Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | **SEPTEMBER 2026**

DECIPHERING Data Centers

a five-part SERIES

part 3 WHERE DOES THE POWER COME FROM?

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About our cover: ERock Chief Commercial Officer Allan Schurr and Edgar Quintero, operations manager O&M West for ERock stand in front of modular generators that could be used to power data centers. **Photo by Ryan Hall.**

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DEPARTMENTS

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Data centers in Montana: Power and cost considerations

MARK LAMBRECHT, *CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association*

THERE are many serious considerations surrounding data centers, including their impacts on the electric grid and who pays for the power they require to operate. Data centers have the potential to fundamentally change Montana's power supply and demand, and could affect ratepayers if development is not carried out strategically.

At any given moment, Montana's residential, commercial and industrial sectors consume between 1,200 and 2,500 megawatts (MW) of electricity, depending on the season, weather conditions and time of day. For perspective, one MW of electricity can supply approximately up to 1,000 homes.

Proposals for data centers in Montana range from facilities requiring 20 to 25 MW to others needing several hundred MW. At least one proposed project could require more than 1,100 MW upon completion, following phased construction over several years. How will Montana meet that demand? Utilities will either have to dramatically increase electricity generation to serve both existing consumers and data centers, or data centers will have to provide some or all of their own power.

Montana law allows data centers to construct their own electricity generation behind the meter. This means data centers can produce electricity specifically for their facilities, with the power used on-site rather than necessarily being connected to the grid. They can also build more generation than they need and sell up to 20 percent of their excess power to a public utility or electric cooperative at no more than the cost of producing it.

MECA's research into data centers demonstrated they can benefit the communities where they are located. They can also benefit utilities by providing a consistent, large demand for electricity, offsetting costs for other consumers. In addition, excess power generation from data centers could enhance grid reliability.

Of course, data centers also present potential drawbacks that must be considered, including water consumption for cooling, noise, air-quality and land use. These concerns will be examined in future issues of this magazine.

When it comes to data center power supply and demand, the priority of electric cooperatives remains providing safe, affordable and reliable electricity to their residential, agricultural, commercial and industrial consumers. Co-ops maintain data centers can and should pay their own way — without being subsidized by members or placing them at financial risk.

Powering data centers

THEY NEED TO PROVIDE A LOT OF POWER QUICKLY

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

ONE of the biggest concerns and challenges when it comes to data centers, both generative AI and traditional computing centers, is how to power them — and how to do so with little to no impact to electric cooperative members, if not providing a benefit.

In public and industry forums on data center development throughout the Northwest, this has been a recurring theme. Data centers need power, lots of it, and they need transmission lines and infrastructure to bring that power to them.

Montana, like many states, does not have many spare megawatts, let alone spare gigawatts, waiting for new customers. And even if it did, there isn't the capacity on existing lines to deliver it to those customers.

Data center advocates will point to communities where electric rates have stabilized or even dropped due to a large electricity customer, a large load in industry terms, such as a data center coming online. Opponents of data centers have examples of rates increasing, such as one highlighted by a *CBS Evening News* report in April showing residential electric bills nearly doubling in the past two years in a part of Georgia due to data centers locating in the region. Similar increases have also been reported in Virginia.

There are many different options for powering data centers, each with varying costs, timelines and degrees of reliability and availability. There are also many approaches to constructing and paying for the infrastructure needed, varying the impact on ratepayers.

DECIPHERING Data Centers

A FIVE-PART SERIES PART 3: POWERING DATA CENTERS

This is the third in a five-part series on data centers. We have already looked at What is a Data Center ad the community benefits. Future issues will look at concerns with data centers and the prospects of data centers in Montana, particularly in electric co-ops' service areas. See previous stories in the July and August magazines or online at www.mtco-ops.com/rural-montana/data-centers/

next month: THE CONCERNS WITH DATA CENTERS

Benefiting members

One example of an area that has been able to provide power without negatively impacting public power members' rates is Grant County, specifically the Quincy area, in Washington. Grant County Public Utility District (PUD) Vice President of Customer Experience Andy Wendell said that utility has had a great experience with its eight large data centers.

"We love our data center customers," Wendell said, adding that they pay their bills, and pay for the equipment and capital investments required to serve those loads.

When data centers came to the area in 2006, power wasn't a problem. Grant County PUD had built two dams along the Columbia River, called the Priest Rapids Project, in the early 1960s. In 1952, Grant County PUD's system was about 25 megawatts. Now it is more than 2,100 MW, with a majority of power coming from the two dams, along with wind and solar projects.

That made the area appealing to data centers.

Wendell said the PUD structured its large load rates to help utility members recoup the costs of the dams, which its members initially paid through rates, while keeping data centers' rates competitive compared to other areas.

That structure means data centers pay about 150 percent of the cost to serve these centers through their Grant County PUD rates, while residential rate customers pay about 60 percent of the cost to serve their homes.

Additionally, in Washington state public utilities are prohibited by law from entering into economic development activities by offering better rates to any particular class, such as large loads.

"We have to treat all classes fair and equitable," he said.

Wendell said that when it comes to any new data centers, or requests for additional power from existing ones, Grant County PUD doesn't have all of the same challenges as Montana and elsewhere, but there are some similarities.

"Access to energy is not an issue for us. Distribution lines and substations

are not a barrier. It's really the transmission and transmission capacity that is our bottleneck," he said.

He noted that data centers have offered to fund additional infrastructure. However, they want increased speed to power, an industry buzz term for how quickly power generation can be built or secured and delivered to a prospective site.

"Really the cost is the easy part," Wendell said. "We were never built to meet the speed-to-power needs of today."

He said that if a Montana cooperative is approached about a data center, the key is communicating directly with the end customer if possible, not a developer, to ensure there is a relationship with the eventual end user.

"Be eyes wide open, ask the questions, but don't be afraid of data centers," he said. "There's tremendous opportunity, and tremendous risk."

Charlie Baker, accounting officer for Quantica Infrastructure, and Taylor McCarthy, director of communications for Quantica, stand in front of a substation with two incoming 5 kilovolt transmission lines that make this property near Broadview optimal for a data center. | **PHOTO BY RYAN HALL**

Powering a Montana center

Quantica Infrastructure and its subsidiary, Big Sky Digital Infrastructure (BSDI) are siting a data center near Broadview, a town of about 140 people near Billings. Quantica purchased 5,100 acres to site the data center and potential power sources, and as of May 2026 is leasing 45,000 acres for additional generation development, currently planned for firming power and renewables such as wind and solar on portions of that land, said Charlie Baker, chief accounting officer for Quantica.

The proposed data center would be built in two phases, each being more than 500 MW, for around 1,100 total MW, divided amongst a few buildings, Baker said.

"One misconception I've heard is we are going to fill this 5,100 acres with buildings. That's not true," Baker said. He added that any generation built on site would require a fair amount of land and setbacks, in addition to the data center campus itself.

One key to the site is that a NorthWestern Energy substation, with a 230- and a 500- kilovolt transmission line, is adjacent to the property.

"That is one of the reasons the site is attractive," said Taylor McCarthy, director of communications for Quantica.

Baker and McCarthy said generation and transmission capacity are the major barriers to constructing data centers in Montana. Essentially, any potential data center developer needs to plan to pay for and/or bring its own generation.

"The only way to power this site is to pay for our own power and have our own generation," Baker said.

In May, it was reported that Quantica filed interconnection applications with NorthWestern Energy covering about 7,235 MW of maximum additional capacity, including renewable and firming generation, plus battery storage. That prompted speculation that the data center may grow much larger than initially proposed.

Baker said that isn't the case, noting that in addition to an undecided firming source, such as a natural gas plant, Quantica plans to build a large amount of solar and wind generation, and utilize batteries. They are expecting to operate at a 20 to 30 percent capacity factor, meaning the site will generate on average only about 20 to 30 percent of the total size of the renewable portion of the project. That means 5 gigawatts of renewable generation could only be counted on to consistently supply about 1 gigawatt of power. However, Quantica must apply for an interconnection that covers the full potential of all of the power generation on site, or the maximum combined output of the solar, wind, batteries and firming generation, even if the site will rarely generate that much power.

"The data center is still projected to be 1,100 megawatts," Baker said. "The hope is it will be heavily renewable based."

He stressed that Quantica doesn't

See DATA CENTERS, next page

DATA CENTERS

Continued from page 3

These 123 natural-gas-powered engines enclosed in these modular units provide 50MW of on-demand power.. | **PHOTO BY RYAN HALL**

want ratepayers to be saddled with any additional costs related to the proposed data center or the new generation.

"As a developer we want to pay our own way. We don't want ratepayers to have increased costs in power rates," Baker said.

"We don't want ratepayers to subsidize the project," McCarthy said. "We want there to be a community benefit."

A possible alternative

Though not yet utilized in Montana, there are methods to meet speed-to-power demands for large loads and provide reliable power, without burdening utilities and or residential ratepayers.

One such technology is deployed by ERock, a generation company with sites in multiple states.

ERock Chief Commercial Officer Allan Schurr said its projects have been done for many reasons, from providing reliable backup power to hospitals, to on-demand power when regional heatwaves or wildfires increase usage or knock out resources. It also provides solutions for data centers.

Schurr used a project in El Paso as an example. A local utility only had about 200 MW of power available, but a new data center needed 1,000 MW.

"It would take five years to get 800 megawatts (traditionally)," Schurr said. "We stepped up to provide Phase 2."

ERock provides ready built, kitted modular low-pressure natural gas generators. A base arrives for every five units, with all of the cabling pre-run. Each of the five generators is set on top of that. Everything is trucked to the site from Houston.

The El Paso project will run 24/7 for five years to power the data center "behind the meter," meaning the utility will not be responsible for it and the power is largely dedicated to the data center. Once the new generation, transmission and substation needed for the data center are operational, all power will come from the local public utility, and the modular plant converts to a dispatchable firming or peaking plant in front of the meter and owned by the El Paso utility, purchased at essentially no cost through a lease agreement with the data center, or it can be dismantled and repurposed elsewhere.

ERock projects take up about one acre per every 50 MW, due to the compact vertical construction — much less than a traditional gas-powered turbine power plant.

It takes about 123 21.9-liter natural gas modular generators, each putting out about 450 kilowatts, to make 50 MW, which helps with reliability. Five generators can be out for maintenance without significantly impacting the total output. Each bank of five generators can be shut down, or any individual engine can be taken offline for maintenance or repair, without impacting the others.

"We can deliver five 9s (99.999 percent reliability) from the generation site," Schurr said, walking through a site that provides dispatchable power.

"In about 10 seconds we have power out to the gird," said Edgar Quintero, operations manager O&M West for ERock, adding it takes about 30 seconds for the grid to accept that power.

The modular engines are no louder than a truck engine, with normal volume conversations being able to occur right next to them. They are certified by the California Air Resources Board, which has the strictest air emissions standards in the country, and have no stacks.

Schurr said that once a data center or utility places an order, up to a gigawatt of power is typically operational on site within a year.

Schurr and Quintero noted the engines are self contained so any fluid leakages stay in the container housings, and the generators use no water.

"The only water we use on site is the bathrooms," Schurr said.

He added that the modular design is considered a minor source, so typically the emissions permitting process is around two months.

Co-ops and data centers

We will explore how electric cooperatives would deal with powering a date center in the fourth and fifth parts of this series. However, it is important to note that several co-op managers have previously stated in *RM* that any large load would have to pay its own way for any additional generation and infrastructure, and that co-op members would not subsidize data centers, preventing the rate increases seen in Georgia and Virginia.

In a December column, Beartooth Electric Cooperative Manager Pat Patterson wrote, "As a cooperative, we have an obligation to serve, but the cooperative's management and board also have a responsibility to ensure that our member-owners are not adversely impacted by the addition of a large data center. Any new data center must pay 100 percent of the costs required to serve it, including all necessary infrastructure upgrades." RM

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SEPTEMBER 2026

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Electricity brings value every day

by **Jason Brothen, CEO**

Brothen

Most of us don't think much about electricity until an outage. We flip on the lights, make coffee, charge our phones or adjust the thermostat without giving it a second thought. That is how it should be. At Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative (LYREC), our job is to make sure the power is there when you need it. Providing safe, reliable and affordable electricity is our mission.

Like many families, you have probably noticed just about everything costs more these days. The price of groceries, gas, insurance and other everyday expenses have all increased, which means every dollar counts.

That's why it's worth taking a minute to think about what you get from your electric service.

The average residential electric bill in the United States is about $150 a month or approximately $5 a day. For about the price of a coffee, electricity powers nearly everything we do. It keeps your refrigerator cool, your home comfortable, your lights glowing and your devices charged. It helps you cook meals, wash laundry, work from home, stream your favorite shows, and stay connected with family and friends.

When you stop and think about it, electricity is one of the best values in your monthly budget.

We also know saving money whenever possible is important. If you're looking for ways to lower your energy use or make your home more efficient, LYREC is happy to help.

As your local cooperative, we're different from other utilities. We're owned by the members we serve, not outside investors. That means our focus is on providing reliable, affordable electricity while looking out for the best interests of our communities.

Thank you for being a member of LYREC. We appreciate the trust you place in us every day, and we'll continue working to provide the reliable service and value you count on every day. ■

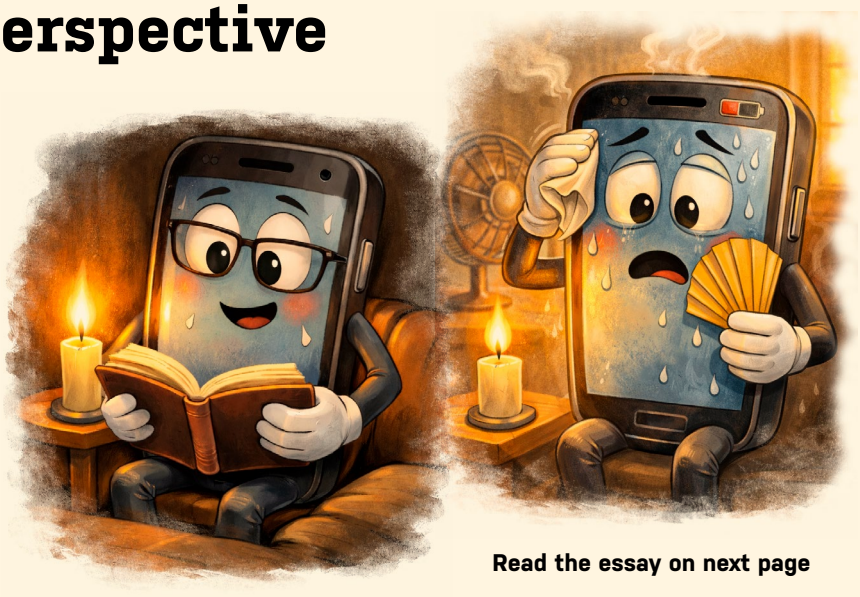
From a phone's perspective

Electricity is something most of us don't think about.

For this year's $1,000 annual meeting scholarship contest, students were asked to imagine what would happen if the power went out for a day, but with a twist. They wrote a journal entry from their phone's perspective and included a photo their phone would have taken during the outage.

The essays shared some great stories from the phone's perspective about our reliance on electricity every day. We are pleased to share one of the standout essays.

Evie Karren, a recent Fairview High School graduate and the daughter of Ryan and Carlie Karren, is attending Brigham Young University, where she plans to study elementary education or physics. ■



Read the essay on next page

100% dependable

by **Evie Karren**

100%

The familiar blaring of Evie's alarm pulls me from sleep, feeling rested and fully charged. The wireless charger is warm against my back, signifying energy is continuing to fuel me.

"Five more minutes," she grumbles, rolling over and giving me a tap. Snooze. If I had eyes, I would roll them. She snoozes at least three times every morning. Why, just the other day, she was nearly late for work because…

Evie's head hits the pillow I rest against, launching me off the mattress. I would be surprised if this wasn't such a regular occurrence. If not for the stuffed cat resting just below her bed, I might be in danger of a crack. My frame hits the furry friend, the cotton forming around me. In the fall, the charger disconnected. Not a problem, considering I'm at 100%.

Evie lets out a frustrated sigh as she leans over the side of her bed, stretching until she grasps me. She lifts me up to her face, squinting at the brightness of my screen. Her tired fingers shake as she enters her passcode incorrectly four times until she finally .

The morning follows the same schedule as always. She finally pulls herself from her bed, which I assume must be magnetic, considering how attached she seems to those blankets. She gets ready while I play music, shuffling through her top artists. She leans close to her mirror, putting on her makeup the way she learned through a tutorial played on my screen years ago. The bright lights aid her as she gets ready for the day.

For breakfast, she throws a burrito in the microwave. The consistent hum is somewhat comforting to my calculating nature. As she eats, she scrolls through her socials, making sure she didn't miss anything in her friends' lives during her seven hours of sleep.

We're pretty much best friends. I don't think she notices, but she relies on me for everything. We go everywhere together. Let's just say I'm a pretty important part of her life.

72%

Notification after notification lights up my screen, pulling Evie away from her laptop. Whether working, writing, drawing or relaxing, she always has a device. Leaning back against the couch cushions, she observes her sisters surrounding her. Two of them are playing a multiplayer video game while another messes around on the computer, not far from the oldest using her phone. The curtains are drawn, the room only lit by the fluorescents and screens.

Evie's phone captured a photo of some of the devices that rely on electricity.

Let's just say I wasn't expecting everything to go black. Faster than my data can load, everything shuts down. Evie instinctively reaches for me, opening the flashlight and flipping me around.

"Power outage," she explains to her younger siblings. "It'll come back on soon enough."

She's right. She has to be. While Evie uses me to guide herself in the dark, I take a moment to figure out everything.

Wi-Fi. Gone.

Clocks. Blank.

Television. Silent.

Time passes, or I assume it does, considering no digital clocks are working to tell me if it really does. As the minutes tick by, the entire household becomes more concerned. The power still hasn't returned.

"Evie, use your phone to call Mom," one of the younger girls suggests. "She'll know what to do." The phone conversation goes about how I expected. No matter how all-knowing and talented their mother is, even she cannot make the lights magically turn back on.

Then it hits me. Without any other screens, the family relies on me alone. They are using me as their light, their time, their entertainment, their communication. I'm almost certain my screen glows brighter with pride.

21%

It's afternoon now. Still no power. As the air grows thick with tension and summer heat, we start to miss the air conditioning and the guaranteed presence of power. I feel a buzz, expecting another text message to appear on my screen. The notification that awaits me is far from it. LOW POWER MODE. No. No, no, no. Not yet, not already! My charge normally lasts well into the night. How could I be so empty already? Suddenly, it dawns on me like an electric shock. With the power outage, I've been used more than normal. Light, time, entertainment, communication. Being relied upon takes its toll.

When Evie sees the notification, she rushes into her room. She pulls out her charger and sets me on it. Nothing. She sucks in a breath, staring down at my dimming screen. Nothing. No charge, no energy, no power.

This morning, I awoke rested, ready for the day with 100%. Little did I realize just how much we rely on electricity for everything we do. In reality, we're really just 100% dependent.

19%
16%
15%

It's dropping quickly now. With my last few moments of charge, I decide to take a picture of some of the objects that rely on electricity. If the power ever comes back on and I get charged, I'll never be able to forget just how important dependable energy is to our everyday lives.

11%
8%

Apparently, when humans are at the end of their life, they see a light. But while I'm dying, I see no light, because there is none, not without electricity, energy and power.

1%

"It's back! They've fixed it! Power has returned!" Evie dances around the house, skipping by everything that relies on electricity. The TV flickers back on, the computer lights up, the lights switch on immediately, the clocks blink the time once again, the Wi-Fi reconnects. Before I know it, I'm rushed into the bedroom. Evie gently rests me against the stuffed cat, picking up the charger once more. She holds her breath. I would, too, if I relied on oxygen instead of electricity. My charger connects immediately, filling me with a surge of energy.

And even though I'm only at 1%, I know I won't always be. Because our local electricity is 100% dependable. ■

SAFETY REMINDERS FOR HARVEST

Harvest keeps everyone moving quickly, so it's important to focus on the job. With large equipment in the field, it's also important to watch for what's overhead.

Taking a few extra minutes to think about electrical safety can help prevent a serious accident.

Before heading to the field, make sure everyone working on the farm knows where the overhead power lines are located. Remember, you don't have to touch a power line to be in danger. Getting equipment too close can cause electricity to arc.

Keep these safety tips in mind throughout harvest:

- Look up before moving equipment, raising truck beds or using grain augers.
- Stay at least 10 feet away from overhead power lines.
- Load and unload trucks in areas clear of power lines whenever possible.
- Avoid storing machinery, hay or irrigation pipe beneath power lines.
- If equipment comes into contact with a power line, stay in the cab and call 911. Warn others to stay away until the line has been deenergized.
- Report any damaged poles or downed power lines to Lower Yellowstone Rural Electric Cooperative right away. Never assume a downed line is safe.

Harvest is busy, but a quick safety reminder before the workday begins can make all the difference. Staying aware of power lines and electrical equipment helps keep everyone on the farm safe and the harvest moving. ■

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VALUE OF ELECTRICITY

Despite recent hikes, power rate increase behind other goods

By **RYAN HALL** | *Editor, Rural Montana*

THERES no other way to say it, life has gotten expensive. Across Montana, a gallon of milk and a dozen eggs could run you $12 or more. Add bacon, and it's close to $20.

Electricity is not immune to that trend. There is no doubt you are paying more for your electricity than your parents or grandparents did when they were your age.

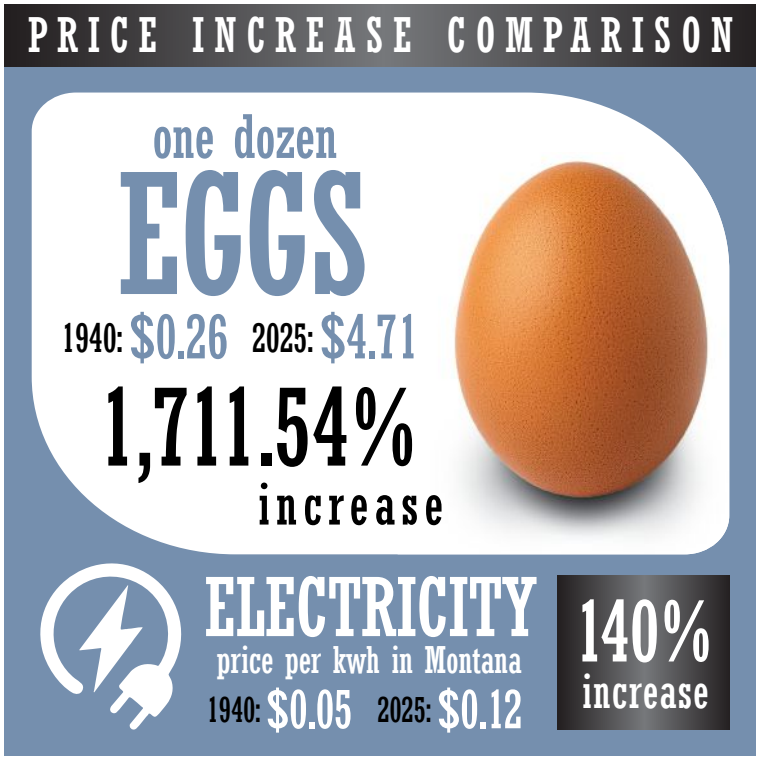
However, electric cooperatives have worked hard to keep those rising costs under control. Looking back to 1940, shortly after many Montana electric cooperatives were founded, the average cost of a kilowatt-hour of power in Montana, including both cooperatives and investor-owned utilities, was 5 cents. Today, it's 12 cents, a 140-percent increase.

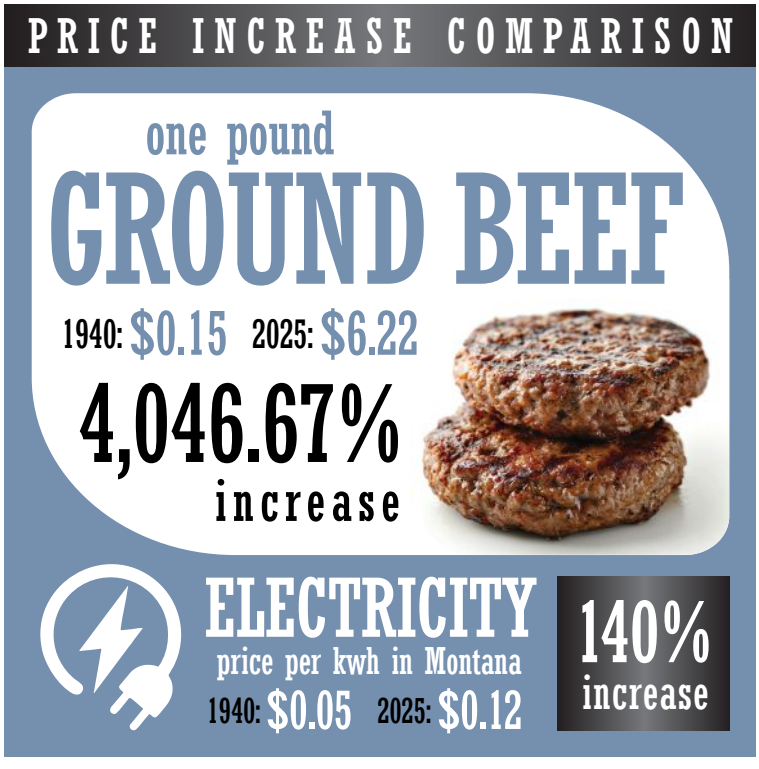
Looking at other goods that were similarly priced in 1940, as we do on these pages, while electricity has substantially increased in the last 85 years, it pales in comparison to the increase of those other goods. In addition to the comparisons you see here, we looked at other goods and compared them as well, including milk, bacon, bread and gas.

You will see these comparisons on the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association social media pages, on the social media account of your electric cooperative and maybe in your co-op's newsletter that appears monthly in this magazine.

There is no doubt that life has gotten pricier over the years and decades, but your cooperative is looking out for you by providing safe, affordable and reliable electricity. RM

Sources: *in2013dollars.com; cheesereporter.com; National Rural Electric Cooperatives Association.*





THE RACE FOR U.S. SENATE

THIS MONTH'S QUESTION: *If elected, what would your energy priorities be for your term as U.S. senator?*

THE SAME QUESTION WAS ASKED TO MONTANA'S U.S. HOUSE CANDIDATES IN LAST MONTH'S EDITION

Kurt Alme

almeforsenate.com

WE need to make life more affordable. That's what I hear from Montanans all across the state, and that's why making life more affordable and lowering energy costs will be among my highest priorities as Montana's next U.S. senator.

The best way to reduce energy costs is to increase supply by unleashing all forms of American energy. Producing more energy not only reduces gas and utility bills for families and businesses, but also reduces the cost of goods on our shelves for all Montanans.

The previous administration's war on energy canceled responsible projects, imposed burdensome regulations, increased the cost of energy and all goods, killed Montana jobs, hurt rural Montana communities and made us more dependent on foreign countries.

We must take an all-of-the-above approach to responsibly develop energy and ensure Montana is a national energy leader. When I was in high school in Miles City, I saw firsthand the positive impact energy development brought to neighboring communities like Baker and Colstrip. Pro-energy policies help make life more affordable, create good-paying jobs, generate critical tax revenue for Montana's rural communities and schools, and make America more secure.

Energy security is national security. We should produce more of the energy we need here at home for affordable, reliable power. With advancing technology, we can increase production while protecting our environment.

As your senator, I will fight to unleash energy production right here in Montana, remove burdensome red tape tying up needed, responsible energy development, make America energy dominant, and support those who power our state and fuel our economy. RM

Alani Bankhead

alaniformt.com

MONTANA'S electric cooperatives were built on a simple idea: neighbors banding together to power the places big utilities wouldn't. That same spirit should guide our energy future.

My first priority is keeping power affordable and reliable. Rural families and farmers already stretch every dollar, and no energy plan is worth much if it raises your bill or leaves you in the dark.

I'm a strong believer in alternative energy — done the Montana way. Out here, where the grid is thin and the distances are long, on-site solar, battery storage and charging can be a real lifeline for a ranch or a remote home. My job is to make it easier — through tax credits and low-cost financing for folks who choose to set it up — never by mandating it from Washington or blowing a hole in the budget.

Choice is the whole point. If you want to add solar, we should help you do it — and if diesel and gas are what keep your operation running, no one in Washington should be forcing you off them.

Here's the good news: Montanans are already leading. Flathead Electric now pairs its community solar with battery storage, Ravalli Electric just won a federal grant for a big battery, and Yellowstone Valley's community solar sold out every panel — because members want it. When a co-op can generate and store its own power for less than it pays to buy off the grid, that helps hold rates steady; and a homeowner who adds their own panels simply buys less. That's lower costs, not higher, and I'll help more Montanans do it. And I'll keep big power users like data centers from driving up costs or straining the grid Montanans depend on.

Affordable, reliable, Montana-made energy — with real choices for the families and farmers who live here. That's what I'll bring to the Senate. RM

THE RACE FOR U.S. SENATE

CONTINUED

Seth Bodnar

www.sethformontana.com

MONTANA is blessed with both natural resources and natural beauty, and we must work to expand our energy production while protecting our public lands. America needs to produce more energy, and Montana deserves an energy plan that's genuinely all-of-the-above. In the military, we were taught that you should never depend on one supply line. Our energy policy shouldn't either.

Unfortunately, we've let ideology creep too far into this conversation, and Montanans are the ones paying higher costs because of it. Utility bills are through the roof. Some believe we can simply turn off our reliance on fossil fuels. That's not realistic. Others believe we must halt development of renewables because it's become a convenient culture-war target. That's not serious, either.

Meanwhile, we're falling behind competitors like China, which now draws a substantial share of its electricity from renewables and is less exposed to energy shocks like the ones we've seen from Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, many of our allies have capitalized on emerging technologies to significantly lower costs for ratepayers. In Australia, for example, citizens enjoy free electricity during certain parts of the day. We cannot continue to let the rest of the world pass us by when it comes to energy development.

As Montana's U.S. Senator, I'll fight to:

• Invest in additional power generation and electricity transmission infrastructure.

• Enact a true "all-of-the-above" energy strategy.

• Ensure full transparency and community involvement on data center development and construction, ensuring Montanans don't pay more.

• Require energy companies, fossil fuel or alternative, to pay royalties for energy produced on public lands.

• Require private industry, not taxpayers, to clean up environmental sites. RM

Join Youth Tour

Enter your essay today

HIGH school sophomores and juniors whose parents are electric co-op members can win a free trip to Washington, D.C., to learn about history and our nation just by writing an essay (students in Ravalli Electric Cooperative's service area do not need to be co-op members).

This past summer, 29 students from across the state took part in the NRECA Electric Cooperative Youth Tour to Washington, D.C. Montana's electric cooperatives are hoping to send even more students at NO COST TO THEM in 2027.

Contact your electric cooperative for its specific requirements, but for most co-ops, a simple application and short essay is all that is required. From there, each participating co-op will choose at least one winner, and a statewide winner will be chosen as well.

This year's essay topic is: *If you could build a monument in Washington, D.C., who would you honor and why?*

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

Those students who are selected by their co-ops will travel to D.C. June 17-24 for a week of activities. Every Montana Electric Cooperative Youth Tour includes meetings with Montana's U.S. senators and representatives, as well as seeing many of the famous monuments and memorials, and the Smithsonian Museums. Past Youth Tours have also included a Washington Nationals baseball game, the International Spy Museum, a river boat cruise, Ford's Theater, the Gettysburg Battlefield, the U.S. Naval Academy, the Marine Corps Museum, a meal at the famous Ben's Chili Bowl and countless other stops and attractions.

Contact your local electric cooperative today, and start work on that essay! Visit *www.mtco-ops.com/youthtour* for more information. RM

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:

Our manager panel discusses laminated poles

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

Our panel for 2026 is Matt Haggerty, manager of Park Electric Cooperative in Livingston; Trevor Parke, manager of Vigilante Electric Cooperative in Dillon; and Brad Bauman, manager of Sun River Electric Cooperative in Fairfield

This month's question is:

Q: *"Here in the Bitterroot, we have laminated poles, some of which are huge."*

Does your co-op use them? When does a laminated pole make sense? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these poles?

- Inspired by a letter from Tom Elbert, Victor, Ravalli Electric Cooperative member

BRAD BAUMAN SUN RIVER ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

We do use laminated poles at Sun River Electric.

The advantages of these engineered poles are the ability to use them in tight right-of-way locations. These poles do not require down guys because of the engineered camber that is built into them. This makes them a safer choice in areas frequented by vehicles, four-wheelers, side-by-side vehicles or snowmobiles.

The lack of down guys also makes these poles attractive in areas where farming activities would place the down guys in fields that are needed to be cultivated. Another benefit is the condition referred to as pole rot. Laminated poles are less likely to experience pole rot versus a wood pole.

The downside of these poles is the cost. Laminated poles cost about five times the amount of a similar-sized wood pole.

The added cost of a down guy, anchor plate and associated hardware brings this price gap closer, but it is still significantly different. The pole size is considerably larger, but the benefits outweigh the negatives under most conditions. RM

TREVOR PARKE VIGILANTE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

VIGILANTE Electric uses laminated poles for specialized applications where limited access and higher structural demands make traditional poles less practical. These engineered poles provide exceptional strength and stability, making them an ideal solution for powerlines with sharp angles or heavy tension loads, where guying is not feasible.

Their modular design also offers significant logistical advantages. Larger laminated poles are easier to transport than comparable one-piece traditional poles, especially in remote or hard-to-reach locations. Unlike conventional wood poles, laminated poles use multiple layers of wood bonded together to create a pole that resists cracking, twisting and warping. This design ensures consistent performance throughout their service lives. In areas with limited rights-of-way or challenging terrain, laminated poles — or even steel structures — may be the only practical solution.

Another key advantage is their preservation process. Laminated poles are treated throughout the entire structure rather than just the outer shell, providing enhanced resistance to rot and decay. This comprehensive protection extends the pole's service life, making laminated poles an excellent long-term investment for locations where construction or future replacement would be difficult and costly.

While laminated poles offer clear performance benefits, they are best suited for specific applications. They typically cost more than traditional wood poles and require specialized installation procedures that crews must carefully follow. Because each pole is engineered for specific height and loading requirements, utilities must also maintain matching replacement poles in their inventory to ensure compatibility if a pole is ever damaged and needs to be replaced. RM

MATT HAGGERTY PARK ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

PARK Electric does use laminated poles in certain locations on our system. Laminated poles are typically used where additional strength is needed, such as at sharp angles or dead-end structures, or where there is limited space for guy wires. To provide the best answer, I reached out to our engineering firm to learn more about when and why they recommend these poles.

Unlike a standard utility pole, a laminated pole is designed to be self-supporting, meaning it doesn't require guy wires and anchors for stability. While these poles are often larger at the base, their overall footprint is actually smaller because they eliminate the need for guy wires, which can extend a considerable distance from the pole, depending on its height, and require ground anchors. A standard pole may require anywhere from one to six guy wires, and if a guy wire is damaged or fails, it can affect the stability of the pole and potentially cause an outage.

Advantages of laminated poles:

• Require less easement because no guy wires or anchors are needed.

• Improve reliability by eliminating guy wires that can be damaged or fail.

• Are sometimes the only practical engineering solution for a specific location.

Disadvantages of laminated poles:

• Cost more than standard poles with guy wires.

• Often require heavier equipment to install.

• Can be more noticeable because they are typically larger.

Every pole installed on our system is selected based on engineering standards, safety, reliability and the conditions at that specific location. While laminated poles aren't needed everywhere, they provide an effective solution where traditional guyed poles aren't the best fit. RM

Photo submitted by Teresa Gaylord

SEND IN YOUR RECIPES

Recipes for *RM magazine* are submitted by cooperative members across the state. First, second and third place monthly winners are awarded $30, $20 and $10 prizes, respectively. Send your recipes to *RM* Recipes, Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403, or email rural@mtco-ops.com. **Please include your name, hometown and an address.** ***If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.*** **For October send your favorite German-inspired recipes by September 16.** ***Please send in November recipes anytime: Your favorite Roast or Oven-roasted Recipes.*** *Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.*

1st PLACE

Bacon Pimento Cheese Spread

Teresa Gaylord | **KALISPELL**

INGREDIENTS

- **4 slices of bacon, cooked and crumbled, optional**
- **1 jar (4 oz.) diced pimentos, drained and rinsed**
- **2 cups (8oz.) mild cheddar cheese, shredded**
- **1 cup (4oz.) colby-jack cheese, shredded**
- **1 cup (4oz.) Swiss cheese, shredded**
- **1 T Worcestershire sauce**
- **1/8 tsp. ground red pepper**
- **½ cup mayo**
- **¼ tsp. salt**
- **1/8 tsp. black pepper**
- **Crackers of choice for serving**

DIRECTIONS

Mix and refrigerate up to 1 week.

2nd PLACE

Fried Potato Balls

Pam Forrest | **ROUNDUP**

INGREDIENTS

- **4 golden potatoes, peeled and cubed**
- **4 T cornstarch**
- **4 T butter**
- **½ cup heavy cream**
- **1 tsp. salt**
- **1 tsp. pepper**
- **3 T dried parsley, divided**
- **Avocado oil**

DIRECTIONS

Boil cubed potatoes in salted water until fork tender, then drain.

In a large bowl, mash potatoes slightly and mix with cornstarch, butter, heavy cream, salt, pepper and 2 T of parsley.

Cool for 10 minutes, scoop into spheres, and roll smooth.

Fry in 1 inch of oil at 350°F until golden brown. Drain on a wire rack, sprinkle with the remaining parsley, and serve with fry sauce or ketchup.

3rd PLACE

After School Turkey Pinwheels

Melissa Friess | **KALISPELL**

INGREDIENTS

- **4 extra-large flour tortillas (burrito size)**
- **9 oz. sliced turkey**
- **8 slices sharp cheddar cheese**
- **4 oz. cream cheese, softened**
- **1 T mayonnaise**
- **½ tsp. Dijon mustard**
- **1 cup fresh lettuce leaves**
- **1 cup thinly sliced English cucumber**
- **Salt and pepper**

DIRECTIONS

In a small bowl, mix together the softened cream cheese, mayonnaise and Dijon mustard until well combined. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Lay out a tortilla and spread a thin layer of the cream cheese mixture evenly over the tortilla.

Place a few slices of turkey breast on top of the cream cheese mixture, covering the tortilla evenly. Repeat the process with the cheddar cheese slices.

Layer some lettuce and sliced cucumber on top of the turkey.

Starting from one end, tightly roll up the tortilla, forming a pinwheel shape.

Repeat this process with the remaining tortillas and filling.

Once all the tortillas are rolled up, use a sharp knife to slice each rolled tortilla into 1-inch thick pinwheels.

Events Calendar

NORTHWEST

September

Bigfork Summer Playhouse celebrates 67th season — *Newsies, Young Frankenstein, The Music Man, Mean Girls, 8 p.m., and 2 p.m., for info go to bigforksummerplayhouse.com, 837-4886* | **BIGFORK**

September 2

History Book Club — *NW Montana History Museum, 2 p.m., 756-8381* | **KALISPELL**

September 5-7

End of Summer Yard Sale — *365 Dunwoody Ln, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 425-785-1057* | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

September 8

Northwest Montana Photographers meeting — *Fellowship church, 1025 7th Ave. W., 7 p.m., 260-0086* | **KALISPELL**

September 9

Feeding the Frontier: A History of Chinese Vegetable Gardens in Montana — *NW Montana History Museum, 6 p.m., 756-8381* | **KALISPELL**

September 11

20th Annual BBQ Fundraiser — *Friends of Bigfork Fire Department, Harbor Village Pavilion, Marina Dr.,, 5 to 8 p.m., 692-6050* | **BIGFORK**

September 11-12

12th Annual Flathead Celtic Festival — *Centennial Farm, Fri: 3 to 7 p.m., Sat: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., 282-4478* | **KALISPELL**

September 12

Community Yard Sale — *Bigfork Senior Center, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.* | **BIGFORK**

September 12

Oh My Pie! — *Homemade pies and dinner, live music and quilt raffle, historic Mountain Brook Community Center, 4 to 7 p.m., 314-8232* | **KALISPELL**

September 12

Volunteer Fire Department Annual Fundraiser — *Music, auction, raffle, Dew Drop Inn, 5 to 11 p.m., 249-4034.* | **CORAM**

September 12-13

Seize the Day Flathead presents Craft and Vendor Event — *Flathead County Fairgrounds Grandstand Building, Sat: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.* | **KALISPELL**

September 15

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

September 16

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

September 18-19

Flathead Quilters' Guild Quilt Show: Under the Stars — *Flathead County Fairgrounds Expo Building, Fri: 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sat: 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., 892-4117* | **KALISPELL**

September 18-20

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

September 18-20

43rd Annual Threshing Bee 2026 — *Raffle, kids tractor pulls, band and more, 2 blocks south of the city park, Fri: noon to 5 p.m., Sat/Sun: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.* | **CHOTEAU**

September 18-20

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

September 21

Westerners Int'l present Scott Tanner on *Follow the Glacier Trail* — *NW Montana History Museum, 6:30 to 8 p.m., 309-0958* | **KALISPELL**

September 22

Movie Night at the Museum — *NW Montana History Museum, 7 p.m., 756-8381* | **KALISPELL**

September 25-26

16th Annual Mountain Brook Crafters Co-op Handcraft Market — *795 Mennonite Church Rd., Fri: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Sat: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 250-8657* | **KALISPELL**

September 26

Kootenai Forest Fair — *Riverfront Park, 2 to 5 p.m., 291-3609* | **LIBBY**

October 3

Trego Heritage Day — *Blarney Ranch, 191 Ant Flat Road, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., www.thehalltfs.com/heritagedays, 307-699-5026* | **LIBBY**

October 10

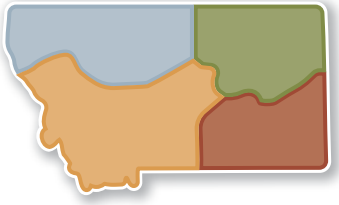
Stayin' Alive Celebration — *A disco fundraiser to celebrate 50 years of Abbie Shelter services in Flathead County, Wachholz College Center on the FVCC campus, 5 to 9 p.m., abbieshelter.org, 752-4735* | **KALISPELL**

October 22-24

NRA Finals Rodeo — *Majestic Valley Arena, 7 p.m., 252-1122* | **KALISPELL**

SUBMIT YOUR EVENTS

To list an event, send it to: RM Events, PO Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403 or email us at: rural@mtco-ops.com — Submit items by September 15 for October events. **Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. Events without such info will not be used.** Some items may be cut for space concerns.



NORTHEAST

September 19

Circle Town and Country Appreciation Day — *6 to 2 a.m., www.circle-montana.com* | **CIRCLE**

SOUTHEAST

September 12

Shepherd Jamboree — *Family-friendly fundraising event benefiting Shepherd Lion's Club, food and drink, live auction at noon, Shepherd Community Center, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., 855-5875* | **SHEPHERD**

September 17

8th Annual Calves to Cure DMD — *Proceeds benefit research for Duchenne muscular dystrophy, Billings Livestock Commission, 1 p.m., enter the beef raffle at www.cureduchenne.org/calvestocure, 860-4279* | **BILLINGS**

October 25

Night at the Museum — *O'Fallon Historical Museum, 4 to 9 p.m., 778-3265* | **BAKER**

SOUTHWEST

September 5-6

Wrangler Team Roping Championship — *Three Forks Rodeo Arena, 95691 MT Hwy 2, Visit www.threeforksrodeo.com, 272-3716* | **THREE FORKS**

September 11

Ladies of Love on Day of Service (9/11)— *Cultivating Connections MT at Homestead Organics Farm campus, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., CultivatingConnectionsMT.org* | **HAMILTON**

September 11-13

Rapelje Bike Festival — *Fri: Cynde's Memorial Sunset Ride, dinner, Sat: 80-mile start, 40-mile start, 20-mile start, kids races, live music, dinner, see www.rapeljebikefest.com for more information, 208-220-6608* | **RAPELJE**

September 12-13

Bridger Mountain Youth Rodeo — *Three Forks Rodeo Arena, 95691 MT Hwy 2, 9 a.m., Visit www.threeforksrodeo.com, 272-3716* | **THREE FORKS**

September 19

15th Annual Arts on Fire Festival — *Art activities, performances, food trucks, artist alley vendor market, art demonstrations and more, Paris Gibson Square Museum of Art, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 727-8255* | **GREAT FALLS**

September 25

Dinner in Doig Country — *Ivan Doig Center fundraiser and auction, North Bridger Bison Ranch, 5:30 to 8:30 p.m., www.montana.edu/doig/fundraiser.html, 994-4288* | **GREAT FALLS**

September 26

Bitterroot Heritage Civic Group Annual Chili Contest — *Darby MT Club House, 10 a.m., chili contest starts at 11 a.m., 531-4172* | **DARBY**

October 2-3

Stevensville Scarecrow Festival — *Family event, Main Street, Fri: 3 to 9 p.m., Sat: noon to 9 p.m., stevensvillescarecrowfestival.org 224-4880* | **STEVENSVILLE**

October 2-4

Townsend Rotary Fall Festival — *Live music, food and craft vendors, car show, Heritage Park, Fri: 4 to 9 p.m., Sat: 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., www.TownsendFallFest.com, 918-914-2055* | **TOWNSEND**

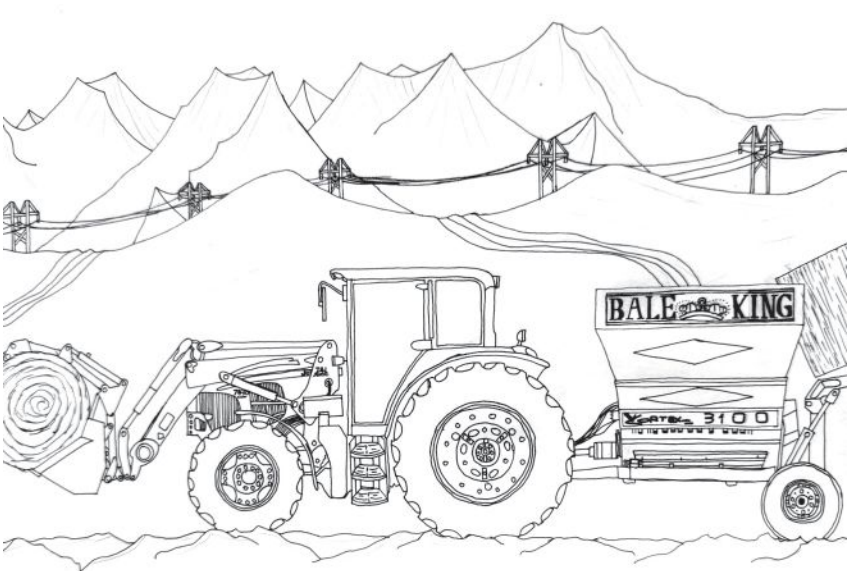
October 3

Mountain Valley UMC Annual Harvest Sale — *2470 East River Rd., lunch at noon, auction at 1 p.m., 222-4897* | **LIVINGSTON**

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.***

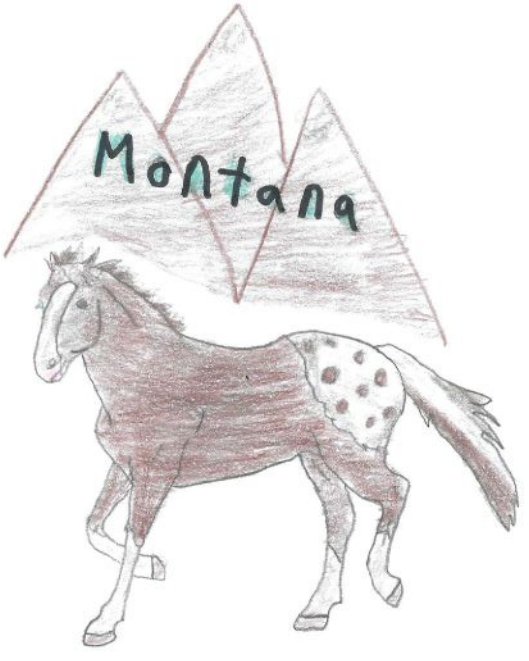
SEND US YOUR WINTER DRAWINGS AND POEMS



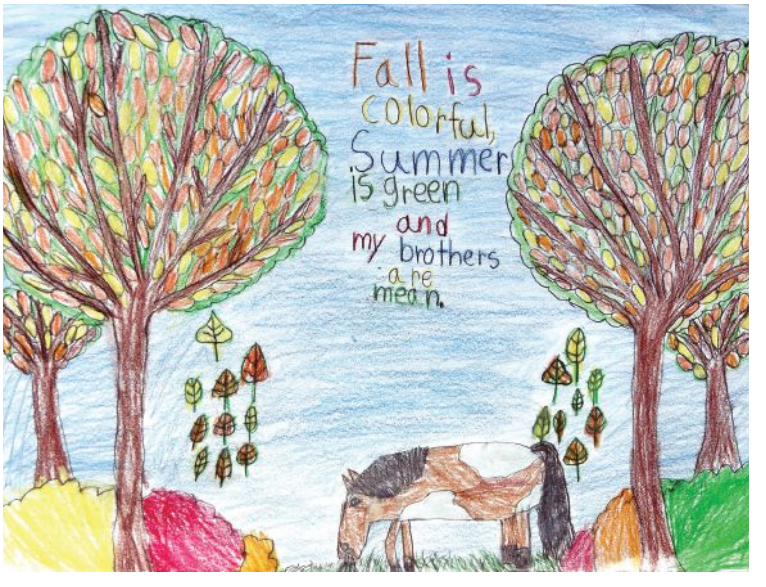
Brantley Moyer, 13, Cardwell | **VIGILANTE ELECTRIC**

Solomon Lentz, 8, Victor | **RAVALLI ELECTRIC**

Ella Schulke, 12, Billings | **YELLOWSTONE VALLEY ELECTRIC**



Amaris Kovalovszki, 8, Nye | **BEARTOOTH 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.

Bear Bath

A black bear goes for a swim in the Bighorn River. **Photo by Cole Hoffman of Shepherd.**

In Bloom

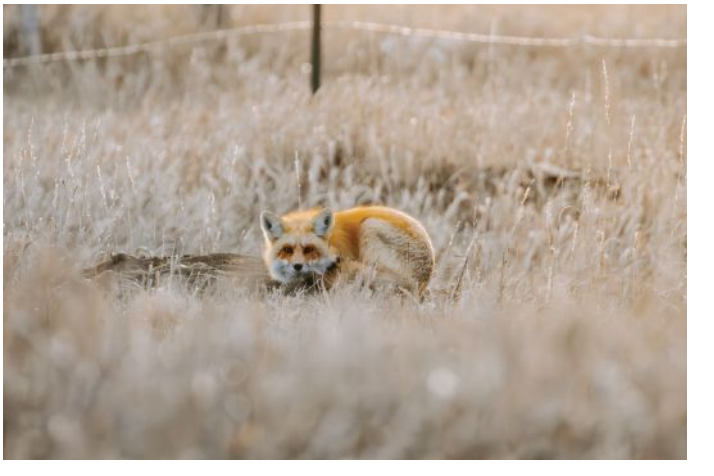
Wildflowers grow in a field. **Photo by Kaida Ragsdale of Hamilton.**

A Montana Scene

Horses along a river are depicted in this **painting by Ellie Chin of Kalispell.**

What You Looking At?

A fox watches a visitor closely. **Photo by Sierra Rowden of Wilsall.**



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