



Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | MARCH 2026



STATEWIDE ESSAY WINNER

AMELIA GILCHRIST

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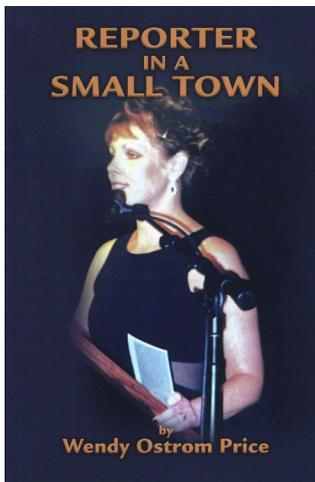
Learn what a Red Cross disaster volunteer does and how to be one



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NRECA Youth Tour: Helping secure our future

MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association



ONE of the highlights of my time with the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA) was working with Youth Tour, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) program that brings high school students from all over the country to the nation's capital to learn about government and to experience Washington, D.C.



Montana's delegations were incredibly diverse, with different ethnicities, rural and urban backgrounds, athletes and artists, and contrasting political viewpoints.

The program traces its roots back to 1957, when Lyndon B. Johnson, then a U.S. Senator from Texas, addressed the NRECA Annual Meeting in Chicago, and suggested the organization initiate a program for rural teens to have the opportunity to experience Washington, D.C., and see their government in action. Since then, NRECA has welcomed tens of thousands of students to D.C. every summer. Montana's electric cooperatives and MECA have sent more than 800 youth delegates over the years. This summer MECA will send Glasgow High School's Amelia Gilchrist, whose winning statewide essay contest entry is featured in this issue, along with more than two dozen students sponsored by their electric cooperatives.

In the February issue of *Rural Montana*, I wrote about my hope that by getting to know each other better, we can come together. Youth Tour proves that concept every year. I've witnessed Montana's students start each trip in small groups of those who knew each other from 4-H or athletics, while others didn't know anyone else. Yet after spending a week together learning about American history and seeing how our government works, experiencing fun team-building exercises and just talking on the bus, they all understood each other better and developed enduring friendships.

I had the privilege to chaperone two Montana Youth Tour delegations to Washington, D.C. They each included a couple dozen youth from across the state, featuring students from large and small high schools, as well as home schools.

Youth Tour alumni have become leaders in their schools and communities, and in state and national organizations. In fact, Apple CEO Tim Cook participated in Youth Tour in 1977 as a member of Alabama's delegation. There's no doubt in my mind that as they become leaders in government, business, education and other fields critical to our union, Montana's Youth Tour delegates will show the rest of us the way to come together to move our nation forward. 

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NRECA YOUTH TOUR TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

STATEWIDE ESSAY WINNER



EACH year the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA) holds an essay contest to select one student to be sponsored by MECA on the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour.

The winner this year is Amelia Gilchrist, a junior at Glasgow High School, whose parents

are members of NorVal Electric Cooperative.

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

Below is Amelia's winning essay with minor edits to match RM style.

NorVal Electric:

Leading our community toward a brighter future

ESSAY BY **AMELIA GILCHRIST** | MECA STATEWIDE YOUTH TOUR WINNER

NORVAL Electric Cooperative is a company that is fully invested in the surrounding communities. From Scobey to Wolf Point, and Opheim to Glasgow, this co-op not only keeps the lights on but also helps those in need all across eastern Montana.

This support is especially important in our rural and underserved community. NorVal contributes over \$3.5 million annually to the local economy. This helps fund the numerous philanthropic and community projects that enhance our small town and the surrounding areas.

NorVal Electric is a business that supports our rural population through numerous activities, such as donations to nonprofits, offering scholarship opportunities to local high school students, and encouraging its employees to volunteer as coaches and mentors in the surrounding area. Our community wouldn't be the same without NorVal Electric Cooperative.

Recently, NorVal has both donated to and participated in our local Festival of Trees, which is where different groups, businesses or people in our community decorate Christmas trees to be auctioned to the highest bidder.

Editor's Note - Citations and the reference section of the following essay were removed due to space availability. A cited copy of the essay, with references, is available upon request to ryanh@mtco-ops.com.

This money is donated to the Valley County non-profit HOPE (Help Others Pay Expenses) Project, which supports citizens of Valley County who are struggling with medical bills. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the average hospital stay in 2019 was over \$14,000, while according to *CensusReporter.org*, the annual per capita income in Glasgow is only \$34,439, with 13 percent of individuals being below the poverty line. Considering these two facts, medical bills could easily result in crushing debt or even bankruptcy.

One community member has said, "Your thoughtfulness means so much more than words can say. Thank you seems so inadequate for all the help you have given us. Thank you so much," concerning how the HOPE proj-

ect affected their life. This assistance wouldn't be possible without support from individuals and organizations such as NorVal Electric.

When the government shutdown threatened the most vulnerable people in our community with the loss of SNAP benefits, NorVal answered the call for assistance. NorVal collected food donations for the Valley Community Emergency Food Bank, offering credits to those who donated canned food. This generosity is nothing new as NorVal has a long history of supporting the local food bank, helping to provide nourishment to those who need it most.

NorVal keeps an eye toward the future. Every year, the humble co-op offers several scholarships for local member high school graduates. These scholarships are especially important as the cost of attending college or a technical/vocational school is only increasing. According to *US News*, the average college sticker price in 2025 rose over the past year by 3.3 percent for private institutions and in-state public college students, and by 3.7 percent for out-of-state public college students. The average four-year degree costs \$19,068 annually, which is a lot



NorVal's dedicated employees are involved in the community just as much as the co-op itself... These people have had a great impact on our community.

Amelia Gilchrist from Glasgow is the NRECA Youth Tour Statewide Essay winner. She will go with students from around the state to Washington, D.C., this summer, all expenses paid by the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

to ask, especially for students below the poverty line in Valley County. Without the help of scholarships like these, many students in our community wouldn't be able to attend these programs.

NorVal's dedicated employees are involved in the community just as much as the co-op itself. Employees such as Eric Feit, Cody Odom, Jayson Nelson, Kyle Barras and Tracy Henry coach athletic activities and mentor students. These people have had a great impact on our community. NorVal's workforce is committed to volunteering and influencing our youth in positive ways, while educating them on the importance of teamwork and

sportsmanship, and assisting them in building their skills.

One idea that NorVal could consider implementing in our rural community would be a mentorship program for those looking to enter the trades, specifically a lineman training program. This program would aim to mentor high school students interested in the trades on what linemen do and how they could pursue these career opportunities. In addition to teaching about the trade itself, this project could include safety demonstrations, trade school application seminars and what it's like to work for NorVal. This program would potentially influence students to attend trade school, then

return to work for the co-op.

From supporting non-profit organizations to providing scholarships and mentors to the local populace, NorVal Electric Cooperative is truly a business that loves its community. By helping the local area, NorVal has become a pillar of our region that we would collapse without.

The continued presence of our local co-op serves as an important indication of just how essential community bonds are to the welfare of rural areas. As Northeastern Montana faces the future, we can be confident that NorVal Electric Cooperative will continue to stand by our side and aid our community through whatever comes our way. RM

NorVal Electric is a business that supports our rural population through numerous activities, such as donations to nonprofits, offering scholarship opportunities to local high school students, and encouraging its employees to volunteer as coaches and mentors in the surrounding area. Our community wouldn't be the same without NorVal Electric Cooperative.

Retired co-op employee authors book of her career as a reporter

Reporter in a Small Town available now

BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

WENDY Ostrom Price, a retired Flathead Electric Cooperative communications employee, never set out to write a book. With *Reporter in a Small Town*, she has done just that, chronicling her life as a radio station reporter in Kalispell prior to joining the co-op.

When her father, famed local journalist G. George Ostrom, passed away on New Year's Day 2025, Ostrom Price began reminiscing about life and her career in journalism.

"My husband said, 'Stop talking and start writing,'" Ostrom Price said. "So I began journaling."

She said that when she finished, she shared her writings with friends and family, who encouraged her to publish the stories as a book.

"So I did," Ostrom Price said.

The book is an easy-to-read chronicle of her career, with most stories only taking up a page or two. There's humor, compassion and a story about the day the world changed on Sept. 11, 2001.

"Because it was journaling, I spilled my guts about a lot of things. I scaled that way back when I decided to publish. I didn't want to hurt anyone or bring up bad memories," Ostrom Price said.

"That was the hard part, was deciding

what to leave out," she added.

Ostrom Price said the stories she picked, and the brevity of each one, were very intentional choices.

"I wanted my book to be as if I was on the radio, short and succinct," she said.

The book chronicles Ostrom Price's career and interviews as she parachutes, meets Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf and other interesting tidbits.

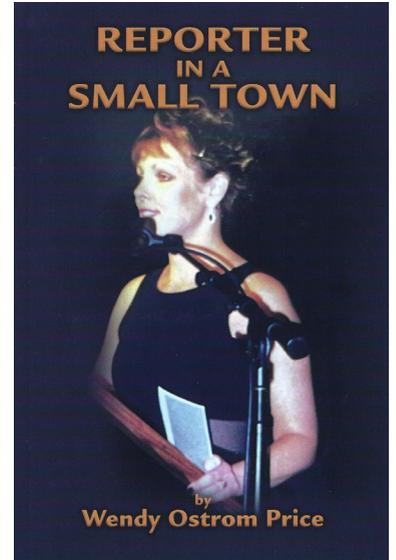
"There's nothing I said yes to that I wish I would have said no to. Even the things that were out of my comfort zone, I learned from them," Ostrom Price said.

Though the pages are dotted with experiences and celebrity interviews, the focus is on local people and their stories.

"My favorite interviews were with those people right here in the community," Ostrom Price said. "The focus was as a reporter in a small town. So that's the period of my life I covered, and attributed to my father."

She said her book not only pays homage to an era of journalism before social media and smartphones, but it honors her community and those in it.

"I hope that people in my area, in my community, who were with me along this ride will just take a little nostalgia from it," Ostrom Price said.



HOW TO BUY

Reporter in a Small Town is available in softcover at various Montana retailers, as well as online and from Farcountry Press at (800) 821-3874, farcountrypress.com.

REMINDER Send us your Reader Issue content

Photo and story submissions are due by April 1

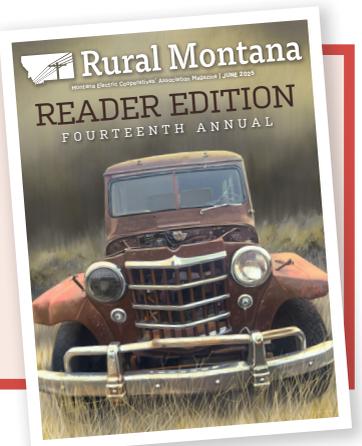
If you have any questions, call Editor Ryan Hall at 406-761-8333.

Send stand-alone photos to: rural@mtco-ops.com.

Send stories (and related photos) to: ryanh@mtco-ops.com,

or mail any item for submission to Rural Montana, PO Box 3469, Great Falls MT 59403.

***You must include your address and phone number to be considered for publication**



Operation Round Up gives to communities

Recent Operation Round Up grants were awarded, bringing the total to \$9,300 distributed in 2025 to nonprofit and community organizations across Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative's service area.

The Operation Round Up program is made possible by the generosity of our members who choose to round up their electric bills each month. While the maximum each month is 99 cents, those small contributions add up to a big impact right here in our communities.

If you have questions about Operation Round Up or would like to learn more, please contact our office at 406-488-1602. The next application deadline is March 15. ■



Operation Round Up donated \$1,500 to Child Bridge in December. Child Bridge helps recruit and equip foster and adoptive families with training and ongoing support so families can offer long-term care to children who have suffered abuse and neglect. The funds will be used for the cost of training materials, family resources, coaching support, community recruitment and equipping efforts. Currently, Child Bridge serves 11 foster/adoptive families in Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative's service territory.



Operation Round Up Trustee **Angie Olson**, left, presents **Cynthia Misner**, founder of Prairie to Peaks Animal Assistance Foundation, with a \$500 donation to help subsidize the spay, neuter and vaccine costs for stray or abandoned pets in our community. The organization assists with an average of 20 to 35 animals per month.



ELECTRIC LAWN CARE: A quiet, low-maintenance option

Before we know it, spring will be here, and Saturday mornings will once again be filled with the familiar hum of lawn mowers. If it's time to replace yard equipment, going electric has many benefits. More options have become available with lawn mowers, string trimmers and leaf blowers in recent years.

Many brands use a shared battery system, meaning one battery can power several tools. Some models also use dual batteries to provide extra power or longer run times.

Benefits of electric lawn equipment versus gas-powered models include:

- **Low maintenance:** No gas or oil changes. Just charge and go.
- **Quiet operation:** Easier on your ears and your neighbors.
- **Zero emissions:** Cleaner air and fewer fumes.
- **Lightweight design:** Easier to handle and store.

If you are considering making a switch to electric lawn tools, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- **Battery platform compatibility:** Choose a brand that uses the same battery across multiple tools so

you can swap batteries between mower, blower or trimmer without needing to buy extras.

- **Voltage:** Higher voltage generally means more power, which can be helpful for larger yards. Lower voltage systems can be sufficient for smaller areas.
- **Amp-hours:** Higher amp-hours provide longer run times between charges.
- **Brushless motors:** These motors are more efficient, run smoother and typically last longer, though they can be more costly upfront.

Because these tools are electric, avoid using them in wet conditions unless they are specifically rated for it. Always store batteries in a cool, dry place and never charge them outdoors when it's wet.

Electric lawn equipment offers a convenient, low-maintenance way to care for your yard. Plus, you have the flexibility to work early or late without waking the neighbors. ■

Tips for home lighting

Many times when a light bulb burns out or we need a new fixture, we grab whatever bulb is available or whatever fixture we think will look good. Do you ever think, “This room feels too dim or the lights are giving off an odd yellow glow?” With a little planning, you can make your home brighter, cozier and more energy efficient.

Watts vs. lumens

When you are shopping for light bulbs, it's easy to focus on watts, but watts only measure how much energy a bulb uses. When it comes to brightness, what really matters is the lumen count. Lumens measure the actual light output. An 800-lumen LED bulb gives off about the same amount of light as an old-fashioned 60-watt incandescent bulb. If you haven't replaced your old incandescent bulbs with long-lasting, energy-efficient LEDs, it's time to make the switch!

Higher lumens mean brighter light, while lower watts mean less energy consumption. Remember to check wattage ratings for fixtures and only install bulbs that meet the fixture's wattage safety requirements.

Color temperature and consistency

Light bulbs also vary in color temperature, which range from warm yellow to cool white or even bluish tones. This detail often gets overlooked, until you replace one bulb and notice the new light doesn't quite match the others. If mismatched tones drive you crazy, consider buying and installing bulbs of the same brand and wattage in a room at the same time. Then the look stays consistent, and you won't be stuck hunting for a perfect match later.

Dimmers and switches

Installing dimmers instead of standard on/off switches can be a game changer. Dimmers give you more control over brightness, help save energy and create a more comfortable atmosphere. Not all bulbs are dimmable, so double check labels before buying.

Fixtures: form meets function

Bulbs are only part of the equation. Fixtures matter, too. Each type serves a purpose. Ambient lighting, like sconces or glass-covered ceiling fixtures, provides general illumination. Task lighting, like pendants, desk lamps or track lighting, focuses light where you need it most.

When choosing a fixture, think beyond looks. Ask yourself: Does this light provide the right amount of brightness for the space? A beautiful chandelier might look perfect over the dining table, but leave the rest of



the room too dim. Alternatively, an oversized fixture could flood the room with more light than you need, wasting both energy and money.

Smart lighting

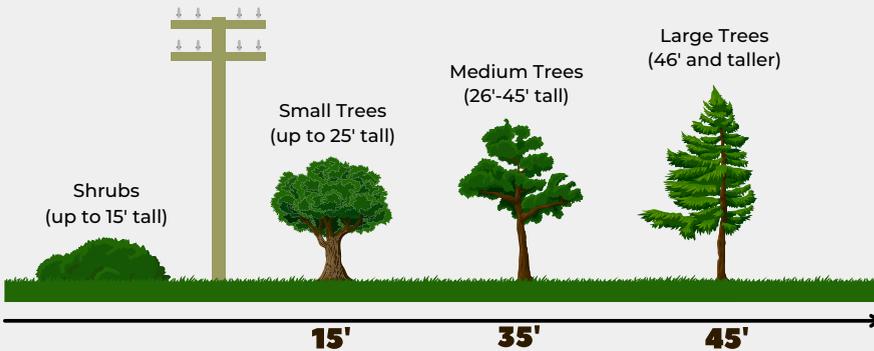
Smart lighting adds another layer of control for illuminating your home. But the real magic is convenience. With smart bulbs, you can adjust brightness, set schedules or even change colors, all from your phone or a voice assistant like Alexa or Google Assistant. Want the lights to dim automatically for movie night? Or to turn on before you get home? Smart bulbs make it easy.

Smart lighting also lets you personalize your space. You can go classic with warm white tones or experiment with colors to set the mood, with anything from a soft glow for winding down to vibrant hues for a party. Remember, smart bulbs still rely on power from your wall switch, which needs to stay in the “on” position for remote controls to work. If you prefer using a physical switch, consider pairing smart bulbs with a smart light switch. Many of today's smart switches also come with motion detectors, adding another level of efficiency and convenience.

Good lighting doesn't just make your home look better, it makes your home feel better, too. With a little planning, you can create spaces that are welcoming, functional and energy efficient. Whether you stick to traditional bulbs and fixtures or explore the flexibility of smart lighting, thoughtful choices today will brighten your home for years to come. ■

Plant the **RIGHT TREE** in the **RIGHT PLACE**

The larger the tree, the farther it should be from a power line. Avoid planting beneath power lines, near poles or close to electrical equipment.



Remember, know what's below by calling 811 before you dig.

Selecting a tree? Know mature height before planting

If you are considering planting a tree, carefully select its location before you begin digging. Also, call 811 before you break ground to get underground utilities marked. If trees are planted in the wrong location, they can be expensive to maintain and even dangerous.

A mature height of fewer than 15 feet is recommended if planting near lines. Trees should never be planted directly under power lines, near poles or too close to electrical equipment.

Once you have a tree selected, call 811 before putting a shovel to the ground. The "Call Before You Dig" number is a free service to locate and mark public underground utilities. You must call at least two full business days before you plan to dig to give the locators enough time to mark the lines. The locators will mark public underground utilities, such as electric, gas, water, cable and fiber. The service does not mark privately owned lines or pipes. ■

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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:

"Cyber threats to electricity infrastructure such as substations and even the power grid itself are a growing concern for utilities. What can Congress do to develop a more comprehensive cybersecurity strategy to protect critical infrastructure like electricity?"

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



Senator Daines

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Senator Steve Daines

UNLEASHING made-in-America energy has been a hallmark priority of mine for years. It bolsters our economy, supports millions of jobs, decreases our reliance on foreign nations, strengthens our electric grid and protects our national security. The demand for U.S. energy is expected to grow at least 50 percent over the next 25 years. It's critical that we do everything we can to support more Made-In-America energy and strengthen our electric grid so we are prepared for this growth in demand and maintain our energy dominance in an increasingly competitive global market.

To meet the increase in demand for electricity, we must support an all-of-the-above energy portfolio that increases American energy on all fronts—from coal and natural gas to hydro, wind and solar. That's why I fought so hard to reverse Joe Biden's anti-energy rules that would have put Montana's Colstrip Power Plant out of business. Thanks to the

leadership of President Trump, the power plant will remain operational. I also fought to protect funding for the Calumet Refinery in Great Falls, which provides good-paying Montana jobs and is critical to our energy dominance.

As technology evolves, it's essential that we strengthen our energy independence and cybersecurity to defend our electric grid from any threats. Back in 2020, President Trump signed my bill into law that requires cybersecurity standards for Internet-connected devices bought by the U.S. government, which puts the proper protections in place to keep our national security safe from cyber threats. We also need to ensure proper funding for research and development in technology, so that America remains at the forefront of cutting-edge tech and can counter any malign influences.

I will always fight to protect Montana's energy security and work toward a secure, safe future. RM



Senator Sheehy

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Senator Tim Sheehy

ENERGY security is national security. Threats to our electricity infrastructure — from substations to the broader power grid — are a serious national security concern. We must thwart these threats to keep the lights on for Montana families, small businesses and rural communities, and to fuel America's 21st-century economy without disruption.

Emerging technologies, from AI to data centers, quantum computing, crypto and more, will drive exponential demand for baseload electricity over the next 20 years. These generational technological advances will create jobs, economic growth and prosperity, but only if we can securely meet that demand.

Our mission is clear and twofold. First, increase energy supply to keep pace with rising demand. Second, harden our grid against threats so electricity continues to flow reliably and safely.

Montanans voted to unleash Montana's resource economy, protect Montana jobs and make energy affordable, accessible and reliable again. From pass-

ing pro-energy provisions in the Working Families Tax Cuts Act to putting an end to radical Biden-era regulations that put our resource economy on life support, Montana's delegation is delivering on this commonsense agenda. And we're just getting started.

As a member of the Armed Services and Commerce, Science and Transportation committees, I'm positioned to ensure that Congress works alongside appropriate federal, state and local partners, and invests in the research, resources and technology needed to safeguard critical infrastructure. Delivering commonsense solutions to secure America's future remains my top priority in the U.S. Senate, including policies that defend our grid and electricity infrastructure.

Thank you for serving Montanans each day. Your work is essential to our state's future, and it is the honor of my life to represent you. Please do not hesitate to reach out to my office for assistance and support. RM

Montana Red Cross in need of volunteers

Co-op couple among those donating their time

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

MANY Montanans donate blood through the Red Cross, but did you know the nonprofit organization is looking for volunteers to do everything from dispatch to disaster response?

“Ninety percent of our workforce is volunteer,” said Matt Ochsner, communications director for Red Cross of Montana, Idaho and Eastern Oregon. “The more volunteers we have, the more folks we can serve.”

He noted that more than 400 volunteers statewide put in upwards of 36,000 hours last year.

“Home fires are our number-one disaster,” Ochsner said. “We respond to home fires from Libby to Plentywood.”

One co-op couple who has responded to house fires and other disasters is Mike and Barbara Gumbert of Kalispell, who are Flathead Electric Cooperative members.

Barbara, 77, was an operating room nurse for 35 years, who wanted to continue to help others, which she felt was the Lord’s calling for her, even after retirement.

“When I retired, I felt that I still had time and the experience to help other people,” she said. “So when I retired, I went to volunteer with the Red Cross.”

While Barbara is able to use her years of medical experience by responding to disasters and providing healthcare, Ochsner noted there are myriads of volunteer jobs available — with no training or medical experience necessary.

“We provide services, but one of the biggest things we provide is a hug,” he said.

Ochsner added that people can



March is Red Cross Month

To volunteer: call (800) REDCROSS or go online to www.redcross.org/montana

volunteer for a few hours a month up to several hours a week. They can be available as needed or take a six-hour shift as a duty officer, which basically acts as a dispatcher for Red Cross volunteers and services.

“Red Cross will provide free training,” for any position, he said.

Volunteer opportunities include duty

Flathead Electric Cooperative members Mike and Barbara Gumbert of Kalispell volunteer for the Red Cross at shelters and by driving donated blood where it is needed, among other duties.

officers, helping at temporary shelters during floods and wildfires, and responding to disasters such as house fires.

Another opportunity is transporting blood, which Mike Gumbert does frequently, driving much-needed donated blood from Kalispell to Great Falls more than 200 times to date.

Helping Others

The Gumberts have volunteered for Red Cross in Washington, Ohio and Montana, and find it rewarding.

“I enjoy the fact that I can assist and help people. I know the Lord is with me and helping me get done what I need to get done,” Barbara said.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

THE MONTANA CHAPTER OF THE RED CROSS IN FY2025

“I don’t think we’ve run into a single client that hasn’t been grateful for the Red Cross assistance,” Mike said. “The sheer outpouring of gratitude is so gratifying and amazing... Just the sheer gratitude for yourself, the gratitude and personal satisfaction from being able to help, that the Red Cross gives you the tools and the training you need to be able to go out and face the client and be able to help them in a desperate time of need.”

In addition to transporting blood or helping with health needs, the Gumberts are among those volunteers who set up shelters and perform intake functions for the Red Cross.

“Whenever they have a disaster, they have us help them out immediately. We always do intake, open shelters, just whatever we can do,” Barbara said.

She also has helped children who have breathing issues get their breathing equipment replaced following a house fire. Barbara said medications, glasses and hearing aids are other items that often need replaced.

Ochsner said the Red Cross has also provided money to displaced families to get a place to stay, as well as replaced work boots, cellphones or clothes. Anything they need to get back on their feet quickly, Ochsner said.

A Growing Need

Ochsner said volunteers are needed across the Treasure State, particularly

in rural areas — and especially in eastern Montana. While volunteers statewide and from neighboring states will respond to a major disaster such as the flooding in Libby earlier this year, local volunteers are needed when a house fire happens.

The Gumberts said they can see relief on the faces of victims when they are given a Red Cross Comfort Kit, which may include bottles of water, blankets and toys for kids in the family.

It’s the first step to getting back to what life was like before the fire, and it’s a sign that someone cares and will be with them as they start that journey.

“Oftentimes we get back more than we give. We run into those people a month or two later,” and they are doing well, Mike said. “It’s rewarding. The Lord is taking care of them as well.”

In co-op country, Ochsner said areas near Sidney, Medicine Lake, Glasgow, Circle and Jordan are all hurting for volunteers. But, any area would welcome new help.

If you don’t have the time or interest in volunteering, you can still help your neighbors. Nationwide, more than 500 blood drives were canceled between Jan. 1 and Feb. 6, meaning approximately 20,000 units of blood that are typically collected were not.

“Raise your hand, roll up your sleeve and donate blood,” Ochsner said. RM



408 volunteers made up 90 percent of the workforce and contributed **36,614 hours.**



Gave **667 people** food, shelter and other support following **187 disasters.**



Collected **51,489 units** of lifesaving blood at **2,176 blood drives.**



The Service to the Armed Forces team supported **7,987 military families.**



With Red Cross partners, installed **364 free smoke alarms** and made **143 homes** safer.



Taught **8,876 people** lifesaving skills, including CPR and first aid.

THE ASK A MANAGER PANEL



MATT HAGGERTY
PARK ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE



TREVOR PARKE
VIGILANTE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE



BRAD BAUMAN
SUN RIVER ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

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 is one thing I need to know about co-ops

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

This month we introduce our new panel for 2026: Matt Haggerty, manager of Park Electric Cooperative in Livingston; Trevor Parke, manager of Vigilante Electric Coop-

erative in Dillon; and Brad Bauman, manager of Sun River Electric Cooperative in Fairfield.

This month's question is:
Q: "What is one thing I need to know about electric cooperatives?"



BRAD BAUMAN SUN RIVER ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

In my mind the most important aspect of a cooperative that needs to be understood is the fact that the organization is owned by the people who receive the service from the business. Having that direct relationship with the cooperative and the member/owner is unique and healthy.

Other business models lend themselves to creating margins or profits for investors. Electric cooperatives generate margins to pay for the operations of the organization, and any margins leftover from paying the operating costs are allocated back to the members in the form of capital credits that will be paid back to the member/owner. What a wonderful concept!

As a member/owner, being able to talk directly to the management and personnel creates a healthier environment for exchanging ideas and creating trust in the operation and the purpose of the organization. The answers that the member/owner receives from the conversations may not always be in line with how the member feels or believes, but at least they have the

opportunity to hear the position of the cooperative and the "why."

The representation that the member/owner gets through the election of the board of trustees that represent them in monthly board meetings, state, regional and national organizations, and strategic planning sessions opens the door for additional member opportunities. Knowing that the member has a seat at the table should give the member/owners a healthier outlook on the purpose and means of operation of the organization.

Cementing the member/owner concept is paramount in having the cooperative model function as it has always been meant to. The continued education and promotion of these ideas should be a part of every electric cooperative's member/owner communication. It is what makes us special and unique. It is who we are. It is what makes us stronger and successful.

Thank you, member/owners, we are proud and honored to serve you. BM

MATT HAGGERTY PARK ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

THIS is a fantastic question, and one that more people should ask. While there are definitely many aspects that I would want cooperative members to know, I will highlight a few key points that truly set electric cooperatives apart.

First, electric cooperatives are not-for-profit, member-owned organizations. Unlike for-profit utilities, cooperatives do not exist to generate profits for their shareholders. Instead, they charge just slightly above their operating cost. Any excess funds remaining at the end of the year are allocated as capital credits, which are returned to our members.

These credits are generally retired on a 15- to 30-year cycle, depending on the cooperative's financial condition. In addition to our standard retirement schedule, Park Electric members also have the option to receive a portion of their capital credits early through a discounted capital-credit program. In general, most cooperatives retire outstanding capital credits as long as their board of trustees deems the cooperative financially stable. This structure ensures members pay only the cooperative's operating costs without any added profit margins.

The reason for the 15- to 30-year cycle is that coopera-

tives use these margins as a way to help fund infrastructure projects on the electrical system as a zero-interest loan from their membership. It then repays that money back to its members at the end of the term.

Another essential principle I feel everyone should understand is democratic member control. Cooperatives are founded on the ideals of democracy. Every member has an equal voice in decisions that affect the organization, including electing the board of trustees, approving policies and shaping the cooperative's future. Every member receives one vote, regardless of how much electricity they use.

This democratic structure ensures fairness, encourages member participation and holds elected leaders accountable. When members know their voices matter, they are more engaged and invested in the success of their cooperative. If concerns arise, members have the power to address them collectively, ensuring decisions are made in the best interest of the entire membership.

Understanding the cooperative difference helps members see how unique this model truly is. Electric cooperatives are built on fairness, accountability and local control, ensuring the focus remains on service, not profit. RM

TREVOR PARKE VIGILANTE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

ELECTRIC cooperatives are built on trust, community and member ownership. Every electric consumer is also a member/owner, giving them a voice in setting policies and making key decisions. Unlike investor owned utilities (IOUs), which are for-profit companies focused on maximizing returns for shareholders, cooperatives operate on a not-for-profit model dedicated to serving local communities, often in rural areas where access to affordable power was once limited and not profitable for IOUs.

Cooperatives are governed by a board of trustees elected by the membership. These trustees are fellow member/owners who live in the same communities they represent. Their role is to guide the cooperative responsibly, ensuring decisions reflect local priorities. Because cooperatives are not driven by profit, revenues are used to maintain and improve the system, cover operating costs and invest in infrastructure. Any excess is returned to members as capital credits.

Employees and trustees share a deep commitment to their communities. Many live within or near the service areas, and therefore understand firsthand the importance of safe, reliable and affordable electricity.

It's common to find cooperative trustees and employees volunteering, serving other local organizations or supporting community initiatives. They see their work as part of strengthening the places they call home.

Support for local communities is a core cooperative principle. Many cooperatives regularly contribute to schools, fire departments, student programs, scholarships, community events and local charities. They also help fund energy-assistance programs and provide aid to individuals and families facing hardship. In many cases, a portion of each power bill directly supports these community-focused efforts.

Electricity is an essential service and cooperatives take reliability seriously. Crews are available 24/7/365 to restore power as quickly and safely as possible during outages. Cooperatives also support one another during storms and emergencies, sending crews wherever needed. This spirit of cooperation extends beyond local boundaries. Cooperatives work together regionally, nationally and even internationally to improve service quality, strengthen local economies and address broader community needs. RM

Photo submitted by
Martha Notess

1st
PLACE

Lamb and Mint Hand Pies

Martha Notess | KALISPELL

INGREDIENTS

DOUGH:
2 cups plus 1 T flour,
divided
1 tsp. salt, divided
10 T cold butter, cut into
small pieces
7-8 T ice water

FILLING:
1 lb. ground lamb
1 carrot, finely chopped

1 small onion, finely
chopped
½ cup beef broth
1 tsp. Dijon or deli
mustard
¼ tsp. black pepper
½ cup (2 oz.) shredded
Irish cheddar cheese
1 T chopped fresh mint
1 egg, lightly beaten

DIRECTIONS

FOR DOUGH:

Combine 2 cups flour and ½ tsp salt in medium bowl. Cut in butter. Add water, 1 T at a time, stirring with fork until loose dough forms. Knead dough until it comes together.

Divide dough into four pieces; press each into a 5-inch disc. Wrap dough with plastic and freeze for 15 minutes.

PREPARE FILLING:

Cook lamb in skillet over medium-high heat, 7-8 minutes, stirring. Drain well, remove to bowl.

Add onion and carrot to skillet; cook 2-3 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Add in lamb and 1 T flour; cook and stir 1 minute.

Add broth, mustard, ½ tsp salt and pepper; cook over medium heat until thick-

ened, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat; stir in mint. Cool 10 minutes. Stir in cheese.

TO BAKE:

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line baking sheet with parchment.

Roll out dough on lightly floured surface. Cut out 4 circles (per disc) with 5-inch round cookie cutter.

Place half of the dough circles on prepared baking sheet. Top each with lamb filling, leaving 1/2-inch border around edge.

Top with remaining dough circles, pressing edges to seal. Press edges again with fork tines. Brush tops with beaten egg; cut 1-inch slit in top.

Bake 28-30 minutes, until golden brown; serve hot or at room temp.



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 April send your favorite recipe that uses cream cheese by March 16. Please send in May recipes anytime: You favorite dish that is saucy/gravy. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

2nd
PLACE

Stuffed Cabbage Rolls

Nicole Watkins | LAUREL

INGREDIENTS

1 large head of cabbage,
cored
1 T butter
2 medium onions,
chopped
3/4 lb. ground beef
1/2 lb. ground pork
sausage

1 cup rice, cooked
1/2 tsp. allspice
1 can (28 oz.) tomatoes
1 can (8 oz.) tomato sauce
1 can (6 oz.) tomato paste
1 tsp. salt
1/2 tsp. garlic salt
1 tsp. thyme

DIRECTIONS

In a large pot, steam cabbage until the leaves are softened enough to peel away, 10 min. Separate leaves, shake off water.

Melt butter in a skillet and saute onions.

Add half the onions to a bowl, combine with beef, sausage, rice and allspice, gently with your hands.

To the remaining onions in

the skillet, add the tomatoes, tomato sauce, paste, salt and seasonings. Simmer for 15 minutes.

Roll a small amount of meat mixture in each cabbage leaf. Place rolls, in a buttered baking dish.

Cover with tomato mixture and bake uncovered for 1 hour in a 350 degree oven.

Serve with sour cream.

3rd
PLACE

Irish Soda Bread

Teresa Gaylord | KALISPELL

INGREDIENTS

3 cups all-
purpose flour
1 T baking powder
1/3 cup sugar
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. baking
soda
1 egg, lightly
beaten
2 cups buttermilk
1/2 cup butter,
melted

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 325 degrees.

Combine dry ingredients in a large bowl. In another bowl, blend egg and buttermilk. Add to flour mixture. Mix until moistened. Add butter.

Pour into greased 9x5-inch loaf pan.

Bake 65-70 minutes, or until toothpick inserted comes out clean.

Cool on a wire rack. Remove from pan and wrap in foil for several hours, or overnight for best flavor.

NORTHWEST

March 1

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

March 14-15

NWMT Rock & Gem Show — Kalispell Fairgrounds, Sat: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 250-1936 | **KALISPELL**

March 16

Westerners Int'l presents "Shelby: Jack Dempsey's Biggest Bout" by Tim Christenson — Northwest Montana History Museum, 6:30 to 8 p.m., 309-0958 | **KALISPELL**

March 18

Flathead Valley Community Band "Celebrating America's 250th - Thru the Ages" Concert — Flathead High School Auditorium, 7:30 p.m., 270-1696 | **KALISPELL**

March 18

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

SOUTHEAST

February 25-March 1

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

March 12

Transportation & Industry City College Expo — For high school students, register online at www.msubitillings.edu/future/springexpos.htm | **BILLINGS**

March 13-14

Glendive Agri-Trade Expo — Eastern Plains Event Center, Fri: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sat: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. | **GLENDIVE**

March 27

MSU Billings Preview Day — Come check out MSUB during Preview Day, explore campus, programs and student life all in one visit. Register online at msubitillings.edu/future/previewday | **BILLINGS**

March 21-22

Kalispell Weekend Market — Flathead County Fairgrounds Expo Building, Sat: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sun: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. | **KALISPELL**

April 2

Spring into Health and Safety Fair — All ages, Bigfork Senior Center, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., free CPR/AED class on site from 9 to 10 a.m., | **KALISPELL**

April 9-12

Pondera Players presents Fiddler on the Roof — Orpheum Theatre, Thurs-Sat: 7 p.m., Sun: 2 p.m. | **CONRAD**

April 10-12

60th Annual Creston Auction & County Fair — Hwy. 35, Fri (consignment day): 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., Sat (general auction): begins 9 a.m., Sun (vehicle, equipment and marine): begins 11 a.m., 250-7396. | **CRESTON**

April 18

Teakettle Quilt Guild 2026 Quilt Show — Glacier Gateway Elementary School, 9 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., 249-7216 | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

April 11

Ben Larson: "Off the Beaten Path: The Lost History of Montana" — O'Fallon Historical Museum, 6 to 8 p.m., 778-3265 | **BAKER**

April 18

PEAKS Style Show & Luncheon — Benefits cancer patients. Raffles, door prizes, art auction, St. Bernard Catholic Church, prior ticket purchase or RSVP required, 697-1098 | **BILLINGS**

May 2

High Tea at the Museum with Fallon County Community Theater — O'Fallon Historical Museum, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., 778-3265 | **BAKER**

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 March 16 for April events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.**

SOUTHWEST

March 6

Hot Springs Adult Soak & Fun Night — Cultivating Connections MT at Sleeping Child Hot Springs, 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. CultivatingConnectionsMT.org | **HAMILTON**

March 7

Women's Wellness Retreat — CCMT at Sleeping Child Hot Springs, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. CultivatingConnectionsMT.org | **HAMILTON**

March 8

Sunday Family Swim Day — CCMT at Sleeping Child Hot Springs, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. or 3 to 7 p.m., CultivatingConnectionsMT.org | **HAMILTON**

March 14

Easter Market — Craft Market, Ravalli County Fairgrounds, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 360-6743 | **HAMILTON**

March 18-22

Western Heritage Art Show — Holiday Inn Convention Center, Wed: preview night: 6 to 9 p.m., Thurs-Sat: 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sun: 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., 590-2377 | **GREAT FALLS**

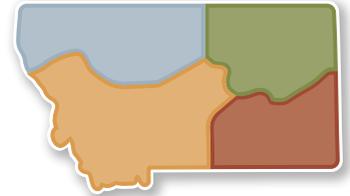
NORTHEAST

March 21

Slam the Dam 10 — Non-competitive Fun Run/Walk across Fort Peck Dam, Registration is at 9 a.m., run/walk begins at 10 a.m., 480-9057 | **FORT PECK**

March 27

Schmeckfest — German festival of tasting followed by entertainment and silent and live auction, Lustre Christian High School, 5 to 7 p.m., 392-5735 | **LUSTRE**



March 21-22

Hellgate Mineral Society presents Treasures of the Northwest — 31st annual gem, mineral, fossil, bead and lapidary show and sale, Hilton Garden Inn, Sat: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. | **MISSOULA**

March 27-28

Naomi Spring Bazaar — Victor School Cafeteria, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 544-6383 | **VICTOR**

April 4

American Legion Post and Auxiliary Annual Easter Egg Hunt — Lewis and Clark Park, 10 a.m. sharp, 369-8843 | **STEVENSVILLE**

April 18

Spring Market — Craft Market, Ravalli County Fairgrounds, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 360-6743 | **HAMILTON**

April 18

Rummage Sale — Puzzles, games, craft supplies, Three Mile Community Center, 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., 360-3385 | **STEVENSVILLE**

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 SPRING DRAWINGS
AND POEMS**



Silas Shofner, 10, Eureka | LINCOLN ELECTRIC

Audrianna Bernard, 12 | VIGILANTE ELECTRIC



HAPPY ST. PATRICK'S
Day!



Sophia Myers, 7, Billings | YELLOWSTONE VALLEY ELECTRIC

Damian Soss, 15, Somers | 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.



▲
Snowy Perch

A bird's feathers fluff out in the wind as snow falls.
Photo by Gloria Allwin of Boyd.

Winter Watchman

An eagle sits in a snow-covered tree.
Photo by Kelly Williams of Kalispell.

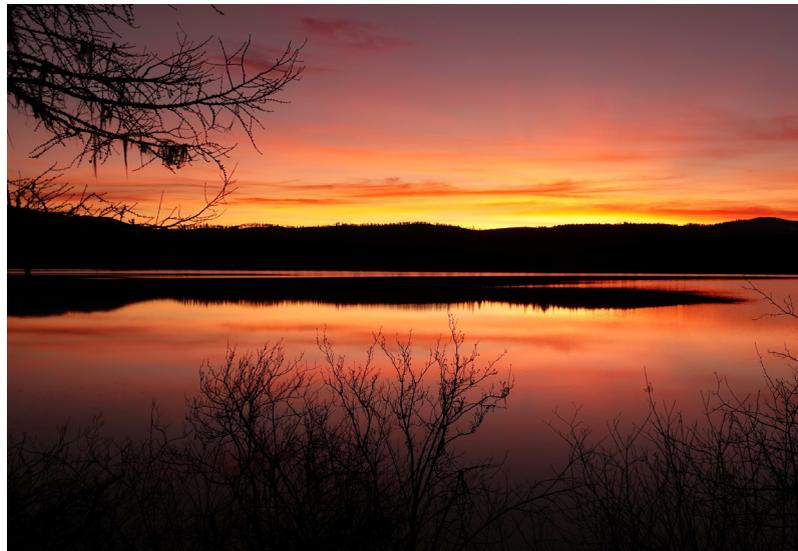


▲
Moon 'Light'

A power pole is in silhouette against the moon.
Photo by Adam Bowser of Lewistown.

Sunset Over Seeley

The sun sets at Seeley Lake.
Photo by Katie Hickman of Seeley Lake.





The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

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