



Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | AUGUST 2025



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Rural Montana

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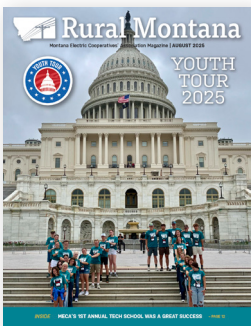
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COVER

About our cover: The
Youth Tour participants
from Montana pose in
front of the U.S. Capitol.
**Photo by Maggie Mader,
Tongue River Electric**



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Co-ops have come a long way

MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association



CENTRAL Montana Electric Power Cooperative Manager Doug Hardy and I had the privilege of speaking at the 80th Annual Meeting of McCone Electric Cooperative in early July. After the meeting, I was approached by a charming elderly lady who told me, "I liked what you had to say, but I *really* liked that other feller."

She told me she grew up on a farm near Circle in the 1930s without electricity, and really appreciated all we did to keep the lights on. She said having electricity made her family's life so much better, and added a story about how the neighbors were wary of "getting the juice in their house," certain they'd get burned by the wires.


This encounter started me thinking about the power pioneers who worked so hard to form co-ops, stand up poles and stretch wire across hundreds of miles to help family, friends and neighbors have better lives.

I think about how far we've come from the time when people like the lady I met in Circle, and my own parents and grandparents, lived without electricity. Their situation was shared by most of rural Montana. When the state's first electric

cooperative was formed in Ravalli County in 1936, only 6 percent of Montana farms had electricity. Other co-ops formed around the state over the following decade, electrifying more than 90 percent of Montana farms within 21 years.

Co-ops today have highly trained personnel operating sophisticated equipment that couldn't have been imagined 80 years ago to serve the ever-increasing demand for power. Yet their mission remains the same: delivering safe, affordable, reliable electricity to Montana's homes, farms, ranches and businesses.

As the new CEO, I'm well aware of the awesome responsibility I have to honor the legacy of those who electrified rural Montana, and to help MECA's members continue to be able to accomplish their mission. The MECA team is fully committed to giving co-op members our best every day to secure a bright future for rural Montana.

To my friend from Circle — if you happen to read this, please get ahold of me at mark@mtco-ops.com or 406-761-8333. I'd really like to hear more of your story. 

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Meet new MECA CEO Mark Lambrecht

MARK Lambrecht has taken the reins as CEO of the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA). He brings with him experience with MECA and electric utilities, and an extensive background in government affairs.

"I am very grateful to the MECA board, staff and members for entrusting me to lead the organization to a future of sustained success. I'm fully committed to giving co-ops my best every day to help them meet their obligations to provide safe, affordable and reliable electricity to their members," Lambrecht said.

Montana roots

A lifelong Montanan, Lambrecht grew up in Billings and Missoula and graduated from Billings Central Catholic High School in 1985. From there, Lambrecht's studies took him to Gonzaga University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in political science. After graduating, he moved to Washington, D.C., to advise U.S. Sen. Max Baucus on natural resource issues. He moved back to Missoula in 1992, to attend graduate school at the University of Montana, earning a master's degree in resource conservation focused on natural resource law and policy.

Lambrecht and his wife Amy have two sons, Lee, 24, and Grant, 27. The family spends a lot of time outdoors hunting, fishing and skiing.

The couple enjoys country swing dancing and attending concerts. Amy enjoys working with her horses in hopes of competing again in shows. Grant is a dentist in Frenchtown, and was a standout competition slope-style skier. Lee is an insurance claims adjuster for the Montana Association



Mark Lambrecht poses with his wife Amy and his two sons, Lee and Grant. | **COURTESY PHOTO**

of Counties in Helena. He was a collegiate bass fisherman and successful high school wrestler. Mark Lambrecht enjoyed coaching both of his sons in youth wrestling and football.

Government

Lambrecht's career first took him to the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, then MSU-TechLink. He then worked for an engineering firm completing environmental permits and planning documents for construction projects.

Lambrecht got his first taste of working for electric utilities when he became the regulatory affairs manager for PPL Montana — his first time lobbying.

"I really enjoyed that job," Lambrecht said. "I got to learn all about coal, hydro and natural gas generation and emergency-action planning, and how to be an effective lobbyist. I was devastated to have been one of the thousands of company employees laid

off during the economic crisis of 2009, but it gave me the opportunity and motivation to start my own consulting business."

His primary consulting clients were the Montana Quality Education Coalition, where he worked on school funding legislation for the state's K-12 public school districts, and the Treasure State Resources Association, where he lobbied on behalf of dozens of natural resource-based industries operating in the state. He also co-founded REAL Montana — the Resource Education & Agriculture Leadership program — at Montana State University.

An avid hunter and outdoorsman, Lambrecht jumped at the chance to work as the first director of government affairs for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation in 2015. He founded the Sportsmen's Caucus at the Montana Legislature, and was one of the primary authors of the Great American Outdoors Act, championed by Sen. Steve Daines and signed by President

Donald Trump in his first term.

Lambrecht was encouraged by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior in 2020 to apply for a top job with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). He started his service as assistant director of national conservation lands for the BLM at the beginning of 2021. He supervised 44 professionals across seven states and Washington, D.C., and oversaw a \$138 million budget to manage more than 38 million acres of federal lands.

Coming home

Lambrecht said that after the administration changed, the BLM director wanted to assign him to a new politically-focused position with a potential move to Washington, D.C. At the same time, a friend at MECA called to tell him its director of government relations position had opened.

"I was very excited to know that opportunity was available," Lambrecht said. "I really enjoyed my time with the BLM and gained valuable high-level management experience, but the opportunity to work with Montana's co-ops was too good to pass up."

Lambrecht was hired in 2022, and has led MECA's government relations team since.

Back to his roots

Lambrecht has a personal connec-



tion to co-ops and the statewide association. His grandfather, George Lackman, was a farmer near Huntley and one of the early members of Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative (YVEC). Lackman became a director at YVEC, then became a board member at what would become MECA, before becoming president of the statewide organization in 1950. One of his initiatives as president was to develop a statewide magazine, which became *Rural Montana*.

"I clearly remember my grandpa George and grandma Kate telling me

how challenging life was on the farm before they had electricity. I feel a deep responsibility to continue what my grandpa and others started back then to improve the lives of rural Montanans," Lambrecht said.

He became more familiar with Montana's electric cooperatives through developing a relationship with MECA lobbyists Gary Wiens and Doug Hardy, while working together during many Montana legislative sessions.

"Gary and Doug left a big impression on me. I admired their effectiveness and integrity. I particularly appreciated their consistent commitment to the best interests of co-op members, no matter the issue," he said.

The next chapter

On July 6, Lambrecht officially became CEO of MECA, succeeding the retiring Wiens.

"It's an unbelievable opportunity to come full circle in my career - understanding where co-ops in this organization started to what they've become," Lambrecht said. "To have a role in helping them grow and face the issues of the future is a responsibility I take seriously."

Lambrecht said the organization is positioned well for the future with an experienced and knowledgeable staff and board of directors, and a supportive membership.

He plans to utilize a strength, weakness, opportunity and threat analysis to identify and implement opportunities to improve the organization and its services to members in the future.

"One other priority is to enhance tribal participation within our organization," Lambrecht said, noting the annual Tribal Relations Summit and work with the Montana American Indian Caucus at the Legislature as examples of this effort.

"I'm committed to bringing to MECA the same energy and commitment to success I've had throughout my career, and I can't wait to get started working with the organization to benefit co-op members throughout the state." RM

Mark Lambrecht and his two sons, Lee and Grant. | COURTESY PHOTO



Youth Tour alum awarded Marine Corps scholarship

BY **RYAN HALL** | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

YOUTH Tour alum and Tongue River Electric Cooperative member Zach Jones recently was awarded one of four nationwide Semper Fidelis Leadership Scholarships.

The scholarship, which was applied for through the Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation, is funded by a Marine veteran and his family. The four winners each receive a \$20,000 scholarship each year for four years, as well as a trip to Chicago to meet the family funding the scholarship.

Jones said he originally applied for a small scholarship through the Marine Corps Scholarship Foundation, which is available to any children or grandchildren of Marines or Marine veterans.

He was told that based on his application, he was eligible for the larger and more prestigious Semper Fidelis Leadership Scholarship.

“That’s a little more of an intensive process,” Jones said.

He said he had to go through a video interview, then a face-to-face interview in order to apply for the scholarship. He was then notified that he was a semi-finalist, then a finalist.

“As you could imagine I was pretty excited when I got the call (that I had won),” Jones said. “I was visiting some family friends at that time, so that night we went out and had a celebratory dinner.”

Jones, a 2024 National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour participant, plans to attend Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where he will major in economics and government.

“I’ll be going right back to where Youth Tour was,” Jones said. “I was actually kind of inspired to apply to Georgetown after visiting D.C. with the Youth Tour.”

After college he may pursue law school, or he might find a new interest as he broadens his horizons.

“I don’t know, but I’ve been interested in possibly becoming a lawyer, so maybe law school or something,” Jones said. “I’m looking forward to finding new interests, and maybe I’ll find something else I want to do.” RM



Youth Tour alumni Zach Jones was awarded the Semper Fidelis Leadership Scholarship. | **COURTESY PHOTOS**



89th annual meeting highlights



Journeyman Lineworker **Cole Jankovsky** gives Billing Coordinator **Margó Zadow** her first ride in the bucket truck.

At the core of every strong community is the spirit of cooperation, with neighbors coming together to reflect on accomplishments and to look ahead to the future. That spirit was on full display at Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative's (LYREC) 89th annual meeting, held June 4 at the newly expanded Richland County Event Center.

This year's event drew a crowd of 340 attendees in person, with an additional 26 members participating virtually.

We offered a new dinner option, with Jerry and Judy Foss serving a picnic-style meal featuring brats, cowboy beans, watermelon, chips and dessert. The change was a hit!

Before the meeting, members had the opportunity to ride in a bucket truck and explore LYREC's high-voltage safety demonstration trailer, offering a hands-on look at the importance of electrical safety.

President's report

Following the meal, President Allen Thiessen provided an update on LYREC's financials, affirming LYREC is in strong financial standing. He noted the retired capital credits will be returned to members in December.

He discussed the growth experienced in our area and addressed a rate increase by LYREC, which was

driven by the wholesale power costs. Thiessen also reported the Western Area Power Administration is considering an additional rate increase to fund dam improvements and infrastructure upgrades.

CEO's report

CEO Jason Brothen reported on the important role the region's growth has played over the last 20 years in LYREC's service territory regarding the ability to upgrade infrastructure without putting a large burden on the membership rates.

Brothen reported on recent and upcoming projects, including the new Hunter substation and the new switchyard. He also reported on the new construction underway on the McGinnis substation. Brothen stressed the importance of exploring all types of generation resources to ensure a stable and reliable electric grid.

continued on next page



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Aubree Johnson, Lauren Kjos, Reece Graves, Cade Tombre, Hallie Schantz, Kinley Wieland, Sloane Tuck, Robert Knotts, Lauren Prevost and Wyatt McPherson were awarded \$1,000 scholarships for submitting scenic photos of LYREC's service territory. Not pictured are Dalton Bouchard, Ella Norby and Hailey Holzworth.

He gave service awards and recognized Preston Long for his career achievement in earning his journeyman lineworker status. Brothen also thanked the Operation Round Up board members for their service and the success of the program.

Guest speakers

Brothen interviewed Brent Battenfeld, a Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative lineworker, and Ryan Hall, the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association *Rural Montana* editor, about their volunteer work in Guatemala earlier this year through the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's International Program.

Election and bylaw results

Attorney Jean Faure reported Tim Franzen was reelected to represent District 3 and Dennis Schmierer was reelected to represent District 4. Faure also reported all proposed bylaw amendments passed.

Scholarships

Member Service Manager Jami Propp announced the 13 \$1,000 scholarship winners. The winners were Aubree Johnson, Cade Tombre, Dalton Bouchard, Ella Norby, Hailey Holzworth, Hallie Schantz, Kinley Wieland, Lauren Kjos, Lauren Prevost, Reece Graves, Robert Knotts, Sloane Tuck and Wyatt McPherson.

Annual meeting video

If you weren't able to attend this year's annual meeting, you can still catch all the highlights. A full recording is available on LYREC's website under the "2025 Annual Meeting" tab.

We thank all who attended both in person and online. We look forward to continuing to serve our members in the year ahead. ■



Blayke Williamson and **Andrew Buxbaum**, held by his big brother, **Carter Buxbaum**, were the lucky bike winners at LYREC's annual meeting.

Budget billing: Sign up through August

Cooler weather will be here before you know it. Heating requires more energy than any other system in your home, typically making up about 42% of your energy bill.

Budget billing is available to all residential members who have an “A” credit rating and have established a 12-month history with Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative (LYREC). The member can remain on budget billing if the account stays current.

To determine your budget billing amount, LYREC will average your current and last 11 months of bills. Therefore, there will be variations each month, but the change will not be as extreme and will make budgeting easier.

If you would like to sign up for budget billing, call LYREC’s office to see if you qualify. You will need to submit an application before Aug. 31. To get a form, stop by the office or go to www.lyrec.coop. ■

Three technologies to help save energy

BY ABBY BERRY



Smart technologies make our homes more comfortable, convenient and energy efficient. By connecting your home Wi-Fi network, smart devices automate everyday tasks, such as lighting, heating, cooling and home security. They can even communicate with other smart devices in the home.

While not all smart home products are specifically designed with energy savings in mind, there are several smart technologies that can help you lower home energy use. Here are the top three smart home devices to help you save.

Smart thermostats

Smart or not, your thermostat is the most effective tool for controlling energy use, as heating and cooling typically account for the largest portion of energy bills. Smart thermostats allow you to adjust the indoor temperature through an app, giving you full control from anywhere on the go. Many smart thermostats include learning capabilities and will adjust the thermostat based on previous behavior and patterns.

According to the U.S. Department of Energy, smart thermostats can reduce heating and cooling bills by more than 8% annually, and with models as low as \$65, they typically pay for themselves in one year.

Smart lighting

Smart LED bulbs use less electricity than traditional bulbs and can be scheduled or turned off or on remotely through a smartphone app. Smart bulbs are available in a range of shapes, brightness levels, colors and more, so shop for the products that work best for your home lighting needs.

Many smart bulbs include motion sensors that turn on or off based on room activity, further optimizing home energy use. If you’re new to smart lighting, try a home starter kit. Prices for kits range from \$70 to more than \$300, depending on how many bulbs you need.

Smart plugs

Smart plugs are inexpensive gadgets that can help you save energy. Many electronic devices consume power even when they are turned off (known as “phantom load”), which can take a toll on your energy bills. Smart plugs are simply plugged into an electrical outlet and connected to your Wi-Fi network. The smart plug can cut power (or return power) to non-smart devices, like coffeemakers, phone chargers and other items that draw phantom load.

Many smart plugs can be paired with popular smart hubs, like Alexa or Google Nest, or controlled through the plug’s associated app. Smart plugs are simple to use and a set of four can be purchased for as little as \$25.

If you’re looking for new ways to save energy, try these budget-friendly, convenient smart home technologies. ■

Operation Round Up grants



Operation Round Up Trustee **Heidi Moran** presents **Heather Nevins**, Richland County Cancer Coalition, with a check for \$1,500 to assist with the cost of bringing the Sun Bus to Sidney Aug. 16-17. The Sun Bus is a mobile clinic that offers free skin cancer screenings, education and prevention resources. In 2024, the Sun Bus screened 98 individuals, with 35 of them receiving referrals for followup care.



Cynthia Misner, founder of Prairie to Peaks Animal Assistance Foundation (PPAAF), receives a \$500 check from Operation Round Up Trustee **Wendy Johnson**. PPAAF's mission is to support animal wellness by providing spay/neuter services, vaccinations and emergency care, and fostering abandoned pets until they find their forever homes. ■



Discounts offered for Medora vacation

Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative is able to offer its members discounts in Medora by being a Touchstone Energy® member. Simply call 800-MEDORA-1 and give the discount code of "TOUCH2025" for a 15% discount on all of the following during any night of the season.

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- Medora Campground

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3200 W. Holly - Sidney, MT 59270

Phone: 406-488-1602

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MONTANA U.S. REPRESENTATIVES

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 representatives. Next month, we will ask a question of the state's two senators.

THIS MONTH'S QUESTION:

During a recent wildfire summit in Montana, a meteorologist shared a forecast of above-average temperatures and below-average precipitation through the summer and into the fall. With all signs pointing to an active fire season, what can be done on the congressional level to help Montana if these forecasts come to fruition?

THE SAME QUESTION WAS ASKED TO MONTANA'S TWO U.S. SENATORS IN RM'S LAST MONTH'S EDITION

**Rep. Downing**

1037 Longworth, House
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Washington, D.C. 20515
<https://downing.house.gov>
Ph: (202) 225-3211?

Representative Troy Downing

RESponsible forest management is top of mind for every Montanan, especially during fire season. Since taking office, I've supported several measures that promote responsible stewardship of our forests.

One of the first major steps we took in the House was passing the Fix Our Forests Act, a landmark reform aimed at restoring active management practices and helping prevent catastrophic wildfires.

More recently, Senator Sheehy's Aerial Firefighting Enhancement Act of 2025 was signed into law by President Donald Trump. I was proud to vote "yea" on this bill when it came to the House and cosponsored the House companion bill. I'm confident this legislation will bring much-needed support to our aerial firefighting teams.

In June, President Trump signed an Executive Order to strengthen wildfire prevention and response, an unprecedented move that underscores his commitment to this issue. The order

directs improvements in mapping and data-sharing, expedites the transfer of surplus aircraft and identifies burdensome regulations that hinder wildfire mitigation. These common-sense reforms reflect the importance of federal, state and local cooperation.

Lastly, Secretary Rollins' recent rescission of the Roadless Rule marks a significant win for Montana. Previously, 58 percent of Montana's national forest lands were tied up under this rule. Its removal opens the door to responsible management, road access and much-needed infrastructure work in areas that have long been neglected.

Montanans can rest assured — I will continue working with the Montana delegation and the Trump Administration to restore sound forest-management practices. Together, we'll find common-sense, Montana-made solutions that strengthen wildfire readiness, protect our natural resources and keep our communities safe. **RM**

**Rep. Zinke**

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Representative Ryan Zinke

I have been working hard on these issues since being elected to Congress, and have recently taken some serious steps in the right direction in an effort to manage our forests better and prevent the large-scale fires that are all too common in Montana.

I've long said that overregulation is one of the biggest obstacles to proper forest management and wildfire prevention. That's why, in this year's Fix Our Forests Act, I introduced language to ease restrictions on building roads on public lands, a common-sense solution to a problem that has hampered timber access and needlessly complicated wildfire response for years. When you can't build a road or cut a tree, it's impossible to manage our forests effectively or get firefighters where they're needed most.

Another big step was my Aerial Firefighting Enhancement Act, which has now been signed into law. This bill reauthorizes the Department of Defense to sell its excess aircraft for the purpose of aerial firefighting. This will strengthen our fleet and ensure that our brave firefighters have the vehicles and equipment they need to combat the year-round threat of catastrophic wildfires.

Over the last several decades, our forests became overgrown and mismanaged. We all know what needs to be done to prevent wildfires. With the help of the president, House and Senate Republicans are putting in policies and laws that will bolster our ability to fight wildfires quickly and effectively, and prevent the horrible fire seasons we have unfortunately become familiar with in recent years. **RM**

Each year electric cooperatives throughout the state send incoming high school juniors and seniors on an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington, D.C., for a week to learn more about the history of the United States and electric cooperatives.

They visit monuments and museums, meet other electric cooperative youth from across the country and get to ask questions of the state's congressional delegation.

Here is how this year's trip impacted participants, in their own words.

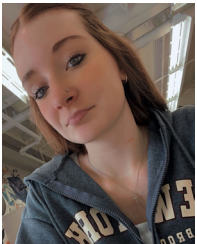
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Send in your essay to win a trip to Washington, D.C., next year. See mtco-ops.com/youthtour.

YOUTH TOUR IN THEIR WORDS

My unforgettable trip to Washington, D.C.

By **MADELINE MORRIS** | *Lincoln Electric Cooperative*



THIS trip meant so much more to me than just visiting Washington, D.C. It taught me that I can accomplish a great deal if I set my mind to it.

I learned this lesson from Mike Schlappi's inspiring speech on Thursday night. Mike has been paralyzed for most of his life, since the beginning of his high school career. He spoke about how he always wanted to give up, describing his thoughts and paralysis as a rock in the middle of his road.

Although he faced moments of doubt, he never gave up. Today, he is encouraging young people like me to keep going, even when life presents obstacles. He taught us that even if people at school make you feel inadequate, you are still capable of achieving great things.

Additionally, witnessing the Changing of the Guard at Arlington National Cemetery was even more breathtaking than I had imagined. Before the trip, I didn't understand the significance of the ceremony, but now I can share the whole story. Watching the Changing of the Guard made me realize that the soldiers who died were not only protectors of our land, but also protectors of our people. They sacrificed their lives for us and our families so we could be here today. Some of these soldiers were unrecognizable due to the injuries inflicted by our enemies. This monument holds great significance for both our history and our future.

In the middle of the week, we took a cruise, where I stepped out of my comfort zone and engaged in conversations with strangers from other states. Most of the cruise attendees were from Colorado, North Dakota, Georgia and Wyoming. That night taught me that it doesn't matter where you come from or what your background is. What truly matters is that people like us were brought together to do amazing things and create lasting memories. We spent the night talking and dancing, forging connections I will cherish forever.

Overall, I loved this trip in many ways, and it will remain etched in my mind for the rest of my life. RM

It's the people

By **MARYSSA SKINNER** | *Missoula Electric*



WHEN looking back on my experience at the 2025 National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour, I'll remember all of the memorials, museums and meals I was lucky enough to enjoy — but even more than that, I'll remember the people who were there to experience it with me.

Going into this trip, I was nervous about one thing: making friends. I jumped into this opportunity knowing no one, but from day one, I made connections I didn't expect to happen so quickly. We started as a group of teenagers from all across Montana, but we were able to connect because of this opportunity we had together.

As the days went on, we slowly learned more about each other and shared more laughs, and it began to feel like I had known them all of my life. One of the coolest things was noticing how the more time we spent together, the more our phones were being put down. At dinner, the conversations became longer and more genuine — and my heart began to grow with a love for these people I didn't see coming.

This was an experience that has truly changed my life for the better. I grew as a person in ways I didn't even know I needed, and I'll forever be amazed by everything this trip gave me. I loved my time in Washington, D.C., but I loved the people I met even more. RM



YOUTH TOUR

Feature | **Youth Tour**

SEE MORE YOUTH TOUR CONTENT ON PAGE 17



How D.C. taught me about electric co-ops

By **MAKENZIE KUJAV** | *Sun River Electric*

This entire trip has been an eye-opener for the amazing things that electric cooperatives accomplish. The fact that all of our electric cooperatives provide the opportunity and financial support to go on this trip shows how much they care. I loved everything that we participated in.

When we got to D.C. on Sunday, we went to a Co-op 101/Advocacy Class. During this class, we got to watch a video about how electric cooperatives started. This opened my eyes to the importance of electric cooperatives in rural areas. We also went over the Seven Cooperative Principles, and it made me realize how electric cooperatives help our communities. Finally, they helped us come up with things to talk about with our senators. They helped us think about problems that affect our communities that may not affect non-rural areas.

On Thursday, we attended the NRECA All States Events. We got to meet some members of the NRECA board and alumni of the Youth Tour. This helped me realize the opportunities this trip, as well as the electric cooperatives, provide for their members. They introduced all of the 2025-2026 Youth Leadership Council participants. They also brought in some speakers. They both talked about facing adversity: mentally and physically. Maggie Martin, the national representative for the Youth Leadership Council, talked about perfectionism and mental health. Mike Schlappi, author and gold medalist, told us his story about getting shot and how he overcame everything. Both of their stories spoke to me, and hearing them inspired me.

These two things that the NRECA put together for the Youth Tour participants made me realize things about electric cooperatives and their relationship to rural communities. The trip's events taught me things that can help me with my future. I loved going on this trip and am extremely grateful for the opportunity. RM



Incredible experience

By **GABRIELLA ZOOK** | *Goldenwest Electric*

If you ever get the opportunity to visit our nation's capital, I suggest you consider taking it. I won't call it a once-in-a-lifetime trip, because I already know that I'll be going back someday. But this experience, made possible by Goldenwest Electric Cooperative, was something entirely unique, and I'm so grateful I got to be a part of it.



This past June, I joined about 1,500 other students across the country for a week in Washington, D.C., as part of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Youth Tour. It was a fast-paced mix of history, landmarks and seriously good food. Our days started early and ended late, filled with learning, walking (so much walking) and trying to take everything in. Although I'm from North Dakota, I traveled with the Montana group since our power comes from a co-op in Wibaux.

Over the course of the week, we visited 25-30 major sites, including the White House, the Library of Congress, the National Archives and the Supreme Court. A couple of our evenings were occupied with events such as dances, boat cruises and baseball games (although between you and me, I enjoyed those significantly less).

One memorable place was the Thomas Jefferson Memorial. We got caught in a downpour between sites, which left us drenched and laughing underneath a tree on the sidewalk. What should have been miserable was actually a hilarious memory in the making.

The trip wasn't always easy. It was exhausting and overwhelming at times. But I'm proud that I went, and that I got to learn so much about the inner workings of our amazing country.

To Goldenwest Electric, thank you for this experience. Winning this trip pried me out of my comfort zone, made it possible for me to see some incredible things, and helped me grow as a person. I'll always remember and be grateful for this opportunity. RM



Four electric cooperative employees participated in the drone track, taught by Chad Nelson of General Pacific during the recent MECA Tech School. | **PHOTO BY RYAN HALL**

Inaugural MECA Tech School sets high bar for the future

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

THE inaugural Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA) Tech School was a success, and plans are already underway to make it an annual event.

"One word — pride," MECA Safety/Loss Control Instructor Jerry Lemm said while standing in a field owned by a Sun River Electric Cooperative member during the event. "I'm so proud of how these guys and the crew came together to put on this event."

The Tech School was a 2½-day training with two tracks, one focusing on rubber gloving and one focused on the use of drones in the electric utility field.

Lemm said MECA COO Lea Potoczny always asks the various manager and employee groups what they would like to see in training, and a more detailed rubber-gloving class that could be developed and built upon, rather than the same class being taught periodically, was requested. That was the start of the Tech School idea.

"It finally came together this year with the help of many, many people," Lemm said.

He added that once the Tech School idea started to form, he wanted to do



Co-op employees were given the chance to work on lines while the instructors offered tips during the field day portion of the Tech School. | **PHOTO BY RYAN HALL**

something more than just the rubber gloving track. The first thought was hot sticking, a technique used to work on energized lines.

"I wanted to get it more than rubber gloving," Lemm said. "We looked at hot sticking, but hot sticking is kind of a dying art in our industry."

However, the use of drones in the utility industry is on the rise. From inspecting components on the pole to

looking for vegetation infringing on the line, drones are used more frequently than ever before.

Lemm contacted Chad Nelson with General Pacific, an instructor and drone vendor, who said he had never been part of something like the Tech School. The second track was then developed.

Both tracks featured a classroom day and a field day, the school wrapped up with joint sessions for half a day to



“

It finally came together this year with the help of many, many people.



— **Jerry Lemm**,
MECA S/LC Instructor and an
organizer of the Tech School

”

finish up the event.

“I think the hands-on training, working with one of the instructors, that was valuable,” said lineman Brent Battenfeld of Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative, who participated in the rubber-gloving track. “It really went good for the first year.”

Randy Gaa, a lineman with Sun River Electric Cooperative, already was commercial drone certified, but he said the drone track was still very valuable.

“This was extremely eye opening,” he said. “I’ve never flown the big 350 (a large drone model used for line inspections). I wanted to get my hands on a high-end drone.”

Gaa added that through the course he learned the importance of compliance — that even after passing his commercial drone pilot license test, he must retain the knowledge he used to pass the test.

“There’s a compliance portion that is my responsibility to obey to protect my co-op,” Gaa said.

“Overall I think it was an overwhelming success,” Lemm said. “Even the minor hiccups we had will make it a better program next year and in the years to come.”

He added that he was surprised the event went so well in its first year, especially the field day, but looking back at it and seeing who the repre-



MECA Safety Trainer Jerry Lemm cooks up some steaks for the Tech School event.

sentatives of the Lineman Subcommittee were that planned the event, he shouldn’t have expected anything less.

“Absolutely I was surprised, but I should not have been given the people who were the boots on the ground,” Lemm said.

He said the plan is to make the Tech School an annual event, and to eventually grow it to be similar to the popular Cody Hot Line School.

“In typical Lemm fashion, bigger and better is where I always want to go,” he said. “I think the people involved see the value. I think there’s an appetite to make it an annual event and to grow it. I think it will take on a life of its own, and if the interest is there, additional topics and a second field day are possible.” **RM**



SEND IN YOUR RECIPES

Recipes for *RM* magazine are submitted by cooperative members across the state. First, second and third place monthly winners are awarded \$30, \$20 and \$10 prizes, respectively. Send your recipes to *RM* Recipes, Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403, or email rural@mtco-ops.com. **Please include your name, hometown and an address. If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.** For September, send in your best recipes that use peppers or chiles (bell, jalapeno, poblano, bird's eye, peppercorn, chipotle, dry or fresh etc.) by August 14. Please send in October recipes anytime: Your favorite recipes that use corn. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

**1st
PLACE**

Sausage Quiche

Misty Hammerbacker | JEFFERSON ISLAND

INGREDIENTS

1 pie crust
1 pound ground sausage
1/3 cup chopped onion
1/3 cup green pepper, chopped
2 oz. cream cheese
3/4 tsp. garlic powder
1/2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
3 T sour cream
1 cup heavy cream
3 eggs
1/2 cup shredded Mexican blend cheese

DIRECTIONS

In a 1-1/2 qt. baking dish, put in one deep-dish pie crust.

Cook sausage until almost done and add the onion and green pepper. Cook until done. Remove from heat and drain.

Stir cream cheese, garlic powder and Worcestershire sauce into the sausage mixture.

Put meat mixture in bottom of baking dish (in pie crust). Top with shredded cheese. Whisk together eggs, sour cream and heavy cream. Pour over sausage mixture.

Bake for 60 minutes.

You can put more shredded cheese on top if desired.

**2nd
PLACE**

Creamy Bratwurst Stew

Ruth Kleinjan | STEVENSVILLE

INGREDIENTS

1-3/4 pounds potatoes, cubed
2 medium carrots, diced
2 stalks celery, chopped
1 medium onion, chopped
1 medium green pepper, diced
2 pounds bratwurst, sliced
1/2 cup chicken broth
1 teaspoon basil
2 cups half & half

DIRECTIONS

Place all ingredients into a slow cooker, and cook on low for 6 to 7 hours.

If thickening is needed, add 1 T cornstarch to 3 T water, whisk together and add to the stew.

**3rd
PLACE**

Pork Low Main

Mel Hayes | LIBBY

INGREDIENTS

6 T light soy sauce
4 T hoisin sauce
2 tsp. sesame oil
1 tsp. sugar
1 bag (16 oz.) slaw mix
1 pound ground pork sausage
1 pound spaghetti noodles, cooked

DIRECTIONS

In small sauce pan, combine soy sauce, hoisin sauce, sesame oil and sugar. Cook on medium heat until thickened, about 15 minutes.

Brown pork in a large skillet, add slaw mix and cook until vegetables are just softened.

Add the sauce and noodles to the skillet. Combine well, heat through and serve.

Events Calendar

Events | What's Happening?

NORTHWEST

August-September

Bigfork Summer Playhouse celebrates 66th season —

Catch Me If You Can, Shrek, All Shook Up and Something Rotten, 8 p.m., and 2 p.m., for more information and schedule, go to bigforksummerplayhouse.com, 837-4886 | BIGFORK

August 2

Eureka Quilt Show — Outdoor quilt show, vendors, food court and sale all throughout town, Historic Village and Main Street, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., 688-4567 | **EUREKA**

August 2

Kevin Fun Days — Car, truck and motorcycle show and more, 450-5176 | **KEVIN**

August 4, 11, 18, 25

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

August 10

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

August 15

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Shakespeare in the Parks - Henry V — Free, Historical Village, preshow music and food by Holy Moly BBQ at 5 p.m., show: 6 p.m., bring chairs or blankets to sit on, 297-0197 | **EUREKA**

August 17

Paws Splash Bash — Exclusive dog-only pool party, no humans in the pool, Woodland Water Park, 2 to 5 p.m., 309-5627 | **KALISPELL**

SOUTHEAST

August 2

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

August 19

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

September 5

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Toast of the Town annual fundraiser — Silent auction, wine tasting, hors d'oeuvres, \$25, Indian Springs Ranch, 5 p.m., 297-0197 | **EUREKA**

September 5-7

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

September 8-11

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

September 12-13

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

September 13-14

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

September 19-20

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

September 6

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

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 August 14 for September events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.**

SOUTHWEST

August 1-2

Montana State Fair — Concert lineup: Jo Dee Messina - July 27, Tucker Wetmore - July 28, The Oak Ridge Boys - July 29, Smash Mouth - July 31, Scotty McCreery - Aug. 1, Lecrae - Aug. 2, Montana Expo Park | **GREAT FALLS**

August 1-2

Cabin Fever Quilters 24th Annual Quilt Show "American Beauty" — Superior High School, in conjunction with the Mineral County Fair, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., 591-5753 | **SUPERIOR**

August 2

Wise River Community Festival — Wise River Community Center, 208-716-2929 | **WISE RIVER**

August 2

Robert's Run — 10k, 5k, or 1 mile, Hamilton High School, 7 a.m. to noon, www.robertsrun.org, 461-0981 | **HAMILTON**

Aug. 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, Sept. 6, 13, 20

Dillon Farmers' Market — Near Jaycee Park, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m., 925-9420 | **DILLON**

August 3

Garlic Braiding — Homestead Organics Farm, 2 to 3:30 p.m., tickets and info at events. humanitix.com/garlic-braiding | **HAMILTON**

August 4, 18

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

August 7

Dinner in the Park — Dinner is provided for a nominal price, music is free, Jaycee Park, Dinner at 5:30, music at 6 p.m. | **DILLON**

August 8-9

Victor Days — Two days of live music, food trucks, beer gardens, market and games; parade and classic truck show on Sat., 360-6743 | **VICTOR**

August 11

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

August 16

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

August 16-17

Bitterroot Celtic Games and Gathering — Daly Mansion, Sat: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sun: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., www.bcg.org, 274-8886 | **HAMILTON**

August 23

14th Annual Montana Clean Energy Fair — Premiere event for comprehensive, clean-powered living in the Big Sky State. 100 Central Avenue Block, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. | **GREAT FALLS**

August 27

Plein Air contest event — Ravalli County Fair, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., 642-3785 | **HAMILTON**

August 27-30

The Beaverhead County 4-H Fair — Beaverhead County Fairgrounds, 925-9420 | **DILLON**

August 27-30

30th Annual Ravalli County Fair — Fair and rodeo, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., 363-3411 | **HAMILTON**

August 29-30

Cobblestone Quilt Show — Over 100 quilts and other items, Cobblestone Schoolhouse, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., 861-5480 | **ABSAROOKIE**

Aug. 29-Sept. 1

'Montana's Biggest Weekend' — Dillon Jaycees PRCA Rodeo, including Ranch Rodeo, wild horse race, Clint Black in concert and Labor Day Parade, 925-9420 | **DILLON**

September 13

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

YOUNG MONTANANS

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

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

**SEND US YOUR FALL
DRAWINGS AND POEMS**



Rya Fisher, 9, Rudyard | **HILL COUNTY ELECTRIC**

Arianna Leonardi, 17, Hamilton | **RAVALLI ELECTRIC**



Noa Schreibeis, 13 Billings | **YELLOWSTONE VALLEY ELECTRIC**

Luke Kinsman, 8, Kalispell | **FLATHEAD ELECTRIC**





YOUTH TOUR 2025



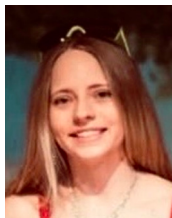
Hasalyn Schairer, Ravalli Electric Cooperative, reads JFK quotes in Arlington National Cemetery. **Photo by Sommer Green, Big Flat Electric**

Where am I?

Poem by **KAYLEIGH NISLEY** | *Southeast Electric*

The sky is gloomy, the air bitterly cold
I am surrounded by thousands of white
stones

All architecture and buildings are very old
Under each white stone are 206 bones.
Where am I?



Valor and honor run deep in this place
A ceremony is given for the unknown.
Nothing is left behind without a trace
Proper thankfulness through the ceremony is shown.
Where am I?

As I stand with a hand over my heart
My mind remembers the sacrifices made
I am grateful for the sacrifice on their part
Their lives for freedom was the trade.
Where am I? I think you know — Arlington National
Cemetery.



Illustration by Savannah Nelson, Vigilante Electric



Photo by Abrielle Rooney, Glacier Electric



MECA photo




The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

Email: rural@mtco-ops.com


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