



Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | JANUARY 2026

RETURNING HISTORY

Wilsall's first firetruck returns home

– PAGE 2



INSIDE

ASK A MANAGER: WHO HAS THE LAST SAY ON DATA CENTERS?

– PAGE 10

FEATURES



2

Returning History*Historic Wilsall firetruck comes back home*

12

Solar Sales Tactics

Is your co-op about to be sold?

10

ASK
A MANAGERAsk A Manager

Who has final say if a data center can move into co-op territory?

**COVER**

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

4

Cost of RM*Have you ever wondered what it costs to send you the Rural Montana magazine?***Rural Montana****Rural Montana**
January 2026**Vol. 72 | No. 1**

(ISSN0199-6401)

DEPARTMENTS

- 1 | Viewpoint**
- 4 | Face of Montana**
- 9 | Dateline D.C.**
- 14 | Recipes**
- 15 | Events Calendar**
- 16 | Young Montanans**

MONTANA ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES' ASSOCIATION STATE BOARD OFFICERS

DeeDee Isaacs | **Pres.** | **TONGUE RIVER**
 Dennis Nelson | **Vice Pres.** |
LOWER YELLOWSTONE RURAL
 Jodi Stiehl | **Sec.-Treas.** | **FALL RIVER RURAL**
 Joe Sisk | **NW Dir.** | **MARIAS RIVER**
 Nick Siebrasse | **NE Dir.** | **HILL COUNTY**
 Dean Peterson | **SW Dir.** | **VIGILANTE**
 Chris White | **SE Dir.** | **YELLOWSTONE VALLEY**

COOPERATIVE DIRECTORS

Jim Neu | **BEARTooth**
 Alan Wesson | **BIG FLAT**
 Derek Sorley | **BIG HORN COUNTY**
 Terry Frost | **FERGUS**
 Stacey Schnebel | **FLATHEAD**
 Jim Taylor | **GLACIER**
 Robert Makelky | **GOLDENWEST**
 Marianne Roose | **LINCOLN**
 Brent Kluth | **MCCONE**
 Reese Stahl | **MID-YELLOWSTONE**
 Dena Hooker | **MISSOULA**
 Steve Klatt | **NORTHERN LIGHTS**
 Chris Christensen | **NORVAL**
 Craig Yost | **PARK**
 Brien Weber | **RAVALLI COUNTY**
 Jody Lagerquist | **SHERIDAN**
 Dave Hayden | **SOUTHEAST**
 John Burgmaier | **SUN RIVER**



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. 72 | No. 1

MANAGING EDITOR | Mark Lambrecht

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR,

EDITOR | Ryan G. Hall

GRAPHIC DESIGN | Nick Daniels

OFFICES | 501 Bay Drive, Great Falls, MT 59404

TELEPHONE | (406) 761-8333

FAX | (460) 761-8339

WEBSITE | www.mtco-ops.com

E-MAIL | rural@mtco-ops.com

CHANGE OF ADDRESS | Mail change of address to your local rural electric cooperative, or if the code ME is above your name, the Rural Montana office, P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403. Please include the mailing label from a recent issue of Rural Montana.

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.

COPYRIGHT©2026 MONTANA

ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES'

ASSOCIATION. No advertising or editorial content of Rural Montana magazine may be reproduced without permission of the publisher.

UNSOLICITED LETTERS, PHOTOS AND MANUSCRIPTS ARE WEL-

COMED. RM assumes no responsibility for their safekeeping or for their return.



Co-ops working to reduce wildfire risk

MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association

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

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

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

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

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

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



SUBSCRIBE to



If you are not receiving **Rural Montana** from your local cooperative and would like to receive the magazine, or you want to give a subscription as a gift, you may purchase one for a yearly fee of **\$10**.

YES! I'd like to subscribe.
(12 Issues a year at \$10).

Check Money Order Cash Credit Card

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone (____) _____

Payment must accompany your order.

CREDIT CARD INFO.

Card Type: Visa Mastercard Discover

Exp. Date: _____

Card Number: _____

Mail to: Rural Montana, P.O. Box 3469
Great Falls, MT 59403





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

Wilsall's first firetruck finds its way home

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

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

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

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

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

A legacy of service

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

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

TO DONATE

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

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

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



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

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

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

"At a whopping top speed of 20 miles



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

Finding its way home

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

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

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

"We wanted it. How often do you



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

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

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

"It was better than expected," Bakosh said.

Future plan

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

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

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

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

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





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

BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

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

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

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

You might be surprised to find out that the

“

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

”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nominating Committee to meet in March

The Nominating Committee will meet on Tuesday, March 3, at the Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative (LYREC) office. The purpose of the Nominating Committee is to select candidates for the board of trustees.

The Nominating Committee will consist of two members each from District 5, District 6 and District 7. The committee will nominate one or more candidates for these districts. The present trustees representing these districts are Dennis Nelson in District 5, Greg Rauschendorfer in District 6 and Allen Thiessen in District 7.

Nominating Committee members are:

- **Representing District 5** - Kirk Panasuk and Mike Wilson
- **Representing District 6** - Kyle Koppinger and Cheyanne Rauschendorfer
- **Representing District 7** - Brian Ligon and Lana Watson



Nelson



Rauschendorfer



Thiessen

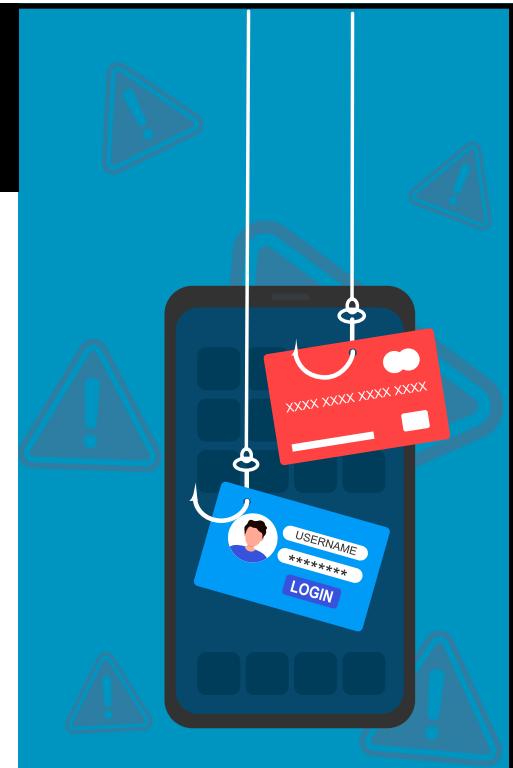
If you are a member of LYREC, reside in District 5, 6 or 7 and are interested in becoming a candidate for the board of trustees, contact one of the Nominating Committee members and ask to be considered for nomination.

If you have a joint membership, either member on the account can run for the board seat. A joint membership is entitled to one vote at any meeting of the cooperative. ■

TIPS TO AVOID ENERGY SCAMS



Beware of “winter bill relief” energy scams. Scammers often exploit high winter bills by offering fake discount or relief programs. They may ask for upfront payments or personal details to lower your rate. Legitimate utilities never demand gift cards, wire transfers or payment through apps like PayPal or Venmo. Always verify offers directly by calling your utility’s phone number located on your energy bill. Do not call any phone numbers provided in a suspicious email or text. Remember to take time to confirm before you pay; real savings programs won’t pressure you for immediate action.



A strong year and bright future for co-op

by Chris Hillesland, COO



Hillesland

2025 has been another good year for Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative (LYREC). We were fortunate to avoid any major storms that could have caused damage to our system, allowing us to stay focused on improving and expanding our system.

Building for the future

One of the major projects in 2025 was the construction of a new substation in the Sioux Pass area. This new substation will replace the old one built back in 1962 and allow us to retire approximately 10 miles of transmission line built around the same time.

The new Sioux Pass substation will be served by our Springlake transmission line that runs along Highway 201. This upgrade will replace aging infrastructure and support the load growth in this area.

Upgrading our system

We are continuing to upgrade our distribution voltage in key areas of our system. This entails re-insulating structures so they can handle 14,400 volts instead of the current 7,200 volts. Doubling the voltage will allow us to handle twice the load on the existing line.

Preventing wildfires

Wildfire mitigation is a term you may have heard lately. This involves looking for ways to improve our system to decrease the chance of a fire starting from any of our facilities. Here are some of the ways we are accomplishing this:

- **Tree trimming** – We spend a great deal of time trimming trees, especially during the winter months.
- **Pole testing** – Each year, we test at least 10% of our poles for decay. Typically, we have less than a 1% failure rate. Those found to be decaying are replaced.
- **Advanced equipment** – We have been adding new electronic reclosers (breakers) that are much more sensitive to fault conditions than the older oil-filled reclosers. They can also connect to our supervisory control and data acquisition system (SCADA), allowing us to see a problem in real time and operate the unit remotely.

Growth and stability

We have continued to see growth in our kilowatt-hour sales, which increased roughly 20% in 2025. Both of our power suppliers, Basin Electric Power Cooperative and the Western Area Power Administration, have informed us of their rate increases effective Jan. 1. Because of the load growth at LYREC, we don't foresee a rate increase for our members in 2026.

Looking ahead to 2026

We are planning to bring our Trenton substation back online to support the load growth and improve system redundancy in the area. The substation was decommissioned several years ago when the Marley substation was built. Since the transmission line remains in place, only some upgrades within the existing substation will be needed.

We are planning to build roughly 6 miles of new transmission line, with distribution underbuild going north from our Iversen substation. This new line will eventually connect to our Springlake transmission line, creating a dual feed. The current distribution line in the area is aging and is no longer adequately sized to meet our needs.

We're also in the planning stages for a new warehouse in our lower ward to house all of our inventory in one building. This new facility will complement our existing buildings and help improve efficiency.

Technology and cybersecurity

Protecting our system and member information is a top priority. Our IT team stays up to date on training, both locally and nationally, to keep our systems as secure as possible. All employees participate in ongoing cybersecurity training.

Our SCADA system is another example of how technology helps us serve you better. All our substations are on our SCADA system, which gives us real-time data for each phase and circuit, and allows us to operate devices remotely.

It's a real timesaver in normal day-to-day operations and especially in outage situations. We have also integrated several devices in the field, making it possible to receive alerts via email or text message from the devices when there is a problem, allowing us to respond quickly.

Safety above all

The subject of safety could be put anywhere in this article, but I chose to save it for last. Safety is a part of everything we do at LYREC. We utilize both the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association safety program and the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives safety program, which provide

monthly training and updates on safety standards and regulations. Safety is a mindset everyone has bought into, not just at work, but also after hours.

Our purpose remains the same: to deliver safe, reliable and affordable electricity to you, all day, every day, rain or shine. ■



Scholarship opportunities available

The Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA) is offering a \$500 scholarship to one eligible student from the northeast district of Montana. The applicant's parent(s)/guardian(s) must be a Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative (LYREC) member, and the applicant must be attending college in the fall of 2026. Applications are judged based on academic strength, school and community activities, employment, volunteerism, community service and a personal statement.

A committee comprised of LYREC staff will choose one application to advance to MECA for a chance to win a \$500 scholarship. In addition, LYREC will award a \$500 scholarship to the chosen applicant it sent to MECA. This will give the selected applicant a chance to earn a total of \$1,000. To apply, complete the required criteria and submit on or before March 5.

Basin Electric Power Cooperative is offering two scholarships to a LYREC member dependent. The first-place winner will receive \$1,500 and the second-place winner will receive a \$1,000 scholarship. The applicant must be a student enrolled in a full-time undergraduate course of study at an accredited two-year or four-year college, university or vocational/technical school in the fall of 2026.

Scholarship recipients are selected based on academic record, leadership and participation in school and community activities, honors, work experience, a statement of education and career goals, and an outside appraisal. To apply, complete the required criteria and submit by Feb. 11.

Download an application at lyrec.coop. Send application to: LYREC, Attn: Jami Propp, P.O. Box 1047, Sidney, MT 59270. ■



Jorgensen receives memorial scholarship

Mya Jorgensen has been awarded the John Redman memorial scholarship. The daughter of Jeff and Keri Jorgensen from Savage, Mya is a freshman at Montana State University-Billings, where she is pursuing a degree in radiology technology. Her winning essay focused on how social media affects the mental health of teens, sharing insights from her own life and the experiences of her friends. Congratulations, Mya! ■

Simplify the way you pay

Don't worry about your payments being lost in the mail. Avoid the hassle of late fees, save money every month on stamps and check blanks, and save valuable time with any of our simple and secure 24/7/365 telephone or online payment options:

1. Pay by telephone at 833-619-0850.
2. Pay online with just your account number and last name, using the "make one-time payment" tab.
3. Download the SmartHub app on your iPhone or Android device. Log into your SmartHub account to view your bill, make a payment, set up automatic payments or see your usage history.
4. Call us at 406-488-1602 to set up recurring automatic payments from your bank account via ACH.

Need help logging into SmartHub? Call us at 406-488-1602 for assistance. ■

3200 W. Holly - Sidney, MT 59270

Phone: 406-488-1602

Website: lyrec.coop

TRUSTEES

Allen Thiessen	President
Greg Rauschendorfer	Vice President
Dennis Schmierer	Secretary/Treasurer
Colin Gartner	Trustee
Tim Franzen	Trustee
Dennis Nelson	Trustee
Jim Vitt	Trustee

EMPLOYEES

Jason Brothen	General Manager
Jami Propp	Member Service Manager
Pam Wilcoxon	Chief Financial Officer
Melissa Buckley	Plant Accountant
Kyle Kavanagh	IT Director
Margo Zadow	Billing Coordinator
Katie Jochim	CSR/Billing Coordinator
Tiffani Hentges	Customer Service Representative
Chris Hillesland	Chief Operations Officer
Rich Gorde	Journeyman Lineman
Eric McPherson	System Controller
Kevin Goff	Operations Assistant
Kelly Keyser	Operations Manager
Aaron Eide	Journeyman Lineman
Bryan Franck	Journeyman Lineman
Jesse Obergfell	Journeyman Lineman
Tanner Roth	Journeyman Lineman
Ryder Peterson	Journeyman Lineman
Cole Jankovsky	Journeyman Lineman
Preston Long	Journeyman Lineman
Trey Schepens	Journeyman Lineman
Jory Bell	Apprentice Lineman
Nicholas Burke	Apprentice Lineman
Jaeger Gunville	Apprentice Lineman
Brandon Mueller	Master Electrician
Mike Eberling	Mechanic
Dan Gieser	EMS
Lee Alvstad	Mechanic/EMS
Richard Tremblay	EMS
Bo Kindopp	GIS/Easement Technician
Tom Hall	GIS Specialist
Corey Candeo	Chief Information Officer
Jeremy Rees	Information Technology Technician
Edwin Gatzke	Line Locator/Groundsman
Justin King	Warehouse Supervisor
Parker Brothen	Groundsman

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative



MONTANA U.S. SENATORS

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

THIS MONTH'S QUESTION:

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

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

**Senator Sheehy**

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

Senator Tim Sheehy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Senator Steve Daines

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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:

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

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

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

This month's question is:

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

*Thank You,
Ray Sierra*



PAT PATTERSON

BEARTOOTH ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

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

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

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

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



SCOTT WESTLUND

SHERIDAN ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

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

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

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

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

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

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

While not chasing data centers actively or taking

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

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

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

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

It's a balancing act.

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

RM

JASON BROTHEN

GOLDENWEST, LOWER YELLOWSTONE RURAL AND MID-YELLOWSTONE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES

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

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

responsible for the cost of any upgrades required.

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

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



SCARE TACTICS

SOME SOLAR SALES STAFF LYING ABOUT ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES BEING SOLD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It would increase our rates substantially," Haggerty said.

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

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

Impacting reputable dealers

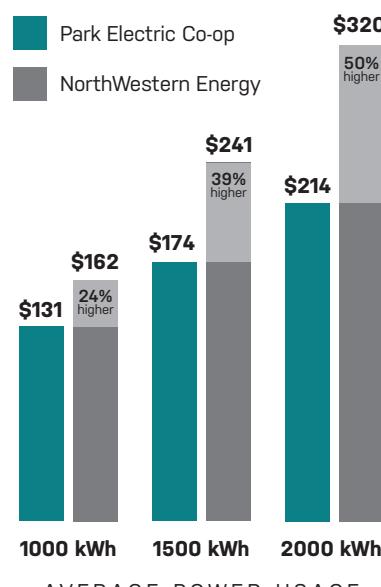
In addition to alarming co-op members, the sales tactics employed by door-knockers for solar installers, many of which are out of state companies, impact the reputable Montana solar panel businesses.

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

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



Park Electric energy rates vs. NorthWestern Energy



fits the needs of a customer and accomplishes their goals.

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

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

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

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

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

Find a reputable dealer

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

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

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

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

**1st
PLACE**

Chile Relleno Meatballs

Diane Carter | MOLT

INGREDIENTS

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

DIRECTIONS

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

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

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

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

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

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



**2nd
PLACE**

Cindy's Pork & Ricotta Meatballs

Laurel Deniger
SEELEY LAKE

INGREDIENTS

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1/2 cup day-old bread, cubed | 2 garlic cloves, minced |
| 1/4 cup whole milk | 1/3 cup chicken broth |
| 1-1/2 lb. ground pork | 1/4 cup white wine |
| 1/2 cup ricotta cheese | 1 T lemon juice |
| 1 garlic clove, minced | 1 jar (3-1/2 oz.) capers, drained |
| 1 shallot, minced | 2 T butter |
| 2 T Italian parsley, chopped | Parmesan cheese and lemon wedges (garnish) |
| Zest of 1 lemon | 2 T canola oil |
| 1/2 tsp. ground coriander | |
| 1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon | |
| 1 tsp. course salt | |
| 2 T olive oil (for frying) | |
| Fresh basil and grated Parmesan cheese (optional) | |

DIRECTIONS

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

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

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



SEND IN YOUR RECIPES

Recipes for *RM* magazine are submitted by cooperative members across the state. First, second and third place monthly winners are awarded \$30, \$20 and \$10 prizes, respectively. Send your recipes to *RM* Recipes, Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403, or email rural@mtco-ops.com. **Please include your name, hometown and an address. If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.** For February send in your favorite Valentine recipe (Date-night entree, dessert, candy, etc...) by January 15. Please send in March recipes anytime: Your favorite Irish or green(ish) recipe. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

**3rd
PLACE**

Chicken Piccata Meatballs

Bev Mix | MISSOULA

INGREDIENTS

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

DIRECTIONS

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

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

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

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



BONUS
RECIPE

Bacon-Wrapped Meatloaf

Teresa Gaylord | KALISPELL

INGREDIENTS

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

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
Mix all ingredients except bacon and barbecue sauce in a large bowl.
Shape into a loaf. Spray loaf pan with cooking spray and place meatloaf inside.
Make basket weave design with bacon and place over meatloaf.
Bake 1-1/2 hours, checking at 1 hour, until internal temperature reaches 160 degrees.
Serve with BBQ sauce.



Events Calendar

SUBMIT YOUR EVENTS

To list an event, send it to: RM Events, PO Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403 or email us at: rural@mtcoops.com — Submit items by January 15 for February events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.**

NORTHWEST

January 13

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

January 18

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

January 20

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

January 21

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

February 1

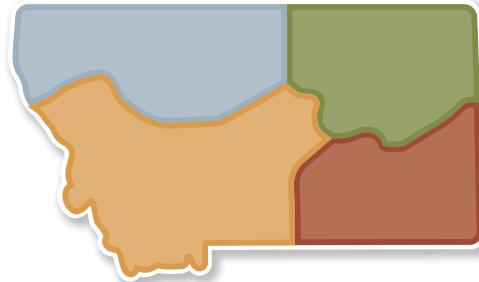
John White Series presents
Kira Powell on fire lookouts — Northwest Montana History Museum, 2 p.m., 756-8381 | **KALISPELL**

February 15

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

March 1

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



SOUTHWEST

January 15-17

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

January 21-22

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

January 30-February 1

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

February 10

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

February 25-28

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

SOUTHEAST

January 10

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

January 18

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

January 30-February 1

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

February 19

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

February 25-March 1

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

STATEWIDE

All year

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

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

YOUNG MONTANANS

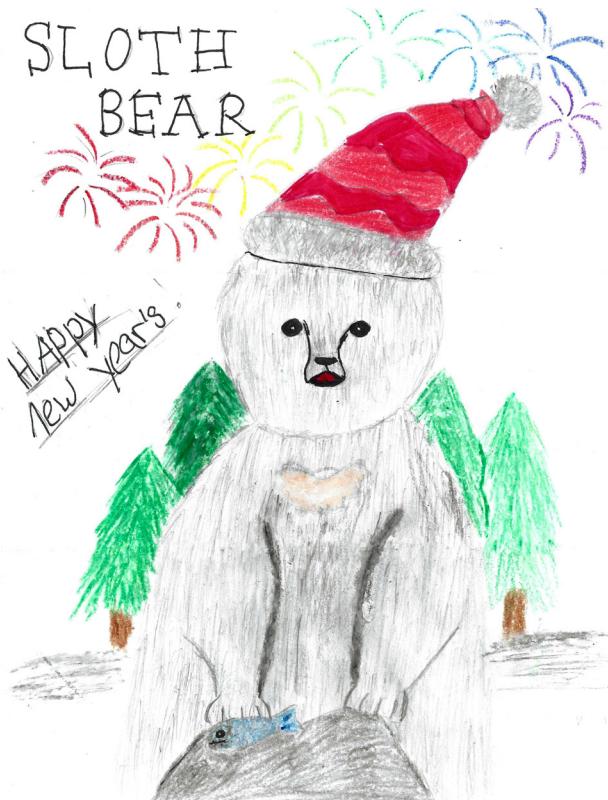
RM invites youngsters to send in original art and poems. If we use it, we'll pay you \$10. **Mail to:** Young Montanans, P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403.

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

SEND YOUR WINTER DRAWINGS
AND POEMS



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



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

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

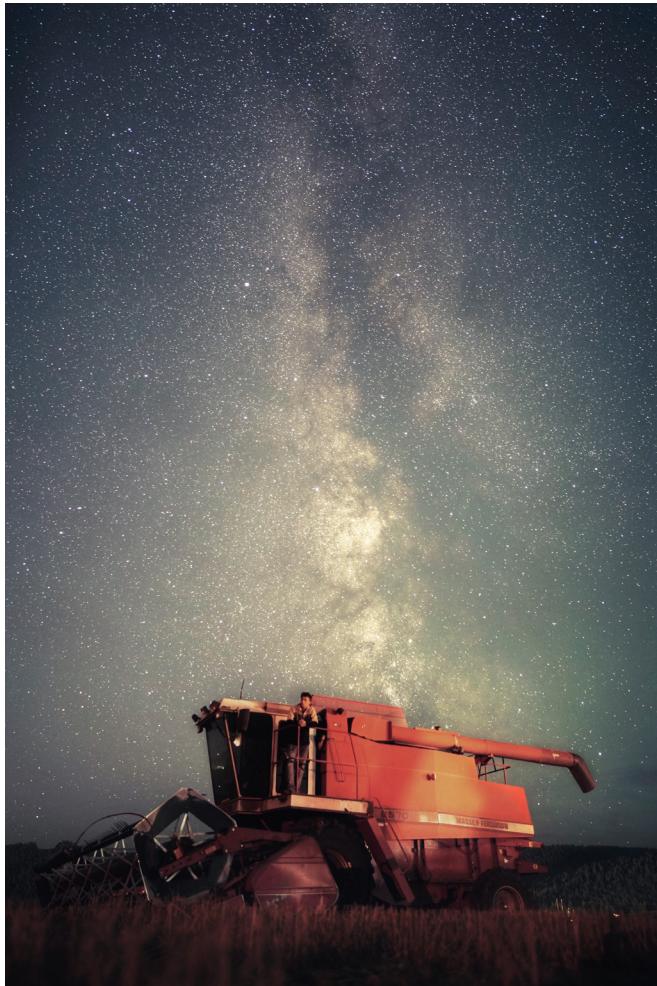


READER PHOTOS

SEND US YOUR FAVORITE PHOTOS/ARTWORK

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

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



Awesome Aurora

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



Celestial Combine

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



Speedy Slalom

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

Sky-High Skier

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



JAMIE W.

RM

The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

Email: rural@mtco-ops.com



BASIN ELECTRIC

RELIABILITY

POWER YOU CAN
ALWAYS DEPEND ON

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

**BASIN ELECTRIC
POWER COOPERATIVE**
A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative