your attic. | **PHOTO CREDIT: BONNEVILLE POWER ADMINISTRATION**



to the roof, allowing air to flow freely through those spaces. Second floors with knee wall attics on both sides are notorious for air leakage. Open cavities allow air to flow horizontally between the attic spaces, making the home uncomfortable and inefficient. Seal off the open cavities in the floor framing and insulate attic spaces.

Dense-packed cellulose or closed-cell foam insulation can be sprayed into exterior walls. Skilled contractors can remove pieces of siding and drill holes to fill the wall cavities from the outside of the home.

For brick or stone homes, holes can be drilled from the inside and then patched and painted. Insulating walls from the inside of the home requires more time and effort in preparation and cleanup, but having well-insulated walls is worth it.

Knob-and-tube wiring — commonly used from the early 1880s to the 1930s, with no grounding wire — should be

replaced prior to insulating walls and attics for safety purposes. Contact between insulation and knob-and-tube wiring can create a fire hazard.

People often think new windows are the best way to improve a home's efficiency. Considering the cost of replacing windows, I recommend investing in air sealing and insulation first. Then consider storm windows to keep the charm of the original windows, such as leaded glass and stained-glass windows, in good condition.

Once you've addressed the envelope of your home, consider appliance improvements. Replace your old electric water heater with a heat-pump water heater. This upgrade can save a family of four an estimated \$550 per year and more than \$5,600 over the lifetime of the water heater, according to ENERGY STAR®.

Invest in high-efficiency heating and cooling equipment. A mini-split heat pump, also known as a ductless heat pump, is a more efficient option than electric baseboard heating and provides the benefit of air conditioning.

Older homes don't have to be inefficient. Show your home some love and invest in energy-efficient upgrades. 

GENERATE SAFELY

By **SCOTT FLOOD** | *For Rural Montana*

DON'T generate problems with your backup generator.

The wind howls outside your windows as a major storm system blows through the area in the late evening. Your lights flicker for a moment or two before you're plunged into darkness. The social media feed on your phone is packed with reports of damage and power outages, and the storm shows no sign of letting up for hours.

Fortunately, you had the foresight to buy a backup generator big enough to handle your refrigerator, freezer and other key needs. Flashlight in hand, you attach extension cords. Within minutes, you hear the quiet humming that tells you they're working again.

Montana's electric cooperatives understand power outages are a major inconvenience, and we do our best to prevent them. But when severe weather rolls through, outages can sometimes stretch into several hours or even days after a major storm. Lineworkers may have to check many miles of powerlines to pinpoint the problems before they can begin their work to restore service. That's why many co-op members consider buying backup generators to provide for their family's needs while waiting for service to resume.

Backup generators fall into one of two categories. Standby generators are permanently wired into the home's electrical system by a qualified electrician. They come in a variety of sizes, so homeowners can match the generator to their home's power needs. Portable generators, as the name implies, can be moved to wherever they are needed. Because they're small enough to move, they generally provide less power than standby models. Most use gasoline or diesel fuel, and when they're operated



Standby generators are permanently wired into the home's electrical system by a qualified electrician. | **PHOTO CREDIT: ALL STAR ELECTRICAL SERVICES**

correctly, both types provide a safe source of backup power.

Some homeowners make the mistake of plugging their backup generators directly into a wall outlet or connecting them to their home's electrical panel. Beyond the significant risk of electrocution and fire that can create, plugging generators directly into your outlets can send the voltage your generator creates into the powerlines connecting your home to the electric grid. That creates a dangerous condition called "backfeed," which can seriously injure the lineworkers who are working so hard to restore your electricity, as well as anyone who accidentally comes in contact with powerlines. Backfeed can also damage the generator.

That's why permanently installed backup generators are required to have what's known as a transfer switch, which should be installed by a qualified electrician. The transfer switch creates a barrier between your home's electrical system and the outside wires, so backfeed cannot occur. When the transfer switch senses that power has been restored, it switches the power

from the generator back to the outside lines.

The biggest danger associated with backup generators is one that's invisible and deadly. Because backup generators burn fossil fuels, they generate a variety of gases, most notably carbon monoxide. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, one portable generator can produce as much CO as hundreds of cars. The agency reports that nearly 100 Americans lose their lives each year because of CO poisoning from backup generators. That's why generators should only be used in dry, well-ventilated areas away from your home and garage.

If you purchase a portable backup generator, protect your home and family by taking the time to read the manufacturer's instructions. Don't use portable generators in rainy or wet conditions unless you keep them shielded from moisture and well-ventilated.

When starting a portable generator, make sure nothing is plugged into it. In addition, you can reduce the potential for damage to your appliances and lighting by turning them off or unplugging them from the wall. After the generator starts, plug them in and turn them on one at a time to make sure you aren't overloading your generator's capacity. Unplug them from the generator before turning it off. Unless the manufacturer recommends otherwise, always turn the generator off and allow it to cool before adding fuel.

Finally, as with many home appliances, regular maintenance is the key to ensuring your portable generator operates safely for years to come. When storing it, drain the fuel from the tank. In addition, check the oil and fuel level, filters and other components once a season so you know it will be ready to run safely and efficiently the next time a big storm blows through. **RM**

Powering the digital frontier

By **ALLISON HAMILTON** | For Rural Montana

DATA centers are the backbone of the Internet. They store and manage everything from social media to cloud computing, artificial intelligence and our favorite streaming services. As more people and businesses go digital, the number of data centers is quickly growing. While many of these centers were once built near large cities, more are now being sited in rural areas.

Electric cooperatives are receiving regular requests from companies that seek to build large data centers in their service territories. These requests bring both big opportunities and major challenges.

Co-op opportunities

Data centers can be huge, sometimes requiring more electricity than all the co-op's members combined. This increased demand for electricity brings several new opportunities for electric cooperatives:

- **New jobs and growth.** Data centers can bring jobs and revenue to small communities. In Virginia, for example, the data center industry supports around 74,000 jobs and adds billions of dollars to the state's economy, according to a 2024 report by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC).

- **Stable revenue.** These centers require a lot of power and usually sign long-term contracts. This provides the co-op with steady income, which can help pay for system upgrades and keep rates lower for other members in the community.

- **Improved infrastructure.** To serve a large data center, the co-op might need to build new powerlines or substations. While this is expensive, it can also improve service for all co-op members by making the electric



Why data centers are coming to rural areas

There are several reasons why companies are choosing rural locations for their data centers:

- **More land.** Rural areas have plenty of space for large buildings.
- **Resource diversity.** Electric cooperatives own and operate reliable sources of energy.
- **Lower costs.** Land and labor are usually less expensive outside of cities.
- **Tax breaks.** Local and state governments may offer tax benefits to attract these businesses.

system stronger and more reliable.

Co-op challenges

While data centers create significant opportunities for electric co-ops by driving demand and investment, they also present new challenges in meeting increased electricity needs while maintaining reliable and resilient power delivery.

- **High upfront costs.** Building the new infrastructure to power a data center can cost millions of dollars, which is why co-ops work diligently with data center customers to ensure upfront costs are covered.

- **Risk of losing a big customer.** If the data center moves away or shuts down, the co-op could be left with expensive equipment it no longer needs. This could negatively impact the co-op's finances.

- **Permitting and siting.** Acquiring permission to build new powerlines and substations takes time. There may be zoning rules, environmental reviews and public meetings that slow things down.

Planning for the future

To manage both the risks and rewards that data centers bring, electric co-op leaders are taking a careful, informed approach. They are working closely with their generation and transmission provider (G&T), economic development offices and financial experts to plan these projects.

Co-ops are also ensuring contracts with data center operators include protections for the co-op. For example, if the data center leaves early, it may be liable for paying part of the infrastructure costs. Forecasting tools are also aiding co-ops in understanding how the new load will impact the local system.

Serving large data centers could be a gamechanger for many electric cooperatives. These projects can bring jobs, revenue and new technology to co-op communities. But they also come with financial risks and planning challenges. By asking the right questions and building smart partnerships, electric cooperatives are poised to make decisions that serve their members well — now and in the future. 

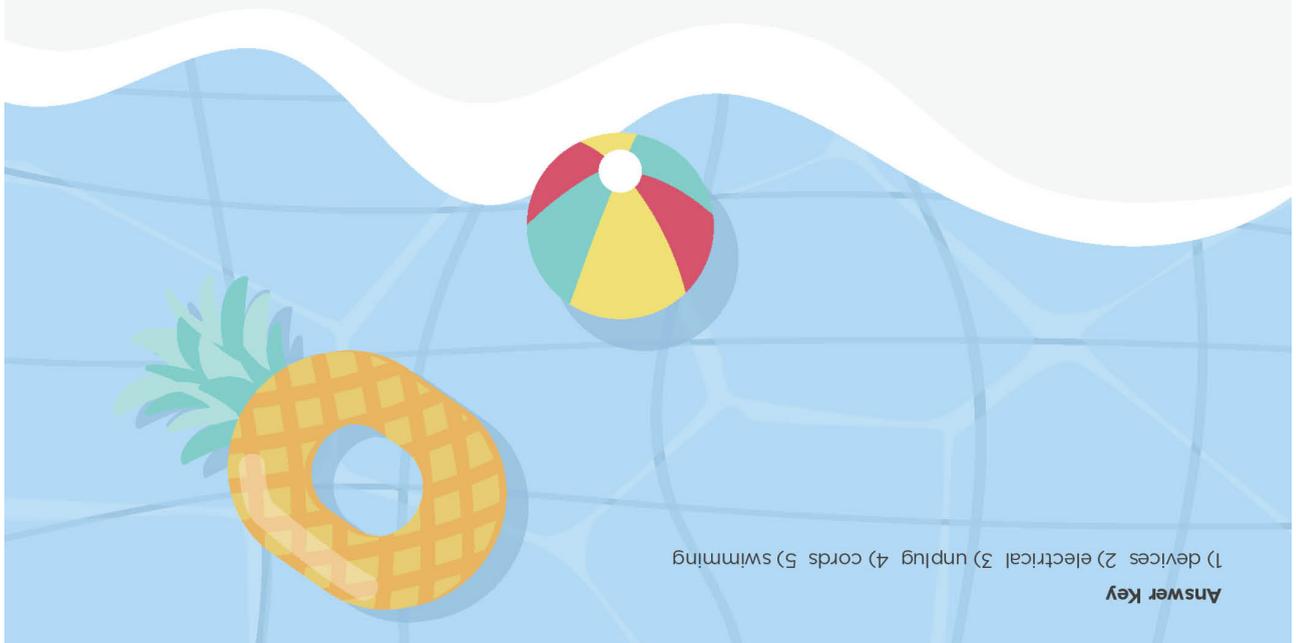
WATER SAFETY WORD SCRAMBLE

Outdoor water activities and electricity never mix because water is a powerful conductor of electricity. When electrical devices or cords come into contact with water—like at a pool, lake or beach—it can cause serious electric shocks. Keep all electrical items far away from water and always follow safety rules when you're outside near water.

Read the sentences below, then unscramble the bolded letters to complete the safety tips.



1. Never touch electrical **csevied**, switches or plugs when your hands are wet.
2. Always place **lacertceil** items like radios, speakers or lights at least 10 feet away from the water's edge.
3. After using outdoor electronics, **ngulup** them and store them away from water to prevent accidents.
4. Keep extension **dsroc** far away from water sources to prevent tripping hazards.
5. Always pay attention to “no **wmsinimg**” signs, whether at the pool, beach or lake.



Answer Key
1) devices 2) electrical 3) unplug 4) cords 5) swimming

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:

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



Senator Sheehy

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Senator Tim Sheehy

THIS year is the most dangerous and expensive wildfire year in history, and our brave first responders on the frontlines need a better system to support them.

One of my top priorities in the Senate is using my expertise to build widespread, bipartisan support for comprehensive wildfire reform legislation to prevent future tragedies. We must always be ready, willing and able to fight wildfires threatening our people, property and communities at a moment's notice.

Working together, we are also focused on adopting a more streamlined approach to wildfire response, implementing modern technology, giving brave wildland firefighters the tools and support they need, and ensuring the best resources are available to be deployed quickly when responding to wildfire. These are all commonsense ways we can dramatically improve the federal wildland fire apparatus as we approach the bulk of fire season this summer.

We must also implement policies that allow us to get ahead of wildfire threats before communities are burning, including better forest management and effective use of prescribed burns.

As we combat catastrophic wildfire risk, which will help ease pressure on insurance markets, it's critical, especially for electric co-ops, that we stabilize the wildfire insurance industry and ensure your investments in critical infrastructure that power Montana's communities are protected.

I came to D.C. to solve problems and deliver results. Americans deserve better, and I'm proud to lead the charge on comprehensive wildfire reform. No more excuses.

As fire season continues, please don't hesitate to reach out to my office for support. Even though I'll miss flying water-bombers on fires myself, it's an honor to serve as Montana's senator, and I'll keep working tirelessly to bring all resources to protect our people and our state. RM



Senator Daines

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Senator Steve Daines

AS Montanans, something we're all familiar with is the catastrophic effects of wildfire season, year after year. There are many commonsense actions Congress can take to mitigate the spread of these fires and keep our communities safe.

First of all, we need to ensure we have effective forest management. For too long, forest management has been left in the hands of D.C. bureaucrats who often cave to the demands of environmental activists. Crucial projects get tied up in frivolous lawsuits and prevent personnel on the ground from doing their jobs. That's why I am eager to see the Fix Our Forests Act get to the Senate floor as it will help improve forest management by fixing the disastrous 9th Circuit Cottonwood decision that has been a top priority of mine for years. This Congress, I also introduced a bill called the "Fire Safe Electrical Corridors Act," which will make it easier to

remove hazardous vegetation near powerlines. This bill will cut red tape and allow for a more streamlined process to combat wildfire risk.

In addition to commonsense forest management, we need to make sure our wildland firefighters are equipped with what they need to help protect our communities. They put their lives on the line to keep us safe, and the least we can do is ensure they are compensated fairly. I've long pushed to give our wildland firefighters a permanent pay increase, and a few months ago President Trump signed my legislation into law that did just that. I'm glad to see President Trump and his administration taking action to support our firefighters, as well as implement science-based timber and logging initiatives, so that we can address the root cause of wildfires and keep our Montana communities safe. RM

MONTANA LEGISLATIVE WRAP-UP

MECA priority bill becomes law

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

MONTANA'S electric cooperatives worked successfully to get a landmark utility wildfire liability bill passed and signed into law during the recent state legislative session.

The most important aspect of the bill, known as HB490 throughout the session, is to declare that strict liability doesn't apply in Montana.

Strict liability means that an entity, such as an electric utility, is liable for a wildfire even if it didn't start it, no criminal intent was involved and the entity was not negligent. Utilities in several other states have been held responsible for billions of dollars in jury awards for fires under strict liability.

If an electric cooperative was to be held liable for a large judgement under strict liability, it could go bankrupt.

"HB490 is the most consequential wildfire liability law in the country. It requires utilities to develop and implement wildfire mitigation plans to reduce fire risk. It also prevents utilities from being held automatically responsible for fires. These factors should reduce insurance premiums for co-ops and help maintain reasonable rates for members," said Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association incoming CEO and former Government Relations Director Mark Lambrecht.

The other major component of the bill is to mandate that utilities develop and comply with approved wildfire mitigation plans, which would allow them to have additional protection from negligence lawsuits.

HB490 requires every utility in the state to develop and commence implementation of a wildfire mitigation plan by the end of 2025, and electric cooperatives are already working on being in compliance with the bill. Seventeen of

the 25 co-ops in the state already have plans, but they need to be modified to comply with the law's specifications.

Once the co-op plans are drafted, they will be made available for member and relevant agency review and comment. Co-ops will also schedule public meetings to gather perspectives and input that will be critical to making mitigation plans accurate and thorough.

Investor-owned utilities have to get their plans approved by the Public Service Commission, while co-op plans will be approved by their elected board of trustees.

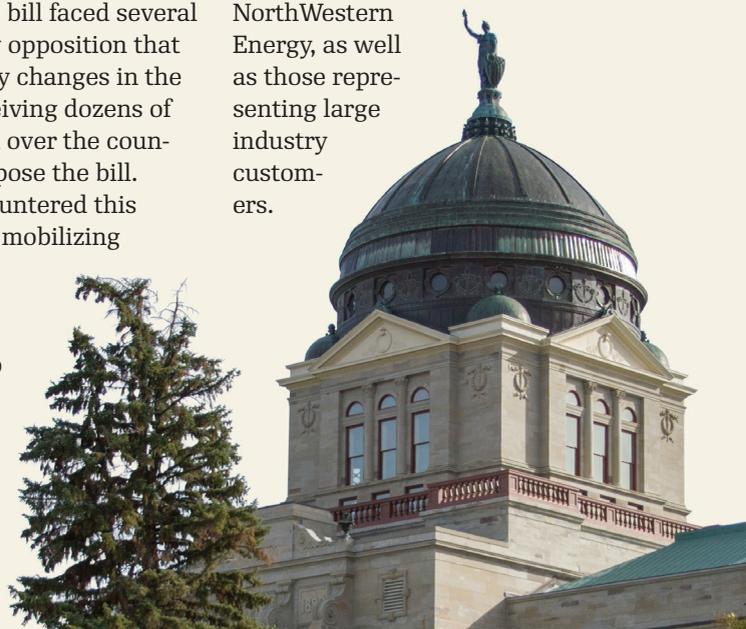
"There were many challenges to developing and passing HB490," Lambrecht said. The first, and perhaps the most difficult challenge, was drafting a bill that met the different needs of the investor-owned utility and electric cooperative stakeholders. There were common interests in wildfire mitigation plans and preventing strict liability from applying to utility-involved wildfires, but the differences in utility governing authorities and wildfire risk had to be balanced."

Lambrecht said the bill faced several challenges, from early opposition that would be addressed by changes in the bill, to legislators receiving dozens of emails from people all over the country asking them to oppose the bill. MECA successfully countered this national campaign by mobilizing its Grassroots Action Network, resulting in hundreds of emails to lawmakers from co-op members around the state encouraging them to support the bill.

While it takes a village to pass a bill such as HB490, Lambrecht wanted to thank several people for their contributions.

"First and foremost, HB490 sponsor Rep. Amy Regier of Kalispell, skillfully moved the bill through her committee and convinced colleagues on both sides of the aisle and legislative leaders to support it. Rep. Greg Overstreet of Stevensville and Rep. Tom France of Missoula had critical roles in explaining the technical legal aspects of the bill to other lawmakers, while Rep. Tyson Running Wolf of Browning secured the strong support of the Montana American Indian Caucus. Senators Vince Ricci and Barry Usher of Billings were critical in shepherding the bill through the Judiciary Committee and Senate. Senate leaders such as President Matt Regier, Majority Leader Tom McGillvray, Minority Leader Pat Flowers and Whips Shane Morigeau and Susan Webber helped navigate several procedural motions designed to kill the bill," Lambrecht said.

He also thanked the government relations staff at the co-ops, MDU and NorthWestern Energy, as well as those representing large industry customers.



2025 Legislative Conference

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

THIRTY electric co-op leaders from across Montana traveled to Washington, D.C., in late May to discuss legislative issues impacting their home co-ops with the state's congressional delegation as part of the National Rural Electric Cooperatives' Association (NRECA) Legislative Conference.

Electric co-op board members and managers, along with staff from the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA), discussed several national and regional issues in meetings with Sen. Steve Daines, Sen. Tim Sheehy, Rep. Troy Downing and a member of Rep. Ryan Zinke's staff.

Topics discussed included:

- A request to repeal the Environmental Policy Agency's unworkable power plant rule.

- The importance of the availability of 24/7 clean, renewable hydropower to Montana's electric cooperatives. The Montana electric co-op representatives urged the delegation to protect hydropower, and rescind the short-sighted lower Snake River dams memorandum of understanding.

- Wildfire liability concerns. The electric cooperative leaders requested the delegation work to pass the Fix Our Forests Act to facilitate co-op vegetation management efforts and pass legislation to make permanent the strict liability limits in the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, and to require federal land management agencies to provide evidence when claiming negligence.

- The importance of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster relief funding to electric cooperatives for restoring electric service after natural disasters. Without this assistance, recovery time and expense will increase drastically for small and rural communities who can least afford it. The co-op leaders stressed that FEMA should continue to invest in rebuilding and resiliency.

In addition to meeting with the congressional delegation, electric co-op representatives from Montana met with the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Energy. RM



Sen. Steve Daines listens to outgoing MECA CEO Gary Wiens during a presentation as part of the NRECA Legislative Conference in late April in Washington, D.C. | PHOTO BY CARSON SWEENEY



Rep. Troy Downing listens to Montana's electric cooperative leaders during the Legislative Conference visit. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL



Sen. Tim Sheehy speaks to representatives from Montana's electric cooperatives. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

THE ASK A MANAGER PANEL



PAT PATTERSON
BEARTOOTH ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE



SCOTT WESTLUND
SHERIDAN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE



JASON BROTHEN
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:

Understanding what drives rate increases

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 Electric Coopera-

tive in Sidney and Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative in Hysham.

This month's question is:

Q: *"My co-op recently raised rates, and I've heard that many co-ops across the state have had to do this in recent years. What are the driving forces behind the increases? Has your co-op raised rates recently, and why or why not?"*



SCOTT WESTLUND SHERIDAN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

GREAT question. Understanding the drivers of rates is what we are always looking at.

Any additional employees, inflation affecting costs, costs of vehicles, costs of wire and poles – any of your dollars that go into running your cooperative – all flow into rates.

The cost of power from a power supplier, which is also affected by what I described, all flow into rates.

When a pole costs \$700 instead of \$300, this is a great example of inflation and costs.

Everything is included in rates.

This cooperative raised rates one year ago, and is set to raise them again in early 2026.

The drivers listed above, drive all. This is unless we can find an opportunity to push it off.

We always look to run lean at your cooperative. This means running one person less than could be employed realistically.

We look at streamlining processes to eliminate waste in movement, travel or materials. This means recycling as many components as we can, so we do not need to purchase them.

Many times, I have found employees tearing things apart so they can reuse it.

Rates are the life blood of your cooperative, and raising these rates affects all the members immediately.

It is common practice that we do not react quickly when rates need to change, this gives us the opportunity to adjust some things to postpone that event, if we can.

Some things we can absorb, some things we cannot.

We will see rates raised from our power supplier very soon, and we do not see a way to absorb that event. This will trigger a rate increase in 2026.

This is a great question, but a tough topic as we are always checking to see how any increase impacts our most vulnerable members.

People are our business, and running your cooperative is paramount to serving people and communities. RM

PAT PATTERSON BEARTOOTH ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

AT Beartooth Electric Cooperative (BEC), we are committed to being responsible stewards of our members' money. As a cooperative, our members are also our owners, and we work hard to deliver safe, reliable service as efficiently as possible. While we strive to avoid rate increases, the reality of rising costs means that adjustments are sometimes necessary to maintain service quality and financial health.

Until 2024, BEC had not implemented a rate increase since 2011. However, during the development of our 2024 business plan, it became clear that our cost of providing service had increased significantly. Several consecutive years of high inflation, including a peak inflation rate of 8 percent in 2021, have placed an upward pressure on oper-

ating costs. Additionally, we must continue investing in critical infrastructure to support a growing and resilient system. These factors led to the implementation of a 5 percent rate increase in May 2024.

Like many utilities across the country, BEC is also facing substantial increases in power supply costs. Unlike most cooperatives, BEC is not a member of a Generation & Transmission (G&T) cooperative. Instead, we purchase power through a market-based Purchase Power Agreement (PPA). This approach has served our members well over the years, offering cost-effective energy.

Our current PPA expires in September 2027, and market forecasts indicate that power costs could double at that time. Currently,

about 40 percent of a member's monthly bill goes toward power supply. If power costs increase as anticipated, we could be facing a necessary rate increase of 25 percent to 30 percent in the fall of 2027.

To prevent a single, dramatic rate spike, BEC has adopted a deferred revenue strategy. Starting in 2026, we will implement smaller incremental rate increases in the range of 3 percent to 4.5 percent. The deferred revenue will help to avoid a large jump in rates, but unfortunately our rates will have to increase.

I feel confident our team has put together a forward-thinking strategy to continue bringing you safe, reliable service you can count on.

RM

JASON BROTHEN GOLDENWEST, LOWER YELLOWSTONE AND MID-YELLOWSTONE COOPERATIVES

EVERY cooperative can have unique factors that play a role in the rate increases, but all of us have a few common factors that drive them.

Wholesale power cost is the largest influence in most electric cooperatives. In most cases this cost can be 75 percent to 80 percent of the budget. The wholesale cost of electricity is significantly affected by fuel prices, including natural gas. There are also times of high demand where we need to purchase power from other sources at higher prices that affect the wholesale rate.

Infrastructure investments in generation and transmission resources are another rate component. In Montana, a majority of the cooperatives receive energy from hydroelectric power. The turbines, dams and infrastructure at these generation sites are over 80 years

old and need updates.

Basin Electric Power Cooperative, which supplies power for many of the electric cooperatives in Montana, has increased cost due to growing power needs. It is making necessary investments in new generation resources over the next 10 years, which reflects on the wholesale power rate.

Inflation and increased operating expenses have impacted the rates since 2022. For example, between 2015 and 2020, the cost increase for a pad-mounted transformer was just 2 percent. Between 2020 and 2022, the price of these same transformers increased by 50 percent in just two years. From 2022 to present, we have seen fluctuations in our main core materials, but we are learning to adapt to our budgets. However, the rapid increase in cost really put the cooperatives in a tough spot

when trying to adjust the rates.

Other factors are regulatory and legislative mandates related to generation resources or environmental regulation that impact construction of new infrastructure. We acknowledge that all generation resources have a role in our portfolio. However, when we receive directives related to decarbonization with short timelines, we are required to make adjustments. These adjustments impact our wholesale power costs, and we must subsequently recover these additional expenses.

The three cooperatives I manage did have rate increases in 2025. The driving factor was simply wholesale power cost because it is the one component we cannot control, and it is very hard to predict with the volatility in the energy market right now.

RM



1st
PLACE

Huckleberry Ice Cream Bars

Laurel Deniger | SEELEY LAKE

CRUST

- 1-1/2 cup graham cracker crumbs
- 1-1/2 cup crushed pretzel sticks
- 1 cup slivered almonds, toasted and finely ground
- 3/4 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1 tsp. salt
- 3/4 cup butter, melted

Mix all ingredients.

Spray 9-inch-by-13-inch pan with cooking spray, line with parchment. Spray again. Press crust mixture into prepared pan. Freeze at least 30 minutes

HUCKLEBERRY COMPOTE

- 1/3 cup sugar
- 3/4 tsp. cornstarch
- 1/8 tsp. salt
- 1-1/2 cups huckleberries (or more)
- 1/6 cup water
- 1/2 tsp. lemon juice

Mix and cook over medium heat until thickened, crushing half the berries. Cool completely

BARs

- 1 cup huckleberry compote
- 2 quarts vanilla ice cream, softened

Once crust is frozen, spread softened ice cream on top. Pour compote over it and using a knife swirl the compote and ice cream together, smoothing the top. Freeze for 6 hours, or overnight. Garnish with extra whole berries.



2nd
PLACE

No-churn Black Forest Ripple Ice Cream

Bev Mix | MISSOULA

INGREDIENTS

- 12 oz. pitted black cherries (fresh or frozen and thawed), halved
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- 2 T water
- 2 cups very cold heavy cream
- 1 can (14 oz.) sweetened condensed milk
- 1 tsp. pure vanilla extract
- 1 cup bittersweet chocolate chunks

DIRECTIONS

Place cherries, sugar and water in large sauce pan. Bring mixture to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer, stirring often, until the cherries break down and the liquid turns to a thick syrup, about 10-12 minutes. Transfer to a bowl and refrigerate until cool, about 15 minutes.

Using an electric mixer, beat the cream, condensed milk and vanilla in a large bowl on medium-high until stiff peaks form, 3-4 minutes. Gently fold in the chocolate chunks.

Spoon half the cream mixture into a 4-inch-by-8-inch loaf pan. Spoon half the cherry mixture on top. Using a knife, swirl the cherry mixture through the cream. Repeat with the remaining cream and cherry mixture. Freeze until set, at least 4 hours. Once set, cover with plastic wrap. May freeze for up to 2 weeks.



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@mt-co-ops.com. **Please include your name, hometown and an address. If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.** For August, send in your best recipes that use sausage (breakfast, bratwurst, Italian, wild game, hotdog, chorizo, salami, etc.) by July 15. Please send in September recipes anytime: Your favorite recipes that use peppers/chilies (bell, jalapeno, poblano, bird's eye, peppercorn, chipotle, dry, fresh etc.). Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

3rd
PLACE

Malted Milk Ball Ice Cream Dessert

Gale Tom | STEVENSVILLE

INGREDIENTS

- 3-1/3 cups malted milk balls (10.5 oz.)
- 12 oz. frozen whipped topping, thawed
- 12 frozen rectangular ice cream sandwiches
- 1 cup hot fudge sauce, warmed (optional)

DIRECTIONS

Coarsely crush malted milk balls in resealable plastic food storage bag. Reserve 1/3 cup. Mix remaining crushed malted milk balls and whipped topping.

Arrange ice cream sandwiches in the bottom of a 13-inch-by-9-inch pan, cutting if necessary.

Spread whipped topping mixture over ice cream sandwiches. Sprinkle with reserved crushed malted milk balls.

Cover and freeze 2 to 3 hours.

Cut into squares and serve with fudge sauce.



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

NORTHWEST

July 12

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Rails to Trails — Event at the Eureka Riverwalk, refreshments, live music and art along the trail, 9 a.m. to noon, 297-0197 | **EUREKA**

July 12

Bison BBQ and Community Appreciation Day — Ferndale Firehouse, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., 208-290-5607 | **BIGFORK**

July 13

Virgelle Mercantile Outdoor Antique Flea Market — Virgelle Mercantile, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., 800-426-2926 | **VIRGELLE**

July 14, 21, 28

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

July 15

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

July 16

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

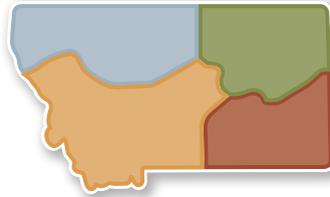
NORTHEAST

July 4

Zortman 4th of July Celebration — Volunteer Fire Department fundraiser, Parade starts at 11 a.m., prizes, activities, food and more, 673-3648 | **ZORTMAN**

July 9-12

Wolf Point Wild Horse Ranch Rodeo & Stampede — Marvin Brookman Stadium, Wed: 6 p.m., Thu-Sat: 7 p.m., 650-7460 | **WOLF POINT**



July 19

6th Annual Backwoods Accordion Festival — Trego Pub, 2 to 9 p.m., 882-4359 | **TREGO**

July 20

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

July 24-27

Cut Bank First Friday — Dumpster Paint, Downtown, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., 224-8898 | **CUT BANK**

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**

SOUTHEAST

July 12

Pub Station Presents Sara Evans with special guests Braxton Keith and Kenny Feidler — ZooMontana, 6 p.m., 653-0443 | **BILLINGS**

July 26

Rodeo — Kids events: 10 a.m., Rodeo: 2 p.m., Calcutta: 1 p.m., Downtown Rodeo Arena, 358-2255 | **INGOMAR**

August 2

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

SOUTHWEST

July 4

Darby Bitterroot Heritage Civic Group Annual Sacajawea Day — Car show, Sacajawea Rest Park, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., 531-4172 | **CLYDE PARK**

July 5

Seeley Lake Auto Parts' Car Show — Seeley Lake Auto Parts, Registration 10 a.m. to noon, voting starts at noon | **SEELEY LAKE**

July 7, 21, Aug. 4, 18

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

July 10, 17, 24, 31,

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**

July 11

Big Sky Community Rodeo — Big Sky Events Arena, 7 p.m., | **BIG SKY**

July 12

Nye Goes Nuts — Nye Community Foundation fundraiser, BBQ, music, Nye Volunteer Fire Hall, 4 p.m., 780-0170 | **NYE**

July 12

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

July 12

Feast in the Field featuring Tim Fain live — Homestead Organics Farm, 5 to 10 p.m., events. humanitix.com/tim-fain-live-at-the-farm | **HAMILTON**

July 13

Running of the Bulls Trail Races — 11K, 21K and 5K relay, registration ends July 11, Big Sky Events Arena | **BIG SKY**

July 14, 28, Aug. 11

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

July 17-19

Big Sky PBR — Three nights of Challenger Series Pro Bull Riding, www.bigskypbr.com for more information, Big Sky Events Arena | **BIG SKY**

July 18-19

Three Forks Rodeo — Three Forks Rodeo Arena, 7 p.m., 272-3716 | **THREE FORKS**

July 25-August 2

Montana State Fair — Concert lineup: Ja 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**

July 26

22nd Blackfoot River Cleanup — Light lunch for participants, Johnsrud Park, boaters at 8 a.m., walkers at 9 p.m., 244-6156 | **POTOMAC**

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

Smoke in the Sweet Grass BBQ Championship — Amateur BBQ competition and fundraiser for Sweetgrass Technical Institute, Homestead 191, noon to 4 p.m., www.smokeinthesweetgrassbbqchamp.com/ 930-1335 | **MELVILLE**

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**

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 SUMMER
DRAWINGS AND POEMS**



Hannah Perkins, 11, Winifred | **FERGUS ELECTRIC**

Sean Penner, 12, Columbia Falls | **FLATHEAD ELECTRIC**



Hadlie Taylor, 10, Angela | **MCCONE ELECTRIC**

Silas Shofner, 9, Eureka | **LINCOLN 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.



Soaring High

A hawk takes flight. **Photo by Di McDermand of Twin Bridges.**

Hoo You Lookin' At?

An owl checks out a visitor from its perch. **Photo by Ruth Fenn of Libby.**



Moose Drool?

It's not the beer, but the real thing as a moose takes a drink at Many Lakes. **Photo by Cindy Houk of Columbia Falls.**

Summer Scene

This scenic photo showcases Montana's beautiful landscape. **Photo by Jovonne Polidoro of Kalispell.**





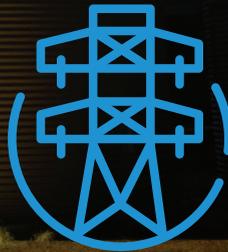
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Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

Email: rural@mtco-ops.com



BASIN ELECTRIC



RELIABILITY

POWER YOU CAN ALWAYS DEPEND ON

No matter the season or storm our members face, Basin Electric provides reliable and affordable electricity for our members' homes, schools, and businesses. We'll do everything we can to keep fans running, the lights on, and the coffee brewing.



**BASIN ELECTRIC
POWER COOPERATIVE**

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