



Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | NOVEMBER 2025



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AND OPERATIONS
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Rural Montana

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Vol. 71 | No. 11

(ISSN0199-6401)

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COVER

About our cover: Billy Molls, owner/CEO of Modern Day Mountain Man, presents Pain, Purpose and Grizzly Bears during the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Operations Conference. Photo by Ryan Hall



RURAL MONTANA (ISSN0199-6401)

is an official publication of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association and is published monthly by Montana's rural electric cooperatives in the interest of better rural and urban understanding of the benefits and the problems of rural utilities. Vol. 71 | No. 11

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SUBSCRIPTIONS | \$10 per year.

POSTMASTER | Published monthly by Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association, 501 Bay Drive, Great Falls, Montana. Periodicals postage paid at Great Falls, Montana, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster send address corrections to P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403.

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Giving thanks to Energy Share of Montana



MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association

I'm thankful for the many blessings in my life — my wife and family who I love unconditionally, faithful lifelong friends and a satisfying career. I'm also grateful for the 14 years I served on the board of Energy Share of Montana, the organization you'll read about in this issue.

During my board tenure, I worked alongside dedicated staff and selfless professionals from utilities, industries, clergy, nonprofits and finance to offer a needed hand up to Montanans struggling to keep the lights and heat on in their homes. Together we built a program with stable funding, including an endowment to help Montanans long into the future, and partnerships with Human Resource Development Councils across the state to efficiently and effectively reach those in need.

Montana's electric cooperatives are proud partners with Energy Share. Co-ops provide significant funding to Energy Share through Universal System Benefits (USB) Program fees established by the Montana Legislature in 1997 to promote energy conservation, and low-income energy assistance and home weatherization. Montana's co-ops contributed more than \$2 million last year for USB

low-income energy assistance programs, including directing a substantial amount to Energy Share. Hundreds of co-op members and employees contribute to the program, and Teresa Miller of Flathead Electric Cooperative and Monti Wetsch of Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative serve on the board.

My most enduring memory with Energy Share was a conversation with a fellow board member who shared a story of a visit she had with a woman whose daughter won a prize for her entry in Energy Share's fourth-grade art contest. Her daughter's picture showed a mother and three children shivering in a small house with blowing snow all around it. The mother confided she was struggling to make ends meet while working multiple jobs and had fallen behind on her energy bills. She became aware of Energy Share when her daughter proudly showed her the drawing she did for the contest at school, and she immediately secured help from the program.

Congratulations to Energy Share of Montana on 42 years of helping thousands of our friends and neighbors make it through their challenges with dignity. 

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MECA MEETINGS

Operations Conference and Annual Meeting featured important cooperative messages

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

SAFETY and how to deal with future electric generation needs were the themes of two large Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA) meetings in September and October.

The annual MECA Operations Conference took place in September in Missoula, with about 200 people attending. Operations personnel from 24 of MECA's cooperatives were in attendance, along with several vendors showing off the latest tools and technology.

In October, more than 200 electric cooperative board members, managers, employees and family members attended the MECA Annual Meeting in Great Falls. That event featured MECA Board of Trustees and committee meetings, as well as keynote speakers and yearly award presentations.

Ops Conference

The keynote address titled *Pain, Purpose and Grizzly Bears*, presented



Monica Rakoczy of EnterTRAINING Solutions speaks with attendees during her presentation at the MECA Operations Conference. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

by Billy Molls, owner/CEO of Modern Day Mountain Man, was a hit with the attendees and had a very powerful message. He told the audience that "everything in nature maximizes its potential until death," noting that every

person has untapped potential. His other main takeaway was, "never stop learning."

Monica Rakoczy of EnterTRAINING Solutions gave a presentation titled *Everybody, Anybody, Somebody and Nobody: Whose Job is Safety?*

She said that if attendees took anything away from her speech, she hoped that it was, "We are all human." She urged co-ops and co-workers to check in on each other if an accident ever happens on their jobsite. Not just in the days after, but for weeks and months following the incident. She also stressed that mental health is important and needs to be cared for as much as physical health.

The conference also included two "Between Two Poles" sessions, which feature happenings at MECA cooperatives. With multiple breakout sessions, the Lineman Subcommittee meeting,



The vendor area is a popular stop for linemen and operations personnel during the MECA Operations Conference. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL



MECA ANNUAL MEETING



MECA CEO Mark Lambrecht speaks with Kansas Electric Cooperatives CEO Lee Tafanelli during a panel at the MECA Annual Meeting. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

the MECA Procurement Group meeting and the MECA Line Superintendents Group meeting, the jam-packed week had everyone sharing ideas and connecting with each other.

Annual Meeting

The MECA Annual Meeting in late September/early October featured an event honoring retired MECA CEO Gary Wiens and retiring Central Montana Electric Power Cooperative General Manager Doug Hardy, a speech by Montana Youth Leadership Council Representative Savannah Nelson of Dillon and much more.

Northwest Power and Conservation Council Chairman Mike Milburn gave the keynote address during the meeting, speaking on what the council does and its role in public power. The council's job is to ensure, with public participation, an affordable and reliable energy system while enhancing fish and wildlife in the Columbia River Basin.

Another highlight of the meeting came when Lee Tafanelli, CEO of Kansas Electric Cooperatives, and Rob Richard, CEO of the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association, participated in a panel discussion. They each talked about policy issues and other impacts on electric cooperatives in their respective states. RM



MECA President DeeDee Isaacs poses for a photo with Montana Youth Leadership Council Representative Savannah Nelson of Dillon after Nelson spoke at the Annual Meeting. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

Kids' book focuses on osprey protection

BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

RURAL Montana has written about avian protection plans and electric cooperatives' efforts to provide safe nesting platforms for ospreys before. But we have never made it as kid-friendly as a children's book by Erin Madison, *Oliver the Osprey*, does.



Erin Madison

Madison is a senior content development specialist with NorthWestern Energy, which also provides safe nesting areas for ospreys and has an avian protection plan. Her interest in that program, combined with the need to complete a capstone project for her Master's Degree in Communications and Leadership at Gonzaga University, led to her penning and illustrating a children's book.

"This is definitely way different than other writing that I've done," said Madison, a former newspaper reporter.

She said she learned that children's books tell their stories primarily through pictures and illustrations, not words.

"I like to be a little wordy sometimes," she said, adding that her nephew, to whom she dedicated the book, told her there were "too many facts, and not enough story."

"He's been my harshest critic," Madison said with a laugh.

In addition to writing the story of Oliver, Madison also illustrated the book — a first for her. It was something



WHERE TO GET THE BOOK

Oliver the Osprey is available for free at the following NorthWestern Energy offices:

- Missoula** – 1903 S. Russell St.
- Kalispell** – 890 N. Meridian Rd.
- Helena** – 1313 North Last Chance Gulch
- Great Falls** – 1501 N River Rd.
- Butte** – 400 Oxford St. and 11 East Park St.
- Billings** – 1944 Monad Rd.

she wanted to try after taking the class Data Visualization, and learning how to make infographics, as part of her Master's program.

"I never illustrated a book before.



That was definitely brand new," Madison said. "I have always liked to doodle and draw though."

She started with the main character, a drawing she thought about changing but decided to stick with the original version.

"I drew the cover first, that was my very first version of Oliver," Madison said. "I liked how it turned out, but I thought he looked grumpy. Now, I think he looks determined instead of grumpy."

Madison toyed with the idea of making Oliver more cartoonish, almost like a mascot, but in the end decided to go with a more realistic style so kids could easier identify a real osprey when they see one.

She said she is happy with the way the book turned out, and is already contemplating another book, perhaps focusing on bull trout and the fish ladder at Thompson Falls.

"That's an idea I'm still playing with," Madison said. RM

Big Flat Trustee Betty Campbell retires

Valued board member has served since 1998

Big Flat Electric Cooperative would like to thank Betty (Duvall) Campbell for her many years of service. Campbell has been a valued board member representing District 4, the Hays/Lodgepole area, since 1998. She served as the board secretary/treasurer for the last 22 years, retiring from the board in May.

Campbell, who turned 90 years young on May 10, is the eldest of 10 children of the late Sydne (Trethewey) Duvall and Walter “Dube” Duvall.

Campbell grew up on the Duvall Homestead at Antelope Springs, southwest of Landusky in the Missouri River Breaks. The Duvalls ran a horse ranch there, where they captured and broke horses in the area. Campbell graduated from Dodson High School in 1953, and then attended Northern Montana College in Havre. She spent one summer at Montana State University-Bozeman for graduate work. She received her bachelor’s degree in elementary education and her master’s degree in education administration, with a minor in reading.

In 1953, she met the love of her life, Michael “Bud” Campbell, along with his eldest children Michael “Skinny” Campbell and Delores Campbell, and together they raised Margaret Campbell, Lil Bud Campbell, twins Sydne Campbell and Sylvia Campbell, and Toma Campbell. Campbell has many grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great grandchildren. She is the matriarch of her family and helped raise several grandchildren on the ranch in Old Hays.

Campbell worked as a teacher in a one-room school north of Nashua when her firstborn, Margie, was a year old.



ABOVE: Jake and Juanita Crasco with Betty Campbell at the 2018 Montana Electric Cooperatives’ Association Today’s Member event.

They then moved to California for a couple years before moving to Winifred to teach at the Gerhard School, then settling in Lodgepole and becoming the elementary principal of the Lodge Pole School, where she worked for 28 years – retiring in 1991. Campbell was the third generation of teachers in her family, which led to many others following her career path as her daughter, granddaughters and great-granddaughters took their places in classrooms.

Bud and Campbell raised livestock on their ranch on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. After Bud passed in 1996, she continued to operate the ranch until age 88. They raised longhorn and black Angus cattle, and quarter horses. Campbell put up hay for their operation for many years. She is a great cook and maintained a large

bountiful garden most of her life, which she shared with whoever came to visit.

Campbell, husband Bud, and their family were very active in rodeos. Bud was a bulldogger, pickup man for the late Marvin Brookman and a stock contractor, while Campbell served as rodeo secretary. Campbell was one of the first women to get a Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) secretary’s card. Bud and Campbell raised their oldest children on the professional rodeo circuit.

It has been an honor and privilege for Big Flat Electric employees and directors to work and serve with Campbell for the last 27 years as a board member. Her dedication, integrity and deep commitment to serving our members left a lasting legacy. Congratulations Betty on your retirement! RM

70 years and counting

The Spojas are one of the longest married couples in the Fergus Electric region

STORY BY **CATHY MOSER** | FOR FERGUS ELECTRIC

"It was a dandy of a party!" That is how Bill Spoja, a native of Lewistown, summarizes the party that family and friends threw for him and his bride of 70 years, Mary Helen. The celebration for their wedded milestone in June brought to Lewistown the Spoja children and other family members, long-time friends and "people I'd almost forgot about," Bill said.

A courtship begins

Seventy years together started in 1952, at The College of Great Falls. The students began production of the play, *The Hither and Thither of Danny Dither*. Bill was cast as Danny Dither, an angel who is sent to Earth for a special mission of spreading faith, hope and charity. During rehearsals, Bill's attention would drift from his acting to the pretty girl who was doubling as play co-director and piano accompanist in the music ensemble. She was Mary Helen, and she could play the organ, too. She and Bill sang in the student choir. It seemed they were always in the company of other students. One day, they left the campus for the neighborhood coffee shop. They talked about music for the play, but the conversation over cups of coffee strayed to other subjects. That's how they discovered shared interests in music, politics, literature and education.

Bill graduated from The College of Great Falls with a Bachelor of Arts degree in political science in 1953. Mary Helen, a native of Butte, graduated from the college with a degree in music education in 1954. She accepted



Married 70 years, Bill and Mary Helen Spoja of Lewistown surely must be among the longest-married couples in the Fergus Electric Cooperative service region. | **COURTESY PHOTO BY CHELSY CIAVARELLA**

a teaching job in Richey. That same year, Bill was called to service in the U.S. Army. Before leaving Montana for the Korean War, Bill gave Mary Helen his class ring. They wrote regularly to each other.

One weekend during Bill's service, Mary Helen drove from Richey to the Spoja home in Lewistown, where she met Bill's mother and father for the first time. Bill would be calling home that weekend, and as much as he wanted to talk to his parents, he hoped to talk to Mary Helen, too. Bill's call came through, and the conversation the young couple had over the phone would be the only time they talked to each other for an entire year. She stayed the weekend with Bill's parents. They would relay to Bill that she was "a very nice young lady" and advised him to "pay attention to her."

Bill came home to Lewistown in 1955. On June 28, he and Mary Helen married in her hometown of Butte. He was 24 years old, and she was 23. They drove to Glacier National Park for their

honeymoon, but constant rain made that a bust. Giving up on the dreary park, they drove to Butte, and then to Lewistown, where they wrapped up their honeymoon by moving into a house. The honeymoon had meandered off plan, and Bill was both relieved and grateful to his bride who, he says, "seemed fine with it all."

Married

They were blessed with six children, and a foster son bumped the number to seven. Inside the Spoja home, Mary Helen ensured one prevailing theme was "Read, read, read." She and Bill instilled in their children a love for literature and music, which included piano lessons. Scholastics were important, too. Outside of the Spoja home, when there was work to do, the family "worked as partners," Mary Helen said.

Bill's grandparents purchased the Spoja ranch just east of Lewistown in 1926. The property passed to Bill's father. Bill said of his father, "We would sing *Silent Night* while we milked the

cows." The ranch passed to Bill. Both he and Mary Helen described their parents as loving, gentle and kind, and said they encouraged their children to realize their dreams. Bill and Mary Helen followed suit, encouraging their children to pursue and attain theirs.

Bill and Mary Helen's careers as educators took the Spoja family to schools in Lewistown as well as Winifred. Friendships made in Winifred have stood the test of time. Bill eventually left teaching to pursue a career in law. He studied for three years at the University of Montana in Missoula, receiving his law degree in 1969. That lengthy career included service as Fergus County attorney from 1969 to 1982, service as the Fergus Electric Cooperative attorney for several decades and a private law practice in Lewistown. Bill is now 94 and has retired from practicing law as of last January. Mary Helen is 93.

Marriage wisdom

When asked to share the wisdom he gathered through seven decades of marriage, Bill answered, "Be quiet." Then he offered, "We'd fuss at each other, but we'd never let it go to a full-blown battle." Mary Helen answered the same question, saying, "Pick your battles. If it is something you feel is worth fighting for, you state your feelings." Their mutual interests in national and world news and politics continues. The Spojas are members of two churches in Lewistown, St. Leo's Catholic Church and St. James Episcopal Church, and they also attend the St. Mathias Church in Moore. Although they enjoy community functions, Bill admits they stay home more than they used to.

He smiles and says, "We worked a lot and we worked hard, but we always took care of ourselves and each other. We sit in the living room and talk and reflect on our lives, and pretty soon we are both laughing at one memory or another. That I ended up married to Mary Helen is one of the best things in my life." RM



PHOTO BY CATHY MOSER

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:

The FAA's proposed beyond visual line of sight drone regulations, which would limit electric cooperative's ability to use drones for line and equipment inspections, and require costly reporting and compliance standards, were recently released. What is your opinion of the proposed rules?

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

Senator Steve Daines

My office has been monitoring a proposed rule by the Federal Aviation Administration regarding the use of drones for line and equipment inspections. I will continue to work closely with DOT Secretary (Sean) Duffy and relevant agencies to ensure that Montana's needs are addressed as our state continues to be a leader in energy production.

In addition, Montana is home to a wealth of natural resources, and our all-of-the-above energy approach is part of what makes our state so great. The demand for U.S. energy is expected to grow at least 50 percent over the next 25 years. It's critical that we do everything we can to support more Made-In-Montana and Made-In-America energy, so we are prepared for this growth

in demand. This includes supporting Montana's electric cooperatives.

In the Treasure State, access to reliable energy and broadband is crucial, especially in rural communities. Electric cooperatives provide service to more than 400,000 Montanans in all 56 counties. Our electric co-ops are also the front lines in defense of our electric grid and are vital to our national security. That's why I'm a strong supporter of programs like the Rural Utilities Service (RUS), which helps improve infrastructure for critical projects like water and waste treatment, the electric grid and broadband.

It's also critical that our state has effective and reliable air and postal



service, so that our businesses, including our electric co-ops, have access to the services they need to keep running. I welcomed the order

by Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy to approve the SkyWest

Charter as a commuter carrier. I'm also proud to report that after I sent a letter to USPS, the department has invested more than \$12 million in the Missoula Processing and Distribution Center to ensure the center runs efficiently, and our communities and businesses have reliable service.

I will continue working with President Trump, his administration and my colleagues in Congress to support Montana priorities." RM

Senator Tim Sheehy

ELECTRIC co-ops help keep the lights on and keep businesses running in our communities, especially those in rural Montana. Know you have my support in this mission, as well as my commitment to unleashing American energy across the board and ensuring Montanans have access to affordable and reliable power.

Whether it's for homes, data centers, AI, quantum computing or crypto, we will see an exponential increase in demand for baseload power over the next 20 years. Securing America's economic and energy dominance in the 21st Century starts with securing Montana's energy dominance and our grid.

As your senator, one of my top priorities is supporting Montana's resource economy in building a successful future

so we can create jobs, power America, and make Montana energy affordable, accessible and reliable again.

Montanans voted to make America energy dominant so we can bring down prices for families and boost real wages for the hardworking Americans who keep our economy running. Montana's delegation is delivering on this common-sense, America-first agenda, and I appreciate the work of Montana electric cooperatives in ensuring that Montanans can rely on dependable electricity, especially in rural communities.

Ensuring America can unleash drone dominance and remain on the cutting-edge of drone technology is also crit-



ical to securing America's future — driving innovation, growing the economy, and making our communities and borders safer. My office

and I will continue monitoring the proposed rule by the FAA. To be clear, we support more opportunities for UAS (unmanned aircraft systems) to support all aspects of American utility and industrial operations. As the process continues, do not hesitate to reach out to my office for assistance.

Thank you once again for powering Montana communities. You can rest assured I'll keep fighting to unleash prosperity, restore common sense in our nation's capital and put Montana first. RM

NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS

How Energy Share provides a lifeline during Montana's harsh winters

STORY BY JONATHAN BALLEW | FOR RURAL MONTANA

AS Montana's long winters usher in freezing temperatures, the threat of a no-heat emergency becomes more than an inconvenience — it can be a matter of life and death. For thousands of Montana residents, help comes in the form of Energy Share, a nonprofit organization dedicated to keeping homes warm, safe and powered when crisis strikes.

Since its founding in 1983, Energy Share has assisted more than 77,000 Montanans, offering support during energy emergencies and helping families avoid the devastating consequences of utility shutoffs and unsafe heating conditions.

Support when it's needed most

Energy Share's approach to assistance is notable for its situational flexibility. Unlike programs that rely solely on income thresholds, Energy Share evaluates each application on a case-by-case basis. This allows the organization to help individuals who may not traditionally qualify for aid but are nevertheless experiencing significant hardship.

For instance, a Montanan who recently lost a job, faced unexpected medical bills or was the victim of a financial setback may still be eligible for support. In these instances, Energy Share steps in to fill the gap when other resources fall short.

Personal stories show community impact

One single mother recently found herself on the verge of crisis. With her car in need of costly repairs and affordable childcare nearly impossible to find, she struggled to maintain employment. Even after securing childcare aligned with her work schedule, the financial strain became overwhelming — and her home was at risk of losing heat.

Energy Share's timely intervention enabled her to maintain heat during this critical time, allowing her to focus on rebuilding her stability without the immediate threat of a freezing home.

Another client, an elderly woman, living alone on Social Security, was deceived by an individual claiming he would fix her car.

"He brought me an itemized paper for parts — I gave him

Montana Electric Co-op Customers helped



the \$400. He said he would have it done in two days; he never came back, so I am behind on all bills. It's my own fault and I could have kicked myself," she said.

Already dealing with illness, she feared losing electric service. Energy Share stepped in to help her cover her power bill and stabilize her situation.

These stories, while deeply personal, reflect a broader reality faced by many people across the state.

Demonstrating tangible results

Energy Share's appliance and weatherization programs resulted in an average annual energy savings of \$543 per household in 2024, with a savings-to-investment ratio of 2.7 — a strong return that benefits both families and the broader energy system.

Energy Share is run by a small and nimble staff based in Helena that operates with an administrative overhead of 5 percent, ensuring that nearly all donations go directly toward supporting Montanans in need.

Local partners, local knowledge

Energy Share's impact is amplified through partnerships with Montana's Human Resource Development Councils (HRDCs). These 10 agencies located across the state process applications, assess household needs and implement assistance programs with a deep understanding of the communi-



ENERGY SHARE'S IMPACT IN MONTANA

In Fiscal Year 2025, Energy Share of Montana's efforts impacted thousands of households:

- **3,172 families** received direct utility bill assistance, with an average award of \$561 per household.
- **580 households** were customers of one of Montana's electric cooperatives.
- Of those served, **45 percent of households** included seniors, and **34 percent** included children.
- **86 homes** benefited from the repair or replacement of unsafe or inefficient appliances.
- **38 households** received upgrades to improve furnace or water-heater efficiency.
- **55 households** received weatherization services to improve energy efficiency and long-term affordability.

ties they serve.

Montana's HRDCs provide essential services – including Head Start, senior programs, housing support and workforce development – to more than 60,000 residents annually. Their work is grounded in local knowledge, offering a grass-roots alternative to one-size-fits-all federal aid.

The importance of energy assistance

The ability to heat a home or repair a broken appliance is not a luxury – it is a basic necessity. The support offered by Energy Share plays a critical role in:

- Protecting health and safety, especially for vulnerable populations during winter.
- Preventing financial collapse, as utility shutoffs can quickly lead to eviction, illness or homelessness.
- Improving long-term sustainability through energy-efficiency measures that reduce household energy burdens over time.

A call to community

As energy prices continue to rise and economic pressures persist, the services provided by Energy Share of Montana are more vital than ever. For many residents, it is not just about keeping the lights on, it is about preserving health, stability and dignity during times of unexpected hardship.

To learn more about how to receive help or support the mission, visit www.energysharemt.com or call 1-888-779-7589.

RM

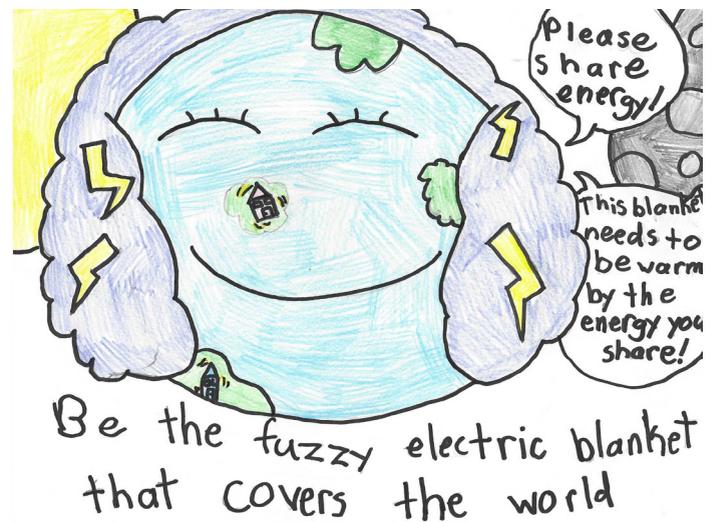
Energy Share of Montana fourth-grade art contest

SINCE 1997, Energy Share has sponsored a fourth-grade art contest. Through this activity, fourth graders become more aware of the value of our community and doing what Montanans always do – help each other during tough times. November 21 is the deadline for submitting entries for this year's contest. This is a great opportunity for fourth graders and their teachers to learn about the need for Energy Share services and how they benefit their neighbors.

Energy Share uses the winning drawing on the front of thank-you cards sent to donors statewide, and invites local media to interview first-, second-, and third-place winners. *Rural Montana* typically interviews the winners.

The prizes for the statewide first-, second-, and third-place artists are \$75, \$50 and \$25 respectively. Gift cards for classroom supplies are awarded to the teachers of the first-, second-, and third-place winners of \$500, \$400 and \$300 respectively.

The winning drawing also is displayed on a billboard or banner in or near the winner's community. To learn more, visit energyssharemt.com/art-contest. Here you can see this year's guidelines and past winning drawings. You can also



call 1-888-779-7589 for more information. Fourth graders in public schools, private schools and home schools are welcome to participate. RM

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: How will data centers impact co-ops?

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: *Does a data center located in cooperative territory benefit the cooperative members? Do you have concerns about your co-op being able to serve such a large load and still being able to maintain reliability for your current members?*



SCOTT WESTLUND SHERIDAN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

The follow up is as good as the original question.

I have always said to my membership, load protects rates. The more load you bring in, the less chance you will have to raise rates to compensate to the membership, as the volume alone gives you opportunities to serve.

We had a similar saying in the timber industry, "higher production pays the higher costs to produce."

These are good loads with high load factors, meaning they are a stable load using the same volume over and over.

High load factor, stable load and protecting rates — all of these items are good for a cooperative's membership.

As stated in the September edition

of *Ask a Manager*, everything we build is paid for by the cost causer. There is no impact on the membership, and it benefits the entire system.

Serving these loads can be challenging only to the power supplier we buy energy from, and they do dictate more generation to compensate for the added loads.

This is where it gets dicey for our current membership as new generation is very pricey, and everything they build is charged to us in rates.

We will be experiencing just such an occurrence in early 2026.

That is how the cooperative model works.

Remember from the last article, we

are obligated to serve and cannot turn it away.

In 2012, we built a \$42 million transmission line on the eastern part of the system. This was to support the oil industry, and it was paid for entirely by the oil industry.

In addition to serving the oil industry, that transmission line improved reliability to the existing membership by 95 percent. In other words, the outages related to the old transmission line have been almost non-existent from 2015 to present, thus answering your last question on reliability to the membership.

Great questions.

PAT PATTERSON

BEARTOOTH ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

A large load such as a data center can be attractive to cooperatives. An opportunity to spread fixed costs across a significant increase in kilowatt-hour sales. These loads provide for an increase in margins. To serve these loads, cooperatives may need to upgrade old infrastructure.

These opportunities also come with risk. It is important for cooperatives to understand the risk and potential benefit of serving large data center loads.

These data center loads typically start at around 100 megawatts and can be as large as 1 gigawatt. These types of loads typically are much larger than the existing loads on many electric cooperative systems. Most cooperatives will charge 100 percent of the cost to serve these loads. These large loads may also require upgrades to the bulk trans-

mission system and additional generation.

What is the risk if the data center pays 100 percent of the cost to interconnect? With new data centers being announced frequently, will this industry be overbuilt? The computer evolution has always been able to build better, more powerful computers in less space and use less energy. Will this happen to the artificial intelligence (AI) data center business model?

What risk does the cooperative have if the data center fails and goes offline? Do they have stranded assets? Did the generation and transmission (G&T) cooperative invest in generation and transmission based on the forecast of the data center loads, and if so what happens if these loads disappear? Who pays for these stranded assets? If the co-op required

100 percent payment for millions of dollars in system upgrades, who pays the property taxes if this load drops offline?

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) has a report that was published in August, *Electric Cooperative Rates and Cost Recovery Mechanisms for Large Loads and Data Centers*. This article has some recent examples of how various distribution and G&T cooperatives minimized the risk of data centers dropping offline. These cooperatives required cash deposits or letters of credit to guarantee the data center revenue.

These data center loads can be attractive loads for cooperatives, but cooperatives also owe it to their member-owners to mitigate the risk of serving these loads. RM

JASON BROTHEN

GOLDENWEST, LOWER YELLOWSTONE RURAL AND MID-YELLOWSTONE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES

WHEN a data center or similar technology facility considers locating within a cooperative's territory, the primary effect is an increase in electricity demand — rather than a significant boost in local jobs or economic development. While this load growth can be substantial, it's important to recognize that not all load growth is created equal, and neither are the electric cooperatives across the state.

For some cooperatives, a new data center load may justify building new infrastructure. In these cases, the upgrades can replace aging facilities, ultimately benefiting all members by modernizing the grid. However, when system or line upgrades are required specifically to serve large commercial or technology loads, the associated costs are typically assigned directly to those customers. This approach ensures that the financial impact

is not spread across the broader membership.

Because these large loads are usually concentrated in a specific area, it becomes easier for the cooperative to plan, design and allocate costs for the necessary infrastructure. This separation of costs protects other member classes from bearing expenses that do not benefit them directly.

Our cooperative is fortunate to have a strong relationship with our wholesale power supplier, which has established a clear application process for prospective large loads. Through this process, the generation and transmission requirements — and the costs to serve the new facility — are presented directly to the company interested in building the data center. These costs are separated and assigned solely to that load, ensuring that no other members are affected.

Once established, these large loads will have their own dedicated generation, transmission and distribution infrastructure assigned to them for the duration of their presence. This method is not unique to our cooperative; it is a well-established practice among cooperatives nationwide. Across the United States, electric cooperatives have long used this approach to ensure that the costs of serving large, concentrated commercial loads are fairly allocated.

In summary, while data centers may not bring widespread economic development or job creation, our cooperative's policies and industry best practices ensure that existing members are protected from the costs associated with serving these large loads. This approach allows us to support growth opportunities, while maintaining fairness and reliability for all members. RM

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 December, send in your favorite large-batch recipes (crowd-sized dishes for the holidays) by November 12. Please send in January recipes anytime: Your best meatball or meatloaf recipe. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

1st
PLACE

Maple-Pecan Roasted Butternut Squash and Brussels Sprouts

Keshawna Yazzie, FAST Blackfeet | BROWNING

INGREDIENTS

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 small butternut squash, diced into small cubes | 1/2 tsp. cinnamon |
| 1 pound Brussels sprouts, halved | 2 T butter |
| 2 T olive oil | 2 T maple syrup |
| 1/2 tsp. nutmeg | 1 tsp. soy sauce |
| | 1/3 cup pecans |
| | 1/4 cup dried cranberries |

DIRECTIONS

Preheat your air fryer to 390°F.

In a spacious bowl, toss diced butternut squash and halved Brussels sprouts with olive oil, nutmeg and ground cinnamon.

Place the seasoned veggies in the air fryer basket and air fry for about 10 minutes, giving them a gentle shake or stir halfway through.

Continue air frying for another 5 minutes or until your veggies are crispy and perfectly roasted.

While the veggies sizzle away, whip up the drizzle: Melt the butter in a pan, then add maple syrup and soy sauce. Stir in pecans and dried cranberries until they're coated and beautifully candied.

Pour the mixture over the air-fried Brussels sprouts and butternut squash. Toss it all together and serve immediately.

2nd
PLACE

Pecan Bars

Orry Nail | WHITEFISH

CRUST

- 1/2 cup butter**
- 1/2 cup sugar**
- 1 tsp. lemon zest**
- 1/2 tsp. vanilla**
- 1-1/4 cups flour**

Beat butter on high for 30 seconds. Add sugar, lemon zest and vanilla. Beat in flour. Pat in the bottom of a 13-by-9-inch pan and bake at 350 degrees for 15 minutes.

FILLING

- 1/3 cup butter**
- 1/2 cup brown sugar**
- 1/3 cup honey**
- 3 T sugar**
- 1-3/4 cups chopped pecans**
- 1/4 cup whipping cream**

Reduce oven temperature to 325 degrees.

Combine first four filling ingredients in a saucepan and cook over medium heat until it comes to a boil.

Remove from heat and stir in pecans and cream. Pour over crust and bake for 25 minutes at 325 degrees.

Cut into bars when cool.

3rd
PLACE

Spiced Nuts

Karen Graham | CHESTER

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cans (12-oz.) salted mixed nuts**
- 2 T. melted butter**
- 1 T. chili powder**
- 1 T. soy sauce**
- 1/4 tsp. cayenne pepper**

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 305 degrees.

In large bowl combine all ingredients. Spread mixture in one layer on jelly-roll pan or cookie sheet and bake for about 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Store in airtight container.

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 November 12 for December events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.**

NORTHWEST

November 1

Columbia Falls Women's Connection Make It, Bake It, Sew It, Grow It Fundraiser — 827 9th St. West, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., 892-3621 | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

November 8

Holiday Craft and Bake Sale — St. Richard Catholic Church, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., 892-5142 | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

November 8

PEO Lakeside Chapter CB 4th Annual Makers Market — 238 S. Adams St., 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. | **LAKESIDE**

November 8

Whitefish Community Presbyterian Church Bazaar and Dinner — Liberty Hall, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., 432-5615 | **WHITEFISH**

November 8

Women of Rollins Annual Holiday Bazaar — Year-round holiday items and bake sale, Rollins Schoolhouse, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 270-0605 | **ROLLINS**

November 14-15

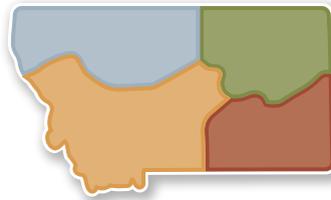
A Holiday Experience with New and Talented Vendors — Wine and Chocolate Tasting Friday Evening, Libby VFW Club, Fri: 3 to 7 p.m., Sat: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 522-9082 | **LIBBY**

November 15

Future-Ready Homes Fair — Practical workshops and advice, Whitefish City Hall, 8:30 to 11:30 a.m., 885-1021 | **WHITEFISH**

November 15

Claudia Cassidy Bennett book signing — "Caregiving Reimagined: A Practical and Spiritual Guide for Family Caregivers," Barnes & Noble, 1 to 3 p.m. | **KALISPELL**



November 18

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

November 19

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

November 29-30

Northwest Ballet Company's 37th performance of The Nutcracker — Bigfork Center for the Performing Arts, Sat: 2 and 7:30 p.m., Sun: 4 p.m., 755-0760 | **BIGFORK**

December 5

Trego Christmas Bazaar — TFS Community Hall, Fri-Sat: 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., 882-4779 | **TREGO**

December 6

Children's Christmas Store — For shoppers ages 5-12, volunteers and donations needed, Anna Jeffries Elementary, 10 a.m. to noon, 873-2693 | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

December 6

Stillwater Christmas Shoppe — Vendor booths, Stillwater Lutheran Church, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 257-4614 | **KALISPELL**

SOUTHWEST

November 1

How to Harvest a Pig workshop — CCMT at Homestead Organics Farm, 2 to 4 p.m., CultivatingConnectionsMT.org | **HAMILTON**

November 2

Lutfisk Dinner — Shields River Lutheran Church, noon to 3 p.m., 233-9014 | **WILSALL**

November 7-8

Bitterroot Arts Guild presents Holiday Extravaganza — 50+ local artists, raffle, food by Moose Creek BBQ, Ravalli County Fairgrounds Event Center, Fri: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sat: 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. | **HAMILTON**

November 9

Helmville Bazaar — Main Street Helmville, 10 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., 793-5834 | **HELMVILLE**

November 14-15

Bazaar — Lunch, bake sale and handmade items and crafts, Florence/Carlton Community Church, Fri: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sat: 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. | **FLORENCE**

November 15

Sourdough Holiday Sweet Treats Workshop — CCMT at Homestead Organics Farm, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., CultivatingConnectionsMT.org | **HAMILTON**

November 29-30

Yellowstone Ballet Company's 34th annual The Nutcracker — Wilson Auditorium, 2:30 p.m., www.yellowstoneballet.info | **BOZEMAN**

December 6

St. Philip Benizi Christmas Market — Crafts, bake sale, raffle and lunch, Darby Clubhouse, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 925-405-2811 | **DARBY**

NORTHEAST

November 1

Specialty Fair — 23 vendors, Malta Event Center, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., 654-1037 | **MALTA**

November 2

Circle ACHD Vendor Show — CHS Gym, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., 974-2555 | **CIRCLE**

November 22

All-Handcrafted Holiday Bazaar — Glasgow Civic Center, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 263-5200 | **GLASGOW**

December 4

Phillips County Museum & Historical Society presents A Blue Christmas Christmas Festival — Annual fundraiser, Phillips County Museum, 654-1037 | **MALTA**

SOUTHEAST

November 1

St. Bernard's Annual Craft Show — St. Bernard Catholic Church, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. | **BILLINGS**

November 8

Forsyth Fall Frenzy — Rosebud County Fairgrounds Exhibit Hall, 9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., 817-771-0399 | **FORSYTH**

November 15-16

Boys & Girls Club Fall Vintage, Antique, Collectible & Craft Show — Homemade food by Big Sky Optimist Club, 505 Orchard Lane, Sat: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., 259-1306 | **BILLINGS**

November 22

Strut Your Stuff Bazaar — 40 vendors, Fromberg Gym, 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., 696-5546 | **FROMBERG**

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.

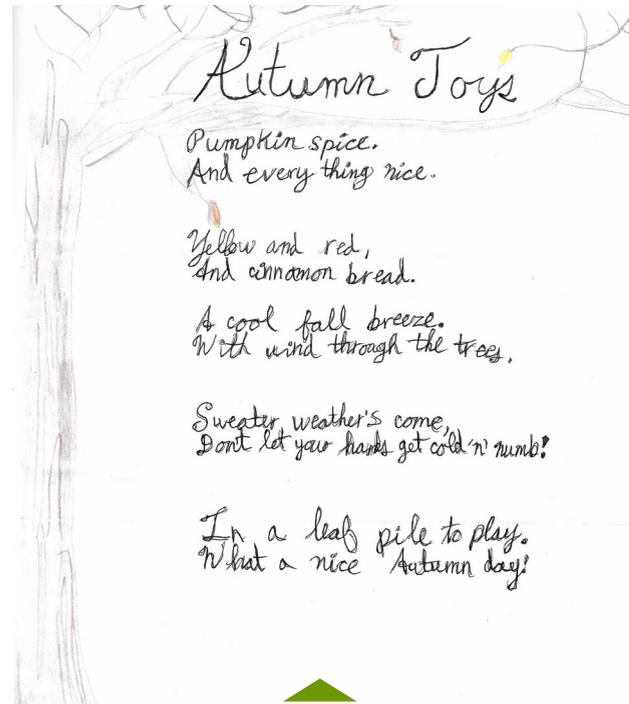
Email: rural@mtco-ops.com. **Include:** Your name, age, address and your cooperative. *If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.*

**SEND YOUR WINTER DRAWINGS
AND POEMS**



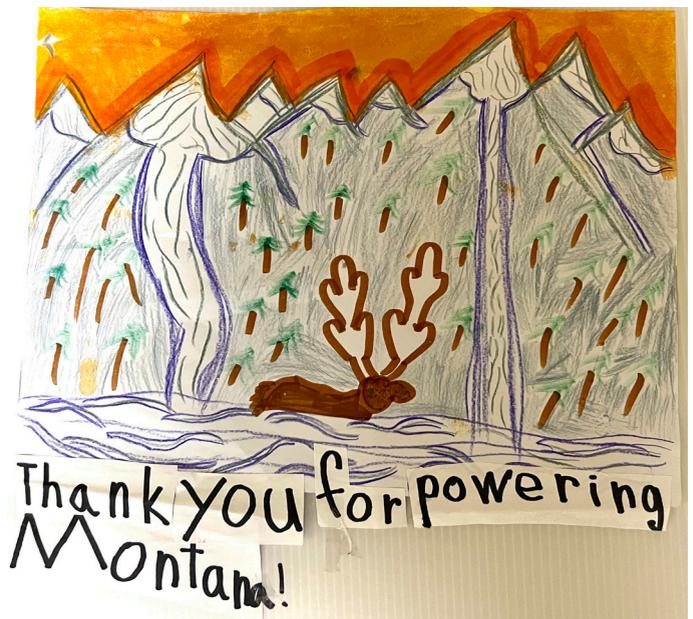
Bella Ridinger, 13, Trego | **LIINCOLN ELECTRIC**

Louisa Fallo, 8, Moore | **FERGUS ELECTRIC**



Grace Cornia, Dillon | **VIGILANTE ELECTRIC**

Otto Steele, 6, Kalispell | **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.



Leaving Leaves

Colorful fall leaves fall off a tree in Medford, Oregon. **Photo by MaKayla Roundy of Three Forks**

Sunset Ride

A classic car sits under a beautiful Montana sunset. **Photo by Rex McCord of Ekalaka**

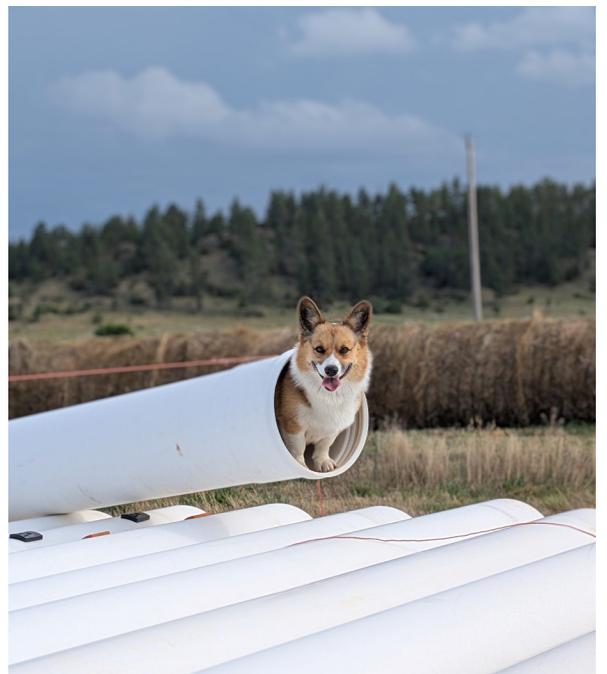
Pipe Pup

A Welsh Corgi went looking for mice and ended up at the top of a pile of PVC pipe. **Photo by Casey Knobloch of Birney**



Elk Bugle

An elk bugles while walking across a field. **Photo by Adam Bowser of Lewistown**





The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

Email: rural@mtco-ops.com



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