



Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | SEPTEMBER 2025



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About our cover: Walt McNutt, a strong airport supporter, stands by a Cape Air cessna 402 in Sidney. Photo by Ryan Hall.

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Maintaining reliable power in a changing landscape

MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association



ELECTRIC cooperatives have been delivering safe, affordable and reliable power to Montanans for more than 80 years. Electricity has become so reliable it's almost an afterthought to flip a switch and know the lights will come on. Reliable power has become a necessity to the quality of Montanans' lives and economic well-being.

Our state's changing landscape presents significant challenges to maintaining the reliability we all expect. These challenges were the focal point of the recent Western Montana Public Power Forum in Kalispell, organized by Flathead Electric Cooperative and sponsored by the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association, as well as Missoula Electric, Ravalli Electric, Vigilante Electric, Glacier Electric and Lincoln Electric cooperatives.

Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte summarized the challenge in his remarks at the forum, noting the state's growing population and business community, and development of power-hungry data centers that require additional baseload electricity generation and transmission capacity. He pointed to his Unleashing Montana Energy Task Force and permitting reform bills passed by the 2025 Legislature as critical first steps to meeting the challenge, adding "Our economy is not

moving forward without energy production."

Flathead Electric General Manager Mark Johnson told forum attendees reliable power is a life-and-death issue in Montana, and we need to have the courage to build large-scale generation locally to address transmission constraints. John Hairston, administrator and CEO of the Bonneville Power Administration, agreed and added that electricity providers need to do a better job helping consumers understand the risks to reliable power and involve the public in developing solutions.

Each month we include in *Rural Montana* information about reliable power issues, and whether there are impacts such as wildfire liability or benefits such as new infrastructure.

This month we included co-op manager perspectives on data centers. I encourage our readers to learn as much as they can about these issues and to get involved. Attend meetings of your co-op, state and federal agencies, or local communities. These are great opportunities to learn more about energy challenges and proposals to address them, but even more importantly they're where you can make sure your voice is heard.



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SIDNEY STALWART

McNutt key to regional airport success

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

WALT McNutt is not a Sidney native, but he and his family have become interwoven into the fabric of this eastern Montana community through business, politics and community activism over the last four decades.

McNutt founded a farm implement dealer that became important to the area, and has served on numerous community boards. He has also been instrumental in improving the Sidney-Richland Regional Airport and keeping federally funded Essential Air Service flights in Sidney, and serves on the local economic development board.

In 1987, after the regional manager for his Choteau Case-IH dealership suggested he look at Sidney as a new location, McNutt — a pilot — flew to eastern Montana to check out the prospects. Business was drying up in Choteau due to many local farmers putting their land into CRP, so he and the regional manager both knew a move was necessary. McNutt wasn't convinced Sidney was the right location.

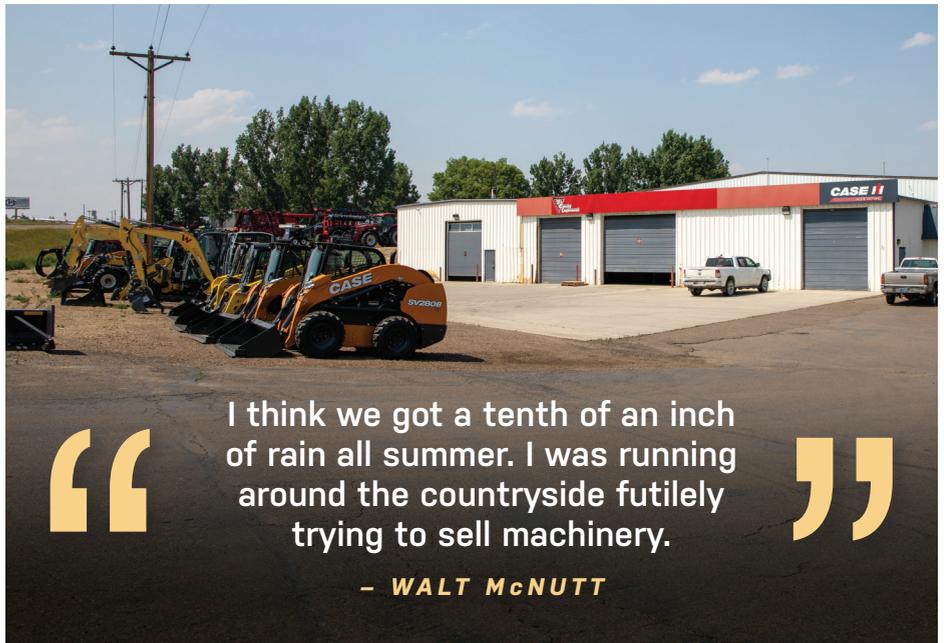
"Flying over south of town, I thought, 'I don't think cactus can grow out here,'" he said with a hearty chuckle. "Pretty soon this green valley starts showing up."

After meeting with several local farmers, the decision was made to make the move.

A slow start

The new Case-IH dealership in Sidney opened in April 1988, but it wasn't a gangbuster start for McNutt.

"I think we got a tenth of an inch of rain all summer," he said. "I was running around the countryside futilely



I think we got a tenth of an inch of rain all summer. I was running around the countryside futilely trying to sell machinery.

— WALT McNUTT

trying to sell machinery."

At the time, McNutt was familiar with dryland farming and hay, and didn't have experience with row-crops, including sugar beets.

In 1989, "Things just clicked," McNutt said. "I started to understand the community.

"That was the beginning of my love affair with Sidney."

Legislative run

"I had no interest in the Legislature," said McNutt, who would serve as either a state senator or representative from 1997-2009.

However, once the incumbent senator chose not to seek re-election, area residents began asking McNutt to run and eventually convinced him to do so.

"I didn't even go to our central committee. I didn't know we had one," McNutt said. "I just threw my hat in the

ring, and I won."

He said his inexperience in the Legislature showed quickly. He was given a largely procedural bill that traditionally passed without much issue — a correction to the Military Code of Justice.

"I didn't know how to present a bill," McNutt said. "They had a field day with me."

When closing on his bill in a hearing, which he wasn't aware he had to do, McNutt said the bill "had to pass."

"That was a mistake," he said. "They took executive action, and they all voted no."

McNutt said the military personnel who had come to the Capitol to testify were very nervous. The committee reconsidered the bill and passed it, teaching McNutt a valuable lesson.

"They did the same thing to me on the floor, on the first vote I was the



only green light on the board,” McNutt said, adding the Senate would also reconsider and pass the bill.

“Welcome to the Senate,” he said, laughing at the memory.

Overall, McNutt has fond memories of his time in the Legislature.

“I spent 13 years there that I really enjoyed,” McNutt said, noting that in 2003 he introduced 16 bills, and they all passed.

Toward the end of his time in the Legislature he saw division grow as veteran legislators termed out and freshman legislators saw the other party as enemies.

“2007 was the worst time, the institutional knowledge was gone, and the decorum went with it,” McNutt said. He said that year a freshman legislator sent messages to other Republicans that McNutt was “working with the enemy” after McNutt, a committee chair, spoke to his vice-chair — a Democrat.

McNutt noted that many bills in his career passed because Republicans and Democrats both supported them.

“If you think they are the enemy, you are sadly mistaken,” McNutt said,

adding he has had opportunities to go back to the Legislature but has turned them down. “I’m just not cut out for that atmosphere anymore.”

Improving air service

McNutt said that while he was away at the Legislature, his kids ran the implement business and did it well. When he returned, he sold the business to his kids but maintained ownership of the property and building.

That left time for a new project.

McNutt has served as chairman of the Sidney-Richland Regional Airport Authority for 20 years. He also was appointed by former Gov. Judy Martz to the state Essential Air Service (EAS) Task Force, of which he was chairman in 1999 and 2000. The airport has five flights each day to and from Billings.

McNutt said the airport is on the last item of its previous 20-year master plan and is getting ready to start its next one.

The Richland-Sidney Regional Airport is one of only five out of the approximately 135 EAS airports in the country to achieve Part 139 certification — which reflects an airport’s

commitment to security. McNutt said the airport is getting a new X-ray machine and that all security is now conducted on site. Security used to be conducted by TSA upon arrival in Billings.

McNutt said the EAS flights are especially helpful for the medical industry. Patients headed to Billings and specialists visiting Sidney can both catch a morning flight to their destination and be home by dinner.

He proudly noted that the community of just over 6,000 people is responsible for 10,000 boardings a year. Fares range from \$29-\$69 for the roughly 90-minute flight aboard a Cape Air Cessna 402 eight-passenger plane.

“I for one said it ain’t gonna work,” McNutt said of the eight-passenger twin-turbo prop planes. He admits he was wrong on that one.

It’s not the only time he has been wrong on something that greatly benefited the community. When asked if he could have ever imagined how ingrained he and Sidney would become when he first flew over the area nearly 40 years ago, McNutt smiled broadly.

“Never,” he said.



JOIN THE NRECA YOUTH TOUR WIN A FREE TRIP TO D.C.

BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

WIN a free trip to Washington, D.C., just by writing a few words. A short essay could be your ticket to a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the nation's capital!

High school sophomores and juniors whose parents are electric co-op members are eligible for this trip (students in Ravalli Electric Cooperative's service area do not need to be co-op members). This past summer, 29 students from across the state took part in the Youth Tour to Washington, D.C.

Montana's electric cooperatives are hoping to send even more students at NO COST TO THEM in 2026.

How do you earn this amazing opportunity? Contact your electric cooperative for its specific requirements, but for most co-ops, a simple

application and short essay is all that is required. From there, each participating co-op will choose at least one winner, and a statewide winner will be chosen as well.

This year's essay topic is: All cooperatives share a concern for their communities. Write about how your local cooperative supports your community or detail new ways it could get involved.

Please note that all submissions will be run through AI detection software, and the results may impact eligibility.

Those students who are selected by their co-ops will travel to D.C. in June for a week of activities. Every Youth Tour includes meetings with Montana's U.S. senators and representatives, as well as many of the famous monuments and memorials, and the Smithsonian

Museums. Past Youth Tours have also included a Washington Nationals baseball game, the International Spy Museum, a Broadway-style show, Ford's Theater, the Gettysburg Battlefield, the U.S. Naval Academy, the Marine Corps Museum, a meal at the famous Ben's Chili Bowl and countless other stops and attractions.

There is also a river boat cruise and dance with students from other states. One thing we can guarantee from past experience is you will have fun, and you will make friendships with students from across the state and country that will last a lifetime.

Contact your local electric cooperative today, and start working on that essay! Visit www.mtco-ops.com/youth-tour for more information. 

Montana Auto Shop success story

Revolving Loan Fund – Empowering our communities with financial solutions

IN 2021, Matt Sieler decided it was time to combine his love of auto mechanics with his educational background – a business degree from BYU and a Master's in Business from the University of Montana – and open his own mechanic shop: *Montana Auto Shop*.

Having worked in several other shops around town, Sieler knew that with dedication and a solid business plan, he could build a successful auto repair business in Eureka. However, like many new entrepreneurs, he faced a common challenge: limited business credit. Local banks were willing to meet with him, but the loan levels and terms didn't allow for his business plan to be implemented successfully.

That's when Sieler learned about the Lincoln Electric Cooperative (LEC) Revolving Loan Fund.

"Once I heard about the LEC Revolving Loan, I knew I had a real chance to bring this business to life," Sieler said.

He met in person with LEC CFO Michelle Wilbur to ensure he understood the loan requirements.

"I wanted to sit down face-to-face so I could get a clear list of what was needed. Michelle was incredibly helpful and made sure I had everything required to submit a strong application," Sieler said.

This was Sieler's first time launching a business from the ground up.

"I did a lot of research to put my business plan together. It felt like a semester-long project that took me back to my college days," he said. "I combined my education with business-planning software to develop a plan that would stand out when presented to the LEC Board of Trustees."

In January 2022, Sieler formally presented his plan and loan application to the LEC board. After careful review



Matt Sieler stands outside his Montana Auto Shop. | LEC PHOTO

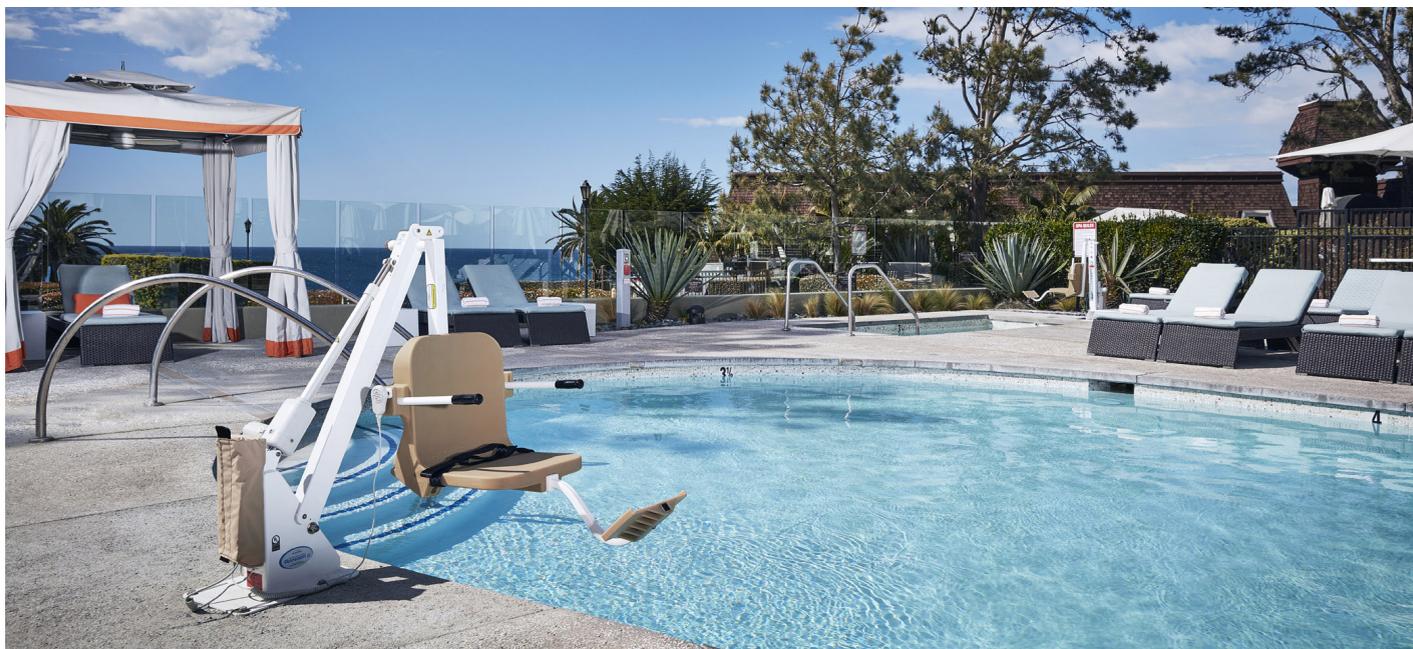
of his business plan and application, LEC approved his loan.

"I was thrilled. The loan gave my family and me the breathing room we needed to get the shop up and running. It also allowed me to hire help sooner and start serving customers right away. With the support of LEC's Revolving Loan Fund, my business is at least two years ahead of where it would have been if LEC hadn't offered these loans, and it has allowed us to be a full-scale auto mechanic shop supporting the Eureka community. It's been a real

blessing for both my family and the business," Sieler said.

When asked what advice he would give to other local business owners interested in the LEC Revolving Loan Fund, Sieler said, "Do your homework. LEC is extremely supportive and genuinely wants you to succeed. Take the time to meet with them – you'll see it's not as difficult as it might seem."

Montana Auto Shop is open and serving customers at 132 Pinson Ln in Eureka. 



MT roots, global reach

Aqua Creek Products champions accessibility from Missoula

By **KELSEY LODGE** | *Missoula Electric*

A big idea was born in a small Missoula dining room in the early-2000s. That's where Brian Goettlich, a Montana native with a sharp mind for innovation and an even sharper sense of community need, founded Aqua Creek Products in 2002. His vision was simple: to make pools more accessible for people with disabilities.

What began as a dream to sell just one pool lift a week quickly transformed into an internationally recognized manufacturing company, one that now ships to more than 54 countries worldwide and holds roughly 60 to 70 percent of the U.S. market share in its category.

At the helm of Aqua Creek today is Goettlich's daughter, Krystal Guihemotonia, who took over as CEO in 2020, following nearly two decades of personal growth with the business. Guihemotonia, who was raised in Missoula and became Aqua

Creek's fourth employee while in high school, represents a new generation of Montana entrepreneurs deeply rooted in community, fiercely committed to innovation and motivated by purpose.

"My dad had the heart and a mind for it," Guihemotonia said of Goettlich's early vision. "He saw this was an underserved community and wanted to build something that mattered."

Her father's mission became even more critical in 2010 when the Department of Justice began enforcing new accessibility mandates for public pools under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). With only three U.S. companies building this type of equipment at the time, Aqua Creek Products quickly scaled operations to meet skyrocketing demand. What was once a single shop became a multi-facility operation in Missoula, with additional contract shops across the country.

"When the boom happened, people came out of the woodwork saying they didn't even know these options

existed," Guihemotonia says. "They wanted to swim again, do aquatic therapy, and enjoy the healing powers of water."

Guihemotonia, who had just graduated from the University of Montana with a degree in business administration and management, suddenly found herself wearing several hats at once — managing employees, navigating regulatory shifts and helping steer a growing business through rapid expansion.

Today, Aqua Creek Products offers 16 standard pool lifts tailored to a wide range of customer needs — from small-footprint commercial models to portable residential options and lifts capable of supporting up to 600 pounds. The company also collaborates with groups such as Make-A-Wish and Wheelchairs and Walleyes, helping children and veterans safely access pools and even fishing boats.

While Aqua Creek's reach has expanded, its roots remain firmly planted in Montana. "We build in

Missoula because we are Montanans,” Guihemotonia said proudly.

“We employ nearly 70 people here. We’re bringing out-of-state dollars into the state and supporting local jobs.”

Their commitment to craftsmanship and customer care has recently earned them ISO 9001:2015 certification, an international benchmark for quality.

“It’s third-party validation that we care about what we build and how we build it,” Guihemotonia explained.

The achievement was announced to the team in June 2025, after years of dedicated preparation and a formal audit process.

Aqua Creek’s growth continues, with a major product launch scheduled for this fall. Responding to customer demand, the company will begin manufacturing yet another high-quality pool product starting this month – a move that could double the size of the business.

“Our customers trust our timelines, our quality and our service,” Guihemotonia said. “They asked us to enter this market, and we listened.”

Even as they prepare for the future, Guihemotonia and her team often reflect on their humble beginnings. In Guihemotonia’s office hangs a 2006 Christmas photo with a mere seven employees, bearing the handwritten reminder: “Just remember how far we’ve come.”

Of course, growth hasn’t come without challenges. From the 2008 recession to the COVID-19 pandemic, Aqua Creek has weathered the unpredictable by staying true to its core values and community spirit. When the pandemic disrupted global supply chains, Guihemotonia ensured the company remained open by qualifying as a medical device manufacturer. The shelves were stocked, the jobs were preserved and the team continued to build.

“It went from highly stressful to setting ourselves up for success,” she recalled. “Every distributor and builder came to us, and we were able to meet the demands.”

A longstanding member of Missoula



Electric Cooperative (MEC), Aqua Creek depends on reliable power to maintain production schedules and uphold quality standards.

“MEC has been great to work with,” Guihemotonia said. “If power isn’t sustainable, we can’t put out a high-quality product. And when we’ve needed upgrades or changes to support our operations, someone has always been available to answer the phone. That’s not something you get everywhere.”

Guihemotonia said MEC’s cooperative model mirrors Aqua Creek’s values: a commitment to innovation, quality and community, and a people-first mindset.”

“Being a part of a cooperative means that there’s a real sense of community,” she said. “I’m proud to be a member of MEC.”

Looking ahead, Guihemotonia is focused on organic, realistic growth – investing in people, improving processes, and expanding job opportunities for Montanans. The company recently brought more manufacturing in-house to improve quality control and shorten lead times, a move that reinforces its commitment to taking care of

its customers.

As for personal advice, Guihemotonia offered this: “Find strong supporters and mentors – spouses, friends, co-workers. People who believe in what you’re doing and who encourage you. Because it’s not an easy path, that support means everything.”

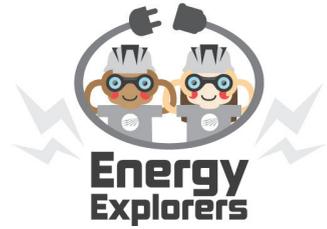
One of her greatest supporters is her husband, Sebastien, who steps in to fill the gaps while also running his businesses. “He’s a project guy,” Guihemotonia laughed. “A serial entrepreneur. He’s a trusted advisor and supporter in everything I do.”

Aqua Creek’s deep sense of community, resilience and quality has earned them national recognition. In 2024, Montana Ambassadors named them Entrepreneurs of the Year, and Guihemotonia was recently featured in Pool Pro Magazine as a “Woman of Substance” in the manufacturing industry.

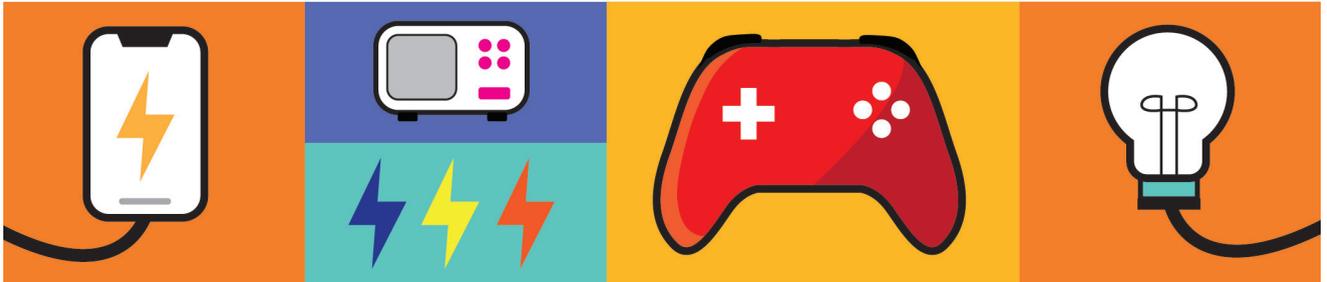
From the very beginning, Aqua Creek Products has been an innovative leader in recreation, fitness and ability. As the company prepares to expand again, its mission remains as clear as the day it started: helping people of all abilities enjoy the water. RM

The Value of Electricity

Did you know the average daily cost of electricity is about \$5? When you think about all the ways we use electricity every day, that's a great value!



A day's worth of electricity powers: home heating/cooling, electronics, lighting, major appliances and more.



Look at the everyday items below, then add a plus (+) sign next to the items you think cost more than daily electricity. For items you think cost less than daily electricity, add a minus (-) sign.

1. 
Large Pizza

2. 
1 Movie Ticket

3. 
Candy Bar

4. 
Video Game

5. 
Ice Cream Cone

6. 
Plush Toy

Answer Key: + 9 - 5 + 4 - 3 + 2 + 1

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:

Statewide electric cooperative magazines were recently hit with nearly double the advertised postal rate increase by USPS, and consistent delays are impacting the delivery of magazines containing official meeting notices and electric bills. What can Congress do to help ensure the USPS is a cost-effective delivery solution and that service improves?

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



Senator Sheehy

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

Senator Tim Sheehy

RELIABLE mail services are vital to communities across the country, especially in rural Montana. Families, small businesses and cooperatives all depend on affordable, dependable mail services. As your senator, I will work to ensure these services are provided as efficiently as possible.

As a veteran of several combat deployments overseas, I experienced how critical it is to have access to safe, reliable mail. The USPS and critical mail services not only connect servicemembers all over the world to their families, but the USPS also connects businesses to customers across the nation and, of course, connects cooperatives to its hard-working members.

For the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association, that means having affordable, reliable access to delivering essential information, support and necessary items such as official meeting notices and electric bills, to complete your mission of powering Montana.

We need to make sure the USPS is strong, vibrant and able to provide cost-effective delivery solutions. It's no secret that the USPS has faced its fair share of challenges in the past, and Montana has not been immune to those challenges. We must support the USPS so it can remain focused on better achieving its core mission: providing the nation with reliable, affordable and universal mail service.

As the administration works to rein in spending and deliver government services more efficiently, I am committed to ensuring we are saving taxpayer dollars, putting more money back in the hands of Montanans, lowering prices, making government operate at peak efficiency and protecting the critical resources Montanans rely on.

My focus remains on delivering a more safe, prosperous and affordable future for Montanans like you – who drive our economy and power Montana. Thanks for your support, and don't hesitate to reach out to my office. 



Senator Daines

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Senator Steve Daines

RELIABLE postal service is essential in Montana, especially in the state's rural communities. That's why one of my main priorities in Washington has been to work with the United States Postal Service to address Montanans' concerns and ensure they have access to the services they need. Back in 2022 I introduced a landmark bill, the "USPS Fairness Act," that revitalized the Postal Service and increased transparency, efficiency and accountability within USPS. It repealed an unfair mandate that required USPS to pre-fund its employees' retirement health benefits and ensures the service runs six days a week. I was proud to help get that bill across the finish line, and we've seen positive results in our state because of it.

However, we're still faced with challenges. Last year, USPS considered transferring some operations out of Missoula and into Spokane. I sent a letter to then-Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, explaining that the Missoula Processing and Distribution Center is critical – not only does it ensure Montanans receive service they depend on in a timely fashion, but it also provides jobs and an economic boost

to the community. I'm proud to report that after I sent that letter, USPS announced that they would not only continue operations in Missoula, they are investing over \$12 million to ensure the center runs efficiently.

I also work closely with USPS to ensure it is aware of the impacts that service disruptions have on our state. Over the last few years, high housing costs and staffing difficulties have contributed to service disruptions in Belgrade and Bozeman, particularly with misdelivered packages and difficulty in tracking shipments. I sent several letters requesting immediate action be taken to address these issues and have been in communication with the USPS to find a more permanent solution. I will continue to bring up Montana priorities at the federal level and work to ensure the USPS continues to serve rural Montana.

Many Montanans rely on the Postal Service for small business transactions, benefit checks, prescription medicines and more. I will always fight to ensure our state has the resources that we need so our families and communities can thrive. 



The Blasdel Barn near Somers was built in 1908 and used until the 1980s. The last four decades have not been kind to the historic structure. Shelby Blasdel is hoping to raise money to restore the barn. | **PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BLASDEL FAMILY**

Blasdel Barn

Family fundraising to save historic Flathead landmark

STORY BY **RYAN HALL** | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

A well-known barn with suspected nefarious beginnings is now facing an unknown future.

The Blasdel Barn near Somers has been a Flathead Valley staple for 117 years, but it is becoming dilapidated as weather and people have contributed to its deterioration.

Shelby Blasdel hopes to save the former family barn, now owned by the federal Fish and Wildlife Service – and the history tied to it.

Nefarious beginnings

The Blasdel Barn started out as the Porter Ranch Barn. It was built in 1908 by Frank W. Porter. That much everyone agrees on. Where the money and/or lumber to build the barn came from is less clear, but all of the theories

agree there was some criminal aspect to it.

“Nobody could ever give us a definite answer,” said Don Blasdel, 91, a Flathead Electric Cooperative member who grew up on the farm and is Shelby’s grandfather.

He said one theory is that the lumber came from Somers Lumber company. The guys scaling the lumber had the scales off just enough for some wood to go missing unnoticed.

Shelby believes the other common story of the barn’s beginnings, one involving a stage-coach robbery and murder.

According to Shelby, Jack O’Neil – a butcher in Somers at the time – was implicated in the Somers stagecoach robbery. His sister, Susie O’Neil, who

was a bookkeeper at the butcher shop, was quick to work to prove her brother’s innocence.

On July 1, 1906, as Susie O’Neil closed in on proving her brother didn’t hold up the stagecoach, she struck up a conversation with Frank Porter and requested that he take her to Holt in his buggy the next day. This was according to Porter’s account told later, and Shelby said it draws red flags for her as the two had never spoken prior to this conversation.

The trip to Holt was uneventful, Porter drank at the Holt Saloon while O’Neil visited a friend nearby. However, when Porter returned to Somers, he was alone.

Porter claimed that while crossing the calm river waters on the ferry, the

horses spooked and bolted off the ferry, plunging them, the buggy and O'Neil into the water. Porter, who somehow returned to town unscathed, said that he saw the silhouette of O'Neil's dress as she sank to the bottom of the river.

During the testimony at Porter's trial, he testified that O'Neil had given him her watch and that he did not know what became of the apparent \$300 in butcher shop funds O'Neil was carrying at the time of her death. In 1906, it was an odd gesture for a woman to give a married man her watch.

At the time of the incident, Jack O'Neil was in prison for the stagecoach robbery. Shortly after his sister's death, he was bonded out by... Frank Porter. Shelbey said she is pretty sure that this is where the \$300 went.

Many believe the massive Porter Ranch Barn, the biggest red barn in western Montana at 92 feet long, 60 feet tall and 66 feet wide, was built with funds taken from the stagecoach robbery.

Family history

Don Blasdel and his son Larry, Shelbey's father, remember the barn well. They both spent their youth throwing hay into it.

"I put over 100 ton of hay in it myself," Don said.

In addition to hay, the family had six dairy cows housed in the barn that they would milk, then separate the cream out and take it to town to sell.

"That's what you bought your groceries with," Don said.

The family also housed two work-horse teams in the barn.

"The whole barn was used all the time," Larry said. "We're very proud of that barn. I spent a lot of time at that barn, putting hay in and out of that barn."

Falling apart

The Blasdels bought the ranch and barn in 1945, and sold it the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Creston Fish Hatchery in 1987, according to an arti-



Shelbey Blasdel stands in front of the Blasdel Barn. | PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BLASDEL FAMILY

HOW TO HELP

To donate to the effort to restore the historic Blasdel Barn, go online to www.blasdelhq.com, or send donations made to Blasdel Barn Reclamation to Blasdel Barn Reclamation PO Box 534 Fort Lupton, CO 80621.

cle in the *Flathead Beacon*.

Since that time, Montana's weather and people wanting to grab a piece of history have led to the barn deteriorating. Though it is still a popular spot for senior photos and wedding photographers, it is far from its glory days.

"When I go there and see the barn is so dilapidated, it bothers me," Shelbey said. "I want my son, who is 2½ years old, to see it the way I did."

"I kind of hate to go down there prit near anymore," Don said.

"That poor old barn is in really sad shape," Larry said. "It's very, very upsetting to watch the (Fish and Wildlife Service) let it go to pot."

Saving the barn

Shelbey has founded Blasdel Barn

Reclamation, a nonprofit that is attempting to raise the money needed to go through the state and federal environmental review process and then restore the barn.

She estimates it will take about \$100,000 to get through the environmental processes, but the restoration will be much more costly.

Shelbey said the barn only has a foundation around the edges of the structure, while Larry noted there are some pillars below the dirt, but they are few and far between. An engineering marvel, built with few supports and no screws or nails on the interior, the barn is held together with notched wood and a few wooden pins.

Shelbey said that the barn needs to be lifted so that a proper foundation can be poured. Additionally, the barn is on the National Register of Historic Places, so all restoration work must conform with rigorous historic guidelines.

"(If it isn't saved) it's one more piece of history nobody will know about," Shelbey said. "To me, devastated isn't the right word, but it's the only feeling I can match to it. It'd be horrible, it'd be absolutely horrible to see another piece of history be demolished." 

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:

What do you think about data centers in Montana?

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

This month's question is:

Q: *What is your opinion on the significant interest large data centers are showing in establishing operations in Montana, particularly in co-op territory?*



JASON BROTHEN

GOLDENWEST, LOWER YELLOWSTONE AND MID-YELLOWSTONE COOPERATIVES

THIS topic has been discussed for many years across the cooperatives I represent. Over the past five years, all three cooperatives have worked with what I call "technology loads," to varying degrees. The cooperatives I manage do their best to serve members with their technology loads, including AI operations, data centers, cryptocurrency mining and other technology-driven enterprises.

We understand the appeal of rural Montana for these businesses. Our state offers a favorable climate for cooling the equipment they need to run their technology centers. In

addition, Montana's vast rural areas allow companies to work with landowners and develop sites without disturbing residential developments around larger cities.

These technology loads are much different than the traditional loads we serve, such as residential, small commercial and industrial members. Traditionally, these loads have been planned well in advance, allowing generation and transmission resources to keep pace. Technology loads bring a new dimension to our membership. They often move more quickly, constructing infrastructure in just a few months.

This speed places significant pressure on generation and transmission systems, which typically take 3-5 years to build.

Our world has been evolving into a digital platform, whether we like it or not. Everything we do consumes data, and that data requires electricity. As we move forward, we need to take a cautious approach to growth. By collaborating with these companies and defining the infrastructure and investment requirements, we can find a way to serve these new types of loads. However, this process will take time. RM

PAT PATTERSON

BEARTOOTH ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

THERE is significant interest from large data centers in establishing operations in rural areas such as Montana, particularly within cooperative service territories. While this attention may initially appear beneficial, especially in terms of tax-base growth, it warrants a cautious and strategic approach.

When evaluating potential sites, data centers typically prioritize two key factors: sufficient communications infrastructure and affordable, reliable power. The expansion of fiber-optic networks over the past two decades has dramatically improved the viability of rural areas, including much of Montana, in terms of communications capacity.

However, power supply is becoming a more pressing concern. The U.S. has been steadily retiring base-load generation assets — particularly coal-fired plants — while at the same time experiencing significant

growth in electric demand.

This demand is being driven by multiple factors:

- The re-shoring of manufacturing to the U.S.
- Continued national population growth
- The growth in electric vehicles
- And the rising number of large-scale data centers

Due to this demand surge, most utilities — both cooperatives and investor-owned — are seeing upward pressure on power-supply costs, prompting rate increases across the board.

Cooperatives must be cautious when considering providing service to large new loads such as data centers. It is imperative to determine whether the co-op's power supplier or generation and transmission cooperative has adequate generation capacity. In most cases, the answer is likely no. If new gener-

ation capacity must be built to serve a data center, this could drive up costs for existing members, resulting in rate increases.

Although the property tax revenue from data centers can benefit local communities, these facilities often bring limited direct job creation and relatively little local economic stimulation compared to other industries. Moreover, large energy users such as data centers could consume all of the available capacity on a cooperative's system, limiting the ability to serve more diverse or sustainable growth in the future.

From a strategic and community development standpoint, a new manufacturing facility may offer greater long-term benefits — such as more jobs and more resilient economic contributions — than a large data center. 

SCOTT WESTLUND

SHERIDAN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

GREAT question and one that we talk about in the eastern part of the state. First off, we are obligated to serve. Second, it is part of the direction of the country.

This is all part of the AI (artificial intelligence) drive, which is a high priority for the nation.

I have been involved in several conversations with fellow co-ops that are being courted to serve data centers, and we have been approached as well.

Some propose self-generation, some do not, but they are bringing generation with them in their construction.

As we are short of generation in the United States, this is a good move.

My overall opinion is to serve, at all times.

With this cooperative, we do not do anything unless we have aide to construction to build, meaning a payment from the cost-causer to build out the needed infrastructure in full. This protects the membership from the high expense of building needed substations and transmission lines.

I see data centers on the horizon for this cooperative, as our neighbors are working on these projects or have been approached.

Eastern Montana has the oil industry that produces natural gas from the drilling process.

This gas is in abundance, and thus is another great fuel source for

generational needs if data centers bring generation.

We also have potential hydrogen producers looking into this region — both blue and green hydrogen productions. This is another fuel source, as natural gas is the baseline for the blue hydrogen process, and water is the baseline for the green hydrogen process.

Data centers are high users of energy; and are the baseline for the AI industry we are all hearing about and seeing. Data centers are a fit for this region.

We are in support as it lends to the entire vision for the United States.

Again, we are obligated to serve. 

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 October, send in your best recipes that use corn (fresh, frozen, canned, cornmeal, polenta, grits) by September 15. Please send in November recipes anytime: Your favorite recipes that use Nuts or Seeds. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

**1st
PLACE**

Sausage and Vegetable Gnocchi

Pam Forrest | ROUNDUP

INGREDIENTS

- 1 lb. ground chorizo sausage
- 1 lb. ground pork
- 2 lb. potato gnocchi
- 4 T oil
- ½ onion diced
- 1 pint mushrooms, sliced
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 2 cups broth
- 2 T cornstarch
- 2 cups kale chopped, stalks removed

DIRECTIONS

In a large pan saute chorizo and pork over medium-high heat. Cook and crumble until no longer pink.

Add oil and onion. Saute for 3 minutes then add bell pepper and mushrooms, saute another 3 minutes.

Prepare gnocchi as directed on the package.

Whisk together broth and cornstarch. Reduce heat in saute pan to medium-low and add cooked gnocchi and broth mixture. Stir to combine and let simmer to thicken sauce for about 5 minutes. Then stir in kale and serve.



**2nd
PLACE**

Chicken Chile Rellenos

Rick Swan | KALISPELL

INGREDIENTS

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>FOR ROASTED RED PEPPER SAUCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 red bell peppers, roasted, peeled, seeded and chopped ¾ cup red onion, chopped 4 garlic cloves roasted ¼ cup red wine vinegar 1 T sugar 1 T hot sauce 1 tsp. ground mustard ½ tsp. chili powder ½ tsp. cajun seasoning 1/8 tsp. black pepper ½ cup olive oil <p>FOR CHILE RELLENO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Poblano peppers, roasted, peeled and seeded | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 cups chicken, cooked and chopped 1 cup cooked corn 8 oz. Monterey Jack cheese, shredded 8 oz. cream cheese (room temperature) 2 T cilantro, chopped 2 tsp. lime juice ½ tsp. ground cumin ½ tsp. chili powder <p>FOR FRY BATTER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 cup all-purpose flour ¾ cup rice flour ½ tsp. salt ½ tsp. baking powder 12 oz. beer or club soda 1/3 cup corn starch Peanut oil for frying |
|---|--|

DIRECTIONS

To make the red pepper sauce, blend all ingredients except oil in a blender until smooth. While blender is running, slowly add the oil and blend until emulsified. Strain. Refrigerate.

For chile rellenos, combine all filling ingredients in a bowl. Stuff each roasted poblano with ¼ of the filling mixture. If necessary, use toothpicks to secure.

To fry, heat peanut oil to 375 degrees in a large Dutch oven. Whisk together first 5 fry ingredients vigorously. Dredge chile in corn starch and then batter. Drop one at a time into oil and fry 4-6 minutes, or until golden brown. Place on a pan with wire rack and keep warm in a 200-degree oven. Drizzle with red pepper sauce and serve.



**3rd
PLACE**

Spicy Red Salsa

Daisy Kind Pryor

INGREDIENTS

- ¼ cup onion, chopped
- 1 jalapeno, seeded to heat preference
- 1 can (14 oz.) fire-roasted tomatoes
- 1 can (4 oz.) fire-roasted green chiles
- ¼ cup packed cilantro
- ½ - ¾ lime, juiced
- ½ tsp. garlic salt
- ¼ tsp. ground black pepper
- ¼ tsp. cumin

DIRECTIONS

In a medium to large blender, combine all ingredients. Blend to desired consistency by pulsing the blender.



Events Calendar

Events | What's Happening?



NORTHWEST

September 1, 8, 15, 22, 29

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

September 4-6

Bigfork Summer Playhouse celebrates 66th season — *The Hits*, 7:30 p.m., bigforksummerplayhouse.com, 837-4886 | **BIGFORK**

September 5

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Toast of the Town annual fundraiser — *Indian Springs Ranch*, 5 p.m., 297-0197 | **EUREKA**

September 5-7

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

September 8-11

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

September 12-13

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

September 13-14

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

September 16

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

September 17

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

September 19-20

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

September 19-21

Friends of Flathead County Library Annual Book Sale — *Kalispell Center Mall*, Fri-Sat: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sun: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. | **KALISPELL**

September 19-21

Hi Line Quilt Guild Festival of Quilts — *Havre Holiday Village Mall*, Fri: noon to 5 p.m., Sat: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sun: noon to 4 p.m., 390-1819 | **HAVRE**

September 19-21

42nd Threshing Bee 2025 — *Food and entertainment, 2 blocks south of the city park*, Fri: noon to 5 p.m., Sat-Sun: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. | **CHOTEAU**

September 24

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Christine Tassan et les Imposteures concert — *Gypsy jazz quartet*, LCHS Auditorium, 7 p.m., 297-0197 | **EUREKA**

September 26-27

15th Annual Mountain Brook Crafters Co-op Handcraft Sale — 795 Mennonite Church Road, Fri: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sat: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 250-8657 | **KALISPELL**

October 4

Trego Heritage Day — *Family-friendly event*, Blarney Ranch, 9 a.m., to 6 p.m., 307-699-5026 | **TREGO**

October 25

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: The Lucky Valentines concert — *Indie-folk duo from Fort Benton*, LCHS Auditorium, 7 p.m., 297-0197 | **EUREKA**

October 29

Flathead Valley Community Band presents 'Fall Fantasy' concert — *Whitefish Performing Arts Center*, 7:30 p.m., 270-1696 | **WHITEFISH**

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

SOUTHWEST

September 6

'80s Dance Party at the Farm — *CCMT at Homestead Organics Farm*, 5:30 to 8:30 p.m., cultivatingconnectionsmt.org | **HAMILTON**

September 11

Brats for the Brave — *Jaycee Park*, noon, 683-5511 | **DILLON**

September 13

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

September 25

After Hours Mixer — *Tailgate party*, Pioneer Federal Savings & Loan, 5 to 7 p.m., 683-5511 | **DILLON**

SOUTHEAST

September 2-30

Family History Research — *Free assistance with genealogy daily from 1 to 3 p.m.*, Billings Livestock Commission & Senior Center, 671-4787 | **BILLINGS**

September 6

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

September 12

Pub Station Presents Pam Tillis — *Petro Theatre*, Montana State University Billings, 8 p.m., thepubstation.com | **BILLINGS**

September 27

Sourdough Basics workshop — *CCMT at Homestead Organics Farm*, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., cultivatingconnectionsmt.org | **HAMILTON**

September 28

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

Mid-Sept.-Oct. 31

Beaverhead Maze & Pumpkin Patch — 4565 MT-41, Thursdays through Sundays, noon to 8 p.m., 579-7955 | **DILLON**

September 18

7th Annual Calves to Cure DMD — *All class cattle sale*, Billings Livestock Commission, 1 p.m., 245-4151 | **BILLINGS**

October 17

Pub Station Presents Charles Wesley Godwin — *The Pub Station Ballroom*, 8 p.m., thepubstation.com | **BILLINGS**

October 17

Q's Art 20th Anniversary Show — *Q's Art & Framing*, 3 to 7 p.m., 248-1102 | **BILLINGS**

October 25

Annual Bazaar — *Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd*, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 672-3723 | **BILLINGS**

NORTHEAST

September 18-19

Reunion Gathering Days — *Multi-Class reunion, more information on Facebook* | **CIRCLE**

September 20

Circle Town and Country Appreciation Day — 485-4782 | **CIRCLE**

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 FALL AND WINTER DRAWINGS AND POEMS



Titus Ents, 12, Simms | **SUN RIVER ELECTRIC**



Inara Ford, 7, Kalispell | **FLATHEAD ELECTRIC**

Maggie Oylear, 13, Ashland | **TONGUE RIVER ELECTRIC**



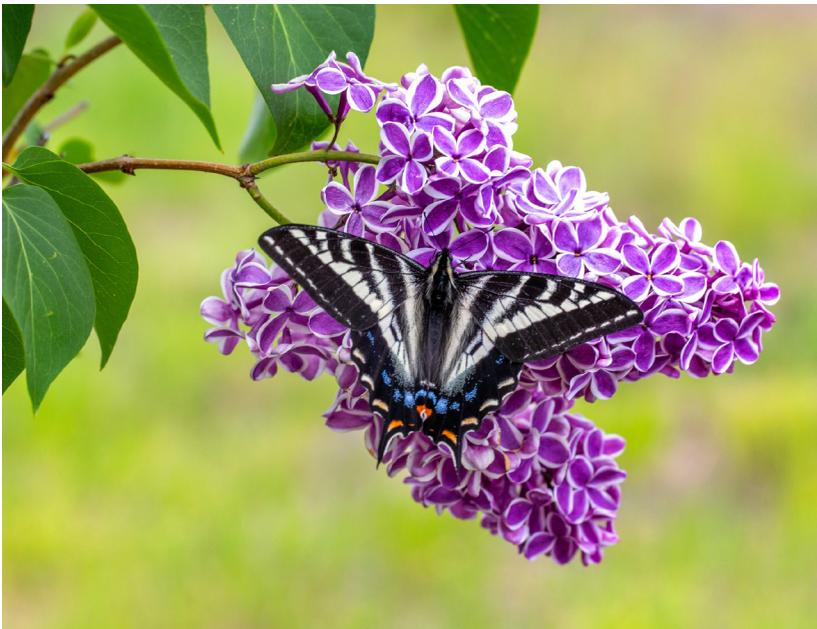
Dane Schreiber, 11, Billings | **YELLOWSTONE VALLEY ELECTRIC**

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.



Scentful Stop

A swallowtail stops on a lilac bush. **Photo by Carol Lynne Fowler of Seeley Lake**



Majestic Trio

Two bald eagles take off from a tree while the third looks on near Freezeout Lake. **Photo by Dave Hopkins of Columbia Falls**



Fall Fox

A fox walks through the trees in the fall. **Photo by Di McDermid of Twin Bridges**



A Galaxy Far Far Away

The Milky Way can be seen above this cabin. **Photo by Robert Hanson of Whitefish**



The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

Email: rural@mtco-ops.com



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Community support is more than a nice idea – it's Basin Electric's culture. Giving back is important to us because charitable programs and non-profit organizations help our communities thrive.

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