

# COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS



## Co-ops at the Capitol

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(left to right) Rosebud Electric Directors Dennis Purvis and Boyt Young and Butte Electric CEO Matt Sleep serve a homemade meal to legislators, state employees and Capitol visitors in South Dakota State Capitol.

Photo by Jacob Boyko

# When a Co-op's Heart Grows Bigger Than Its Balance Sheet



**Valerie Marso**

CFO

Now, down in our cooperative — where the spreadsheets all hum —

I, the CFO, spend my days keeping budgets from going ka-plum.

All year I'm counting coins, guarding dollars with care,  
But come holiday time... well, something warm fills the air.

(Disgusting, I know — but stick with me!)

See, the real heart of a cooperative isn't in numbers or sums,

It's in the people we serve — yes, those neighbors who hum-drum.

And though "giving back" isn't just some once-a-year splurge,

This season shines brighter, giving generosity a surge.

### Supporting Local Causes: A Season for Hearts to Grow Three Sizes

Every Who in our co-op, the tall and the small,  
Came together again to give, care, and stand tall.

They stocked up the PARS Pantry with groceries galore,  
Filled boxes for Feeding South Dakota — and then gave some more.

They pitched in for families who needed a hand,  
Proving the co-op spirit is the best in the land.

Each act on its own? Tiny as a Who.

But bundled together? Why — impact just grew!

Warm meals, full hearts, smiles that last —

That's the kind of magic no Grinch can outlast.

### Investing in Safety and Education (Even a Grinch Likes Less Zapping)

But giving isn't only about food drives and cheer —  
It's also about knowledge, safety, and helping kids steer  
Toward bright futures... without touching high-voltage gear.

Our team brought live electrical demos to schools —

Hands-on, memorable, "don't-do-this-you-fools!"

(That last part might've been just me.)

We kept up our Cooperatives in the Classroom show,  
Teaching how co-ops work and helping students grow.  
Because informed young Whos — bright-eyed, clever  
Make communities stronger forever and ever.

### Supporting Our Future Leaders (A Very Un-Grinchy Thing to Do)

Oh, and don't forget our scholars, the future Who's Whos!

Through scholarships and the Touchstone Energy® Scholar of the Week news,

We celebrate students with brains, heart, and drive —  
The kind who help keep our communities alive.

Invest in young people? Why, that's practically heroic!  
(If you tell anyone I said that... I'll deny it. Very emphatic.)

### A Cooperative Culture of Giving (Even a Grinch Can Approve)

Food drives, safety demos, scholarship cheer —

The heart of our co-op is people, every day of the year.  
And while I may grumble and groan like a proper green Grinch,

I'm proud of the generosity we've seen inch by inch.  
So as the holidays sparkle and the snow starts to fall,  
Let's keep lifting each other — one and all.

Carry that spirit, warm and bright,  
Into the New Year — glowing with cooperative light.  
From our co-op to yours, with a grin (not too wide),  
Happy Holidays — to every Who far and wide.  
Here's to a New Year powered by community...  
And maybe just a little less Grinch in me.

**Happy Holidays — and here's to a bright, cooperative-powered New Year!**

## COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

### OAHE ELECTRIC

(USPS No. 019-042)

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**Our Mission**

Oahe Electric delivers high quality, low-cost electric service to our local member-owners. As a Touchstone Energy® Cooperative, we are committed to meeting the highest standards of customer satisfaction. We do business with accountability, integrity, innovation and commitment to community. As an electric co-op, we are part of America's most trusted network of high quality energy providers.

## Lineman's Lens

### Oahe Crews Raise Lines for House Move

On Nov. 17, Oahe Electric assisted with a historic house move through the service territory. Our crews worked closely with the moving team to safely lift and navigate lines as this home made its way east to Montrose.

Thank you to our members for your patience with the brief outages throughout the day. We're proud of the teamwork, coordination, and community spirit that made this unique project a success.



## Merry Christmas from Oahe Electric!

As we look back on the past year, we are grateful for the trust and support of our members. It is an honor to serve you and our communities each and every day.

We wish you a joyful holiday season filled with peace, warmth, and time spent with those you love.

# Tree Trimming Safety

Trees are majestic, beautiful and good for the soul. But we also know that our members depend on us to deliver reliable power to their homes and businesses. South Dakota's electric cooperatives strive to balance maintaining the beautiful surroundings we all cherish with ensuring reliable electricity. You might not realize it, but there are several benefits to regular tree trimming.

Keeping power lines clear of overgrown vegetation improves service reliability. After all, we've seen the whims of Mother Nature during severe weather events with fallen tree limbs taking down power lines and utility poles. While many factors can impact power disruptions, about half of all outages nationally can be attributed to overgrown vegetation.

Overgrown vegetation and trees also pose a risk to power lines. For example, if trees are touching power lines in our members' yards, they can pose grave danger to families. If children can access those trees, they can potentially climb into a danger zone. Electricity can arc, or jump, from a power line to a nearby conductor like a tree. A proactive approach also diminishes the chances of fallen branches or trees during severe weather events that make it more complicated and dangerous for line workers to restore power.

If trees and other vegetation are left unchecked, they can be-

### BENEFITS OF TREE TRIMMING

- ✓ Improves service reliability
- ✓ Speeds up restoration time
- ✓ Keeps crews & communities safe



come overgrown and expensive to correct. A strategic vegetation management program helps keep costs down for everyone.

When it comes to vegetation management, there are ways you can help too. When planting new trees, make sure they're planted a safe distance from overhead power lines. Medium-height trees (40 ft. or smaller) should be planted at least 25 ft. from power lines. Taller trees (over 40 ft.) should be planted at least 50 ft. from power lines. You can also practice safe planting near pad-mounted transformers. Plant shrubs at least 10 ft. from the transformer door and 4 ft. from the sides. If your neighborhood has underground lines, remember to contact 811 before you begin any project that requires digging.

Additionally, if you spot an overgrown tree or branch that's dangerously close to overhead lines, please contact your local electric cooperative.

We have deep roots in our community, and we love our beautiful surroundings. It takes a balanced approach, and our vegetation management program is a crucial tool in ensuring service reliability.



**"Watch for overhead power lines."**

**Jacob Ymker, Age 10**

Jacob reminds readers to watch out for overhead power lines. Great job, Jacob! Jacob's parents are Mark and Marion Ymker from Armour, S.D.

Kids, send your drawing with an electrical safety tip to your local electric cooperative (address found on Page 3). If your poster is published, you'll receive a prize. All entries must include your name, age, mailing address and the names of your parents. Colored drawings are encouraged.

# Heart-Warming DESSERTS

Picture by Elena Veselova from Shutter stock

## APPLE BREAD

### Ingredients:

1/2 cup brown sugar  
1 1/2 tsps. cinnamon

*Mix in small dish & set aside.*

2 eggs (room temperature)

1/2 cup sugar

1 tsp. vanilla

1/2 cup melted butter or  
margarine

*Mix together in a bowl and add:*

1 1/2 cups flour

1 tsp. baking powder

1/2 tsp. baking soda

2 cups chopped apples

### Method

Pour 1/2 of the batter into a greased and floured bread pan. Sprinkle 1/2 of the cinnamon and sugar mixture over it. Add remaining batter and top with remaining cinnamon sugar mixture.

Bake at 350° for 45-60 minutes.

**Grace Klein**  
**Sioux Valley Energy**

## PUMPKIN CHEESECAKE DESSERT

### Ingredients:

1 cup heavy whipped cream  
8 oz. cream cheese, whipped  
1/3 cup sugar  
1/2 cup brown sugar  
1 can pumpkin puree  
1 tbsp. pumpkin pie spice  
1 tsp. vanilla  
1 pkg. cheesecake pudding mix

### Method

Beat 1 cup heavy whipped cream and set aside.

In a separate bowl, mix and beat the cream cheese, sugar, brown sugar, pumpkin puree, pumpkin pie spice, vanilla, and cheesecake pudding mix.

Fold the whip cream into this mixture and spread in a graham cracker crust.

Refrigerate two hours before serving plus add a spray of whip cream and sprinkle cinnamon on top.

(Optional) add chopped pecans or walnuts.

**Susan Forma**  
**Union County Electric**

## CHERRY COCONUT BARS

### Ingredients:

#### Crust

1 cup flour, sifted  
1/2 cup butter  
3 tsbps. powdered sugar

#### Mixture

2 eggs, slightly beaten  
1 cup sugar  
1/2 tsp. baking powder  
1/4 cup flour  
1/4 tsp. salt  
1 tsp. vanilla  
3/4 cup chopped nuts  
1/2 cup coconut  
1/2 cup red maraschino cherries, quartered

### Method

Mix together flour, butter and powdered sugar. Spread in 8" square pan. Bake at 350° for 20-25 minutes or until it is a delicate brown.

In a bowl, mix in the remaining ingredients in the order given: eggs, sugar, baking powder, flour, salt, vanilla, chopped nuts, coconut, maraschino cherries.

Spread this mixture over the crust and bake again for 25-30 minutes. cool and cut into squares.

**Barbara Anderson**  
**Lake Region Electric**

Please send your favorite recipes to your local electric cooperative (address found on Page 3). Each recipe printed will be entered into a drawing for a prize in December 2025. All entries must include your name, mailing address, phone number and cooperative name.

# Play It Safe: Portable Generator Dos and Don'ts



**Matt Eldridge**  
COO

Storm season is upon us, which means greater potential for power outages. If you're planning to use a portable generator in the event of an outage, Oahe Electric reminds you to play it safe.

With proper use and maintenance, portable generators can provide great convenience during an outage. However, when generators are used incorrectly, they can be extremely hazardous. In a 2022 report, the Consumer Product Safety Commission estimated 85 U.S. consumers die every year from carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning caused by gasoline-powered portable generators.

Here are 10 do's and don'ts to keep in mind when using portable generators:

1. DO: Install backup CO alarms.
2. DO: Keep children and pets away from portable generators at all times.
3. DO: Position generators at least 25 feet outside the home, away from doors, windows and vents that can allow CO to enter the home.
4. DO: Ensure your generator is properly grounded. Use a portable ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) to prevent electric shock injuries.
5. DO: Use three-pronged extension cords that are rated to handle the load of the generator. Inspect extension cords for cuts, frays or other damage before use.
6. DON'T: Operate a generator inside your home or an enclosed (or partially-enclosed) space. Generators produce high levels of CO, which can be deadly.
7. DON'T: Open windows or doors while the generator is running.



## Generate Safely.

**Never use a portable generator indoors.**

**Do not plug generators into standard electrical outlets.**

**Use heavy-duty extension cords to connect appliances into the generator.**

**Start the generator before connecting appliances.**

8. DON'T: Rely on generators as a full-time source of power. They should only be used temporarily or in emergency situations to power essential equipment or appliances.
9. DON'T: Overload generators. They should only be used to power essential equipment. Make sure your generator can handle the load of the items you plan to power.
10. DON'T: Connect generators directly into household wiring unless you have an appropriate transfer switch installed. If a generator is connected to a home's wiring without a transfer switch, power can backfeed along power lines and electrocute utility lineworkers making repairs.

While generators provide convenience during power outages, they can quickly become hazardous—even deadly—if improperly operated. Before you operate a portable generator, be sure to thoroughly read the owner's manual for important safety information and tips.

If you have questions about proper use of portable generators, we're here to help. Give us a call at 1-800-640-6243.

## Holiday Closings

Please note our office will be closed on the following dates so our team can spend time with loved ones.

- **Wednesday, Dec. 24 & Thursday, Dec. 25**
- **Thursday, January 1**

# KINGBIRD COFFEE

## Your Local Coffee Shop

Jocelyn Johnson

jocelyn.johnson@sdrea.coop

Tucked away in the heart of Brandon, S.D., sits Kingbird Coffee – a cozy, vibrant coffee shop built on the foundation of generosity and community spirit. Kingbird Coffee has blossomed from a simple act of love into a cherished gathering place that embodies hometown values and creative flair. It all began as a surprise.

“Technically, my wife, Jessica, owns it,” said Michael Gross, who purchased the coffee shop as a gift to his wife. “It was an impulse buy,” recalled Michael with a chuckle.

At the time, Michael felt his hometown lacked a proper coffee shop – a local hangout where neighbors could linger over coffee, connect and find a sense of belonging.

“Our inspiration is to be able to give back to the community,” Michael said.

True to that inspiration, Kingbird Coffee radiates generosity from its very core. Since opening, every cent of profit has gone directly back into the community – nurturing local events, student activities and charitable causes.

“My wife and I have never taken any money from the coffee shop,” Michael explained. “Everything we have made over the years has gone back into the community to support events or kids.”

Their commitment to fostering community shines through ongoing innovation and engagement. Now, the team is preparing to launch new extended hours, accompanied by themed nightly events – each designed to cultivate connections and celebrate local interests.

“We’re planning on having a different event every night,” Michael said. “Like Monday might be advanced board games. Tuesday might be about meeting a local pastor. Wednesday could be kids’ crafts night.”

This effort signifies Kingbird Coffee’s continual quest to be more than just a coffee shop: it is a place where everyone can find something to enjoy, every night of the week.

The eclectic atmosphere of the coffee shop invites you to stay awhile. Couches and nooks make for perfect reading corners, board games beckon to the playful, and even a whimsical swing under the stairs welcomes imaginative children.

“It’s just a fun little quiet vibe,” Michael described. “We have little hidden nook areas underneath the steps and a little swing where kids can go and hang out... there’s ‘take a book, leave a book,’ and board games. It’s just a fun place.”

Here, creativity isn’t just encouraged – it’s essential. While the owners handle behind-the-scenes work, they credit the employees and a dedicated events manager for shaping the everyday magic that keeps patrons returning.



Photo by Kingbird Coffee

Kingbird Coffee’s devotion to local flavor extends to every product sold. Beans are sourced from Parable Coffee Roasting Co., a local roaster in Tea, S.D. But the commitment to homegrown doesn’t stop with coffee. Local honey, jewelry, bison jerky, pizza, even handmade stockings from coffee bags, and flowers from a local florist – each item tells a story of community partnership. Artists hang their work for free, keeping a portion of sales and donating proceeds to local art initiatives. On weekends, the shop welcomes pop-up boutiques, allowing small business owners an affordable, supportive venue.

Signature drinks bring history to the present. The beloved “Billy King” remains on the menu in honor of Billy, the shop’s founder and namesake.

“We kept everything the same as if he’s still at it. Billy created it, and he’s a good friend of mine,” says Michael.

Such continuity gives regulars – and new customers – a sense of belonging and nostalgia.

Cultivating connections goes well beyond commerce. Employees past and present share a special bond, growing from high school baristas into college students and, often, friends for life.

“People don’t quit. They just...love it because they have the freedom to experiment and to make drinks,” he said, noting the murals and memories that fill the walls.

When asked to describe the shop’s personality, Michael laughs, “A crazy, wild teenager...you never know what’s gonna happen.” The unpredictable, energetic spirit is exactly what makes Kingbird Coffee so beloved – a hub that welcomes everyone, surprises often and gives back always.

For Kingbird Coffee, community isn’t a slogan – it’s a way of life, brewed fresh daily for everyone who walks through the door.



The South Dakota State Capitol  
in Pierre, S.D.  
Photo by Frank Turner

# CO-OPS AT THE CAPITOL EVERY VOICE COUNTS

**Frank Turner**

frank.turner@sdrea.coop

Electric cooperatives carry a wide range of responsibilities to the members they serve. Beyond keeping the lights on, co-ops represent their communities, focus on member needs and help strengthen the places they call home. But behind the scenes, cooperatives also stay actively involved in legislative discussions to stay engaged in the decisions that shape how they serve their members.

According to Steve Barnett, general manager of the South Dakota Rural Electric Association, legislative efforts help protect reliable electricity, keep costs manageable and support rural communities across South Dakota.

“While it’s important that we stay involved in the topics that are relevant to our industry, it’s really about sharing our values and telling our story,” Barnett said. “Being involved means being engaged and aware of the challenges and issues coming up in the 2026 Legislative Session,”

In addition to SDREA’s internal

leadership, legislative efforts are supported by the association’s lobbying team in Pierre, led by Darla Pollman Rogers of Riter Rogers LLP. Rogers and her colleague, Ellie Bailey, have been involved with SDREA’s legislative work for more than two decades.

“A key component of this work involves relationship building with legislators to establish trust and credibility,” Rogers said.

Rogers noted that member engagement strengthens the cooperative voice during session and throughout the year. “The grassroots approach is huge for co-ops,” she said. “Hearing from members across the state and from different cooperatives helps strengthen our overall impact.” Rogers added that one of the best ways members can get involved is by getting to know their local legislators or attending Co-op Day at the Capitol to observe the process firsthand.

With the next session approaching, several topics are already drawing the attention of not only electric cooperatives but utilities across the

state. One of the proposals SDREA is following closely is Rep. Kent Roe’s data center bill, identified as Draft HB 31.

“We’re seeing an increase in interest from large data center developers looking to site facilities in cooperative service territory,” said Chris Studer, chief member and public relations officer at East River Electric Power Cooperative, a wholesale power supply cooperative which serves distribution co-ops in eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota. “We have been providing input on the data center bill to make sure the law would fit within our process and require data centers to invest in generation and transmission infrastructure to serve them, so we can protect our current cooperative consumers from the risk of building generation to serve these large consumers. At the end of the day, we’re not going to put our member-owners at risk, and engaging with lawmakers working on that issue is very important to our cooperative network.”

The association has also been working

with investor-owned utilities on wildfire mitigation legislation, which stands out as another priority for South Dakota cooperatives.

“Wildfire risk is a growing concern, and this proposal gives utilities a clear, consistent way to plan ahead. At its core, this legislation is about preparedness – making sure utilities have a plan and have reviewed it with their governing authority. By strengthening infrastructure, improving vegetation management, and coordinating closely with communities, the framework helps protect public safety while supporting the reliable service South Dakotans depend on,” Black Hills Electric General Manager Walker Witt said.

Cooperative members also have an important role in legislative advocacy. Their engagement helps ensure that rural needs and perspectives reach decision makers. Barnett encouraged members to stay active by reaching out to local lawmakers in their districts and attending local legislative forums and cracker barrels. These are formal town hall style gatherings where legislators answer questions and update the community.

“Members can contact legislators in their respective districts via email or by telephone,” Barnett said. “Attending cracker barrels is also a good way to stay engaged. These opportunities give members a chance to hear updates, ask questions, and share how policy decisions affect their communities.”

Barnett also noted the importance of staying alert during the legislative process, particularly when a bill is significantly amended. He explained that when a bill gets “hog housed,” it means it has been changed so much that the original version is no longer recognizable. “A hog housed bill is changed or amended significantly, to the point where a person may change their position on the bill,” he said. “Tracking these changes is essential to understanding the real impact a proposal may have if it becomes law.”

Barnett said SDREA will continue to represent the interests of both cooperatives and rural communities across the state. At the end of the day, it’s all about providing dependable electricity and keeping the lights on.



Gov. Larry Rhoden takes a picture with members of the electric cooperative network at Co-op Day at the Capitol last February.

*Photo by Jocelyn Johnson*

## STAYING INVOLVED

### Co-op Day at the Capitol

Electric cooperatives’ efforts to engage local legislators extend far beyond traditional lobbying. Every February, cooperatives from across the state gather for a light-hearted dinner at the South Dakota State Capitol to break bread with lawmakers, provide attendees industry updates and sit in on legislative committee meetings.

Last year, South Dakota cooperatives continued their time-honored tradition of serving pulled pork sandwiches and cowboy beans prepared by Ken Gillaspie, who formerly served as a director for East River Electric and as board president for Oahe Electric, and Roger Crom, a former loss control manager at SDREA.

The next Co-op Day at the Capitol is scheduled for Feb. 17, 2026.

### Legislative Banquets

In addition to Co-op Day at the Capitol, select electric cooperatives across the state host legislative banquets as a means of communicating the latest legislative environment with both their members and local lawmakers. Many times, these events provide a free meal to attendees and include updates on both the successes and challenges for the co-op.

Reach out to your local cooperative to learn more about local Legislative Banquets, Co-op Day at the Capitol or the latest legislative news affecting cooperatives. The co-op network is more than happy to engage.

# Murphy



## Oahe Electric Now Accepting Applications for 2026 Scholarships

Oahe Electric, in partnership with Basin Electric Power Cooperative, is pleased to announce that applications are now open for our 2026 scholarship program. This year, Basin Electric and Oahe Electric together will award one \$2,000 scholarship to an outstanding student from the Hughes or Sully County area, along with four additional \$1,000 scholarships provided by Oahe Electric.

Our annual scholarship program is designed to recognize academic achievement, support continuing education, and invest in the future of the rural communities we serve.

To be eligible, applicants must be U.S. citizens and either Oahe Electric members or dependents of members. Students must also be enrolled, or planning to enroll, full-time at

an accredited two-year or four-year college, university, or vocational/technical school.

Recipients are selected based on a combination of factors, including a written essay, SAT/ACT scores, cumulative GPA, work experience, school and community involvement, a personal statement of career goals, and a third-party letter of recommendation.

Applications for the 2025–2026 academic year will be accepted through February 13, 2026.

For more information, contact Oahe Electric at 1-800-640-6243 or [oahe@oaheelectric.com](mailto:oahe@oaheelectric.com). Applications can also be downloaded by visiting our website at [www.oaheelectric.com](http://www.oaheelectric.com).

## Check Out Our Lending Library

Did you know Oahe Electric has a Lending Library right in our entryway?

It's a fun, free way to discover something new to read — anytime you'd like. For the kids, you'll find a special bookcase designed to look like a bucket truck. Adult titles are available on a separate bookshelf, so there's something for readers of all ages.

The library runs on a simple system: take a book, leave a book — or just take one to enjoy! There's no checkout process, no due dates, and no limits.

Best of all, our entryway is open 24/7/365, so you can stop in and browse whenever it's convenient for you.



## Co-ops in the Classroom

What do socks, flashlights and bicycles have in common? All these materials are used to teach children in schools throughout Oahe Electric's service territory about electricity.

Co-ops in the Classroom is a program offered by Oahe Electric Cooperative's wholesale power provider, East River Electric Power Cooperative. Jenny Gross, Education & Outreach Coordinator for East River, travels throughout East River's service territory in eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota to teach children about electrical safety, generation, conservation and economics.

During the course of the hour-long presentations, Gross takes students on the journey of electricity at the atomic level, all the way to the hundreds of miles it travels from the power plant to our homes.

A variety of hands-on demonstrations engage the students. A Van de Graaff generator demonstrates the movement of electrons with some hair-raising results. "That one is always a crowd-pleaser," said Gross. "Not only does it provide a visible and audible example of how electricity

moves, students also get a kick out of seeing their hair stand up and shocking their friends. Sometimes we even get the teachers to join in."

Another device that invokes a lot of excitement is the Pedal Power bicycle generator. Students are asked to become power plants as they provide the energy that produces electricity for lights and small household devices. "The Pedal Power turns the concept of electricity from something abstract into something tangible. By providing the energy needed to make a light bulb turn on, the students are able to quantify just how much more energy an incandescent light bulb requires than a CFL or LED," Gross said.

By the end of the presentation, students develop a new understanding and appreciation for electricity.

Schools that would like the "Co-ops in the Classroom" program presented to their elementary students should have a teacher or administrator contact Oahe Electric's CFO Valerie Marso at 1.800.640.6243 or [vmarso@oaheelectric.com](mailto:vmarso@oaheelectric.com) to schedule a presentation.

## Oahe Electric Accepting Lineman's Scholarship Applications

Oahe Electric Cooperative is now accepting applications for its \$1,000 Lineman Scholarship, available to a full-time student enrolled or planning to enroll in a power line construction and maintenance program.

This scholarship is part of Oahe Electric's commitment to supporting the next generation of power line workers in South Dakota. By providing financial assistance to students pursuing power line maintenance education, we aim to help strengthen

the future workforce of rural electric cooperatives throughout our region.

To be eligible, applicants must be Oahe Electric members or dependents of members. Applications for the 2025-2026 academic year will be accepted through February 13, 2026.

For more information, contact Oahe Electric at 1-800-640-6243 or [oahe@oaheelectric.com](mailto:oahe@oaheelectric.com). Applications can also be downloaded by visiting our website at [www.oaheelectric.com](http://www.oaheelectric.com).

To maximize your fireplace's efficiency, always keep the damper closed when the fireplace is not in use. An open damper is like an open window, allowing warm indoor air to escape and cold air to enter. Consider installing a fireplace insert, which improves heat output by circulating warm air into the room rather than letting it escape up the chimney. Also, burn only seasoned hardwood to ensure a hotter, cleaner burn. Regularly clean and inspect your chimney to maintain safe and efficient operation.

*Source: [energy.gov](https://www.energy.gov)*





# EASEMENTS BRING SAFETY, RELIABILITY

## Why More Room Makes Sense for Co-ops, Line Crews & Members

**Jacob Boyko**

jacob.boyko@sdrea.coop

Serving rural members means maintaining thousands of miles of power line – and finding the space to safely build and access it. At your local electric cooperative, building, maintaining and repairing thousands of miles of infrastructure is a logistical challenge, but each and every piece of the system has its role in a functioning and reliable electric grid.

That's why easements, or agreements to use and access private land, are essential for co-ops and their members. At East River Electric Power

Cooperative, the generation and transmission co-op serving 25 member distribution systems in South Dakota and Minnesota, Engineering and Planning Services Manager Jon Aus works directly with co-op members to get easements for power lines.

In 2025, most cooperatives prioritize building lines along the public right of way – the area between the road and fence lines along roadways – instead of along quarter lines like they have historically, back when rights-of-way were cluttered with telephone and other overhead lines.

"That's where we like it from an access and maintenance perspective,"

South Dakota law allows electric cooperatives to place poles along public rights-of-way without needing an easement. Shown here, East River Electric's transmission lines north of Pierre are built within the right-of-way. In cases where the rights-of-way are crowded, have obstacles, or are otherwise not suitable for poles or line work, a co-op may seek an easement outside of the right-of-way.

*Photo by Jacob Boyko*

Aus said of rights-of-way. "Nowadays, when we develop a route for a line, we pick the roads we want to zigzag down to get from Point A to Point B."

Placing infrastructure along roads improves accessibility for crews and speeds up outage response time, especially when mud or snow are a factor, Aus added. But the trade offs are a workspace limited to the shoulder and ditch and overall limited access to the infrastructure.

That's where easements make all the difference. When a co-op member allows an easement, the co-op will set poles back just several more feet away from the road right-of-way onto private land, and crews can cross behind the fence when they need to access the poles. The impact on private land is minimal, but it's a massive benefit for the line crews.

"Having an easement allows crews to work on the backside of the structures," Aus said. "If you don't get an easement and you don't have any access rights, they're stuck working everything from the ditch and the roadside."

Engineers are meticulous when mapping routes for new lines, Aus added, noting the lengthy process for engineers as they consider pole placement, obstacles, hazards and community impact.

"At the onset of any project, we're evaluating the impact of our routing," Aus continued. "Public impact is right up there on our priorities along with reliability and maintenance. We don't go down routes we foresee to have challenges with public impact."

Distribution cooperatives see similar challenges on the ground. In southwest South Dakota, Black Hills Electric Cooperative System Coordinator Jesse Sorensen aims to manage a system that's not only reliable and affordable, but also built on cooperation with members.

"Very rarely do we have someone reject giving an easement," he said. "We've had very good luck sitting down with members and explaining everything to them that there are hundreds – if not thousands – of landowners that allowed easements so we could get electricity to this property."

He continued, "The biggest concerns from landowners are about losing their trees or the aesthetic value of their property, and we'll work with landowners by rerouting lines to prevent cutting prize trees or installing lines in prime views."

At East River Electric, Aus' team fields similar questions from landowners, usually concerning specific pole placement and whether poles will interfere with field access, an approach or operation of large machinery. He says it's usually something the engineers can accommodate because ultimately, co-ops want to leave members' land as good or better than they found it.

"We'll even work with landowners to pay to replace any trees we have to remove if we obtain an easement from them," Aus said.

As the co-op steadily grows and expands its transmission system, East River Electric General Counsel Danny Brown stresses that the co-op relies on voluntary easements, and in its 75-year history has never used eminent domain to obtain an easement.

"Eminent domain is not something we ever want to use," Brown explained. "We try to educate and work with the property owners the best we can. At the end of the day, an easement is voluntary, and if we can't make it work from the right of way, we have to start thinking about changing our route."

But opting for alternate, less-efficient routes is a concession that can severely impact system reliability and leads to a higher price tag for co-op members to pay. Fortunately, Aus and Sorensen said most landowners understand the value of working with their cooperative for themselves and their community.

"There have been several times when landowners have said, 'Absolutely, bring that line through here,'" Aus recalled. "They want to improve their reliability, or they know that they just need more electricity in that area for whatever they might be doing on their property. Most of the time we're welcomed with open arms."

That willingness helps keep cooperative power moving across the countryside.



When a co-op obtains an easement to build a line along a road right-of-way, the line is placed several feet away from the right-of-way border. In this photo, the right of way border is about at the fence line, with the poles placed several feet behind the fence.

On this route, East River Electric has an easement for 30 feet behind the fence line for when line crews need to maintain or repair the line, giving crews more room to work and better access to the structures.

*Photo submitted by East River Electric.*

# WORKING TOGETHER IS POWERFUL

## Understanding the Three-Tier Co-op Structure

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### What Is an Electric Cooperative? (Tier 1: Distribution Co-ops)

An electric cooperative is a non-profit, member-owned utility governed by a member-elected board of directors. Co-ops are different from a typical utility because they don't report to shareholders; a co-op's responsibility is solely to the people it serves.

Member-ownership keeps the co-op focused on serving the interests of the community and maintaining low costs to members. Co-ops employ democratic principles; each member has one vote, which keeps control local and shields the co-op and members from outside interests.

Your local electric cooperative owns and maintains distribution power lines to serve members throughout its territory. While electric cooperatives' territories cover almost all of South Dakota, most of the state's population lives in cities and small towns and purchase electricity from a city-owned municipal power system or a for-profit investor-owned utility.

Most of the electric distribution cooperatives in South Dakota were organized by members beginning in the 1930s and 1940s to serve the rural areas that investor-owned utilities determined would not be profitable enough to be worth serving.

Rural residents formed co-ops, going

door-to-door collecting \$5 sign-on fees – a lot of money at the time – from their neighbors to kickstart the fledgling co-ops. They applied for loans from the Rural Electrification Administration to begin construction, and by the early 1950s, most rural South Dakotans were enjoying amenities made possible by electricity.

### Who Supplies My Co-op's Power? (Tier 2: Regional G&Ts)

East River Electric Power Cooperative in Madison and Rushmore Electric Power Cooperative in Rapid City are generation and transmission (G&T) cooperatives that sell electricity to a total of 27 distribution systems in South Dakota.

East River sells electricity to 19 member systems located in eastern South Dakota and six member systems in western Minnesota, while Rushmore sells electricity to eight member systems: seven located in western South Dakota and Cam Wal Electric Cooperative serving Campbell and Walworth counties in eastern South Dakota.

Both East River and Rushmore are governed by a board of directors comprised of directors from the distribution co-ops. Therefore, each distribution co-op receives one vote on its respective G&T's board.

Beyond selling electricity, East River and Rushmore assist their member systems in other areas; East River builds and maintains transmission systems to serve its member systems and offers support for information technology, marketing, public relations and economic development. Rushmore also offers marketing, PR and IT support, along with engineering services.



Two co-op systems in South Dakota are affiliated with neither East River nor Rushmore. Rosebud Electric Cooperative, based in Gregory, and Grand Electric, based in Bison, are part of District 9 – a collection of other distribution cooperative systems in Minnesota and North Dakota that purchase their energy from multiple sources rather than from a single supplier.

### Who generates my electricity? (Tier 3: Basin Electric)

Rushmore Electric, East River Electric, and District 9 systems including Rosebud Electric and Grand Electric purchase energy from Basin Electric Power Cooperative, a G&T cooperative based in Bismarck, North Dakota.

Just like the regional G&Ts it serves, Basin is governed by a board of directors representing its member systems. There are 11 directors on Basin's board, and they know the energy industry inside and out – after all, to serve on the Basin board, the directors must also serve on their local co-op's board as well as the regional G&T's board, and are elected by their colleagues to represent the co-op, board, and its members.

Currently, Mike McQuistion of the Fort Pierre area represents his local co-op, West Central Electric Cooperative, on Rushmore's board, and represents Rushmore on Basin's board.

Kermit Pearson of the Lake City area represents his local co-op, Lake Region Electric Association, on East River's board, and represents East River on Basin's board.

The cooperative systems that comprise District 9 also elect a director from

a District 9-affiliated co-op to represent them on Basin's board. Wayne Peltier from Minnesota Valley Electric Cooperative in Montevideo, Minn., represents Rosebud, Grand and the other District 9 co-ops on Basin's board.

Basin Electric was formed in 1961 by electric co-ops in the upper Midwest to generate and transmit electricity exclusively for cooperative systems to purchase. The system has grown to serve North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico.

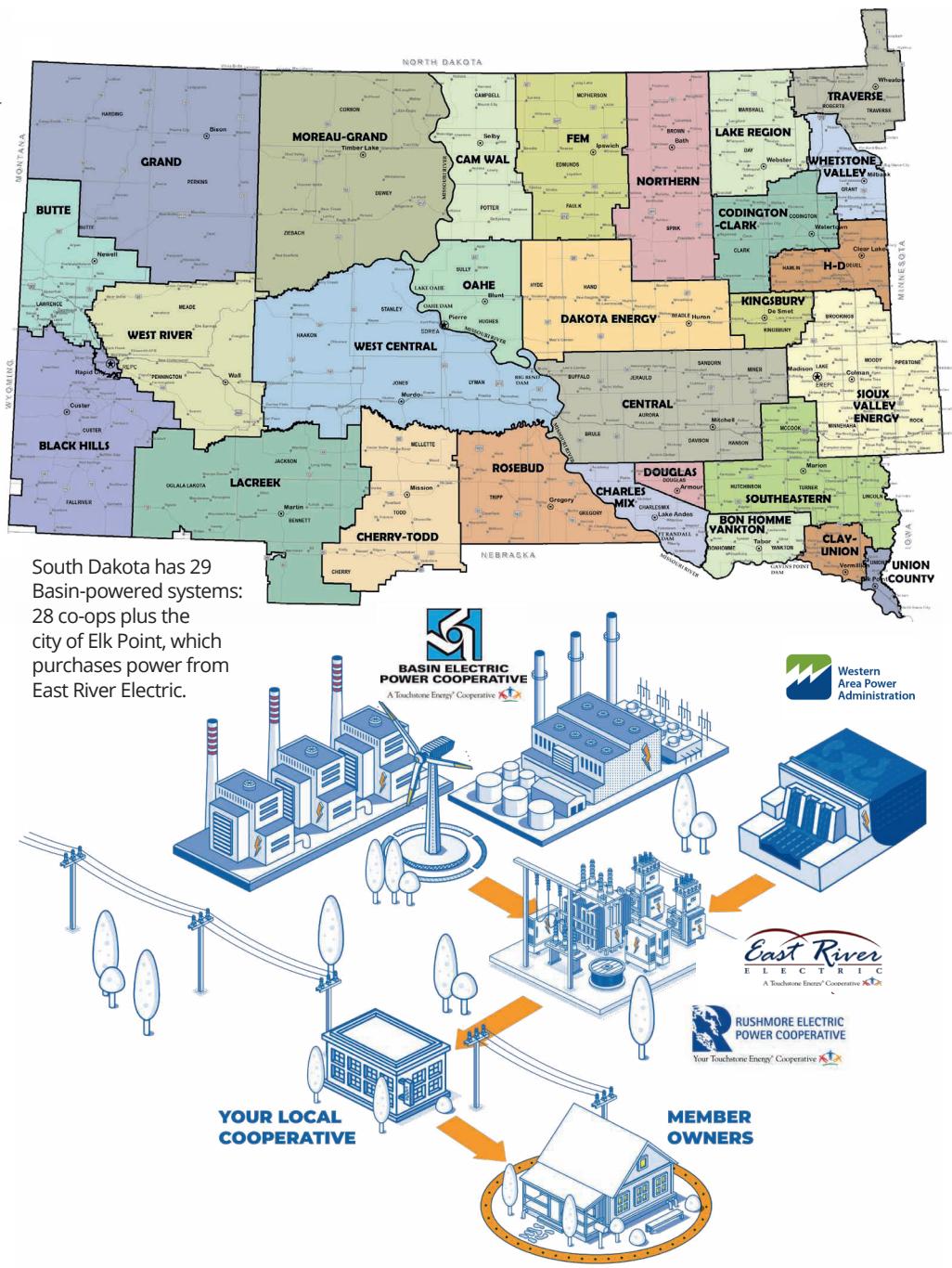
Basin Electric generates electricity using its owned and leased generation assets, which include coal, natural gas, solar, wind, oil and waste heat, with a maximum generating capacity of about 8,500 megawatts.

## Other Generation: Western Area Power Administration

East River, Rushmore and the District 9 systems also purchase an allocated amount of electricity from the Western Area Power Administration. WAPA is the power marketing administration under the U.S. Department of Energy that markets and transmits power from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers-operated Missouri River dams and other generators in the western U.S.

WAPA purchases make up about 18% of East River Electric and 12% of Rushmore Electric's purchases, respectively. District 9 systems also purchase some of their electricity directly from WAPA.

Each year, WAPA transmits about 25,000 gigawatt hours of electricity across its 17,000-circuit mile transmission system. WAPA serves a 15-state region that includes North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada and California.



## Basin Electric Directors Representing South Dakota



**Kermit Pearson**  
East River, Lake Region  
*Submitted Photo*



**Wayne Peltier**  
District 9, Minnesota Valley  
*Submitted Photo*



**Mike McQuistion**  
Rushmore, West Central  
*Submitted Photo*

## REGISTER TO WIN!

Bring this coupon and mailing label to the Touchstone Energy® Cooperatives booth at the Black Hills Stock Show & Rodeo to win a prize!

Your Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Your E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_



To have your event listed on this page, send complete information, including date, event, place and contact to your local electric cooperative. Include your name, address and daytime telephone number. Information must be submitted at least eight weeks prior to your event. Please call ahead to confirm date, time and location of event.

### UNTIL JAN. 6

#### Garden Glow

5-9 p.m. (Closed Dec. 24-25, Jan. 1)  
SDSU McCrory Gardens  
Brookings, SD  
[www.sdstate.edu/mccrory-gardens](http://www.sdstate.edu/mccrory-gardens)

### UNTIL DEC. 26

#### Christmas at the Capitol

8 a.m.-10 p.m. (Holidays Included)  
South Dakota State Capitol  
Pierre, SD  
605-773-3178  
[christmasatthecapitol.sd.gov](http://christmasatthecapitol.sd.gov)

### DEC. 20-21, 23-24, 27-28

#### 1880 Train Holiday Express

Hot Chocolate, Santa  
Hill City, SD  
[www.1880train.com](http://www.1880train.com)  
605-574-2222

### DEC. 31

#### New Year's Eve Bash

Doors Open at 5:30 p.m.  
American Legion  
Sioux Falls, SD  
Tickets: 605-336-3470

### JAN. 6-8

#### Dakota Farm Show

USD Dakota Dome  
Vermillion, SD  
[www.dakotafarmshow.com](http://www.dakotafarmshow.com)

### JAN. 10

#### Knights of Columbus Coats for Kids Bowling Tournament

1 p.m.  
Meadowood Lanes  
3809 Sturgis Rd.  
Rapid City, SD

### JAN. 20

#### Prohibition & the Pig

Lake Cty. Museum Fundraiser;  
Prohibition-Era Bootlegging  
6 p.m.-7:30 p.m.  
\$60 per ticket  
The Office Bar & Grill  
Madison, SD  
605-256-5308

### JAN. 22

#### Gentleman's Quartet: Instrumental

7 p.m.  
Johnson Fine Arts Center  
Aberdeen, SD

### JAN. 23-24

#### Pro Snocross Races

Deadwood, SD  
605-578-1876

### JAN. 30-FEB. 7

**Annual Black Hills Stock Show**  
Central States Fairgrounds  
Rapid City, SD  
[www.centralstatesfairinc.com](http://www.centralstatesfairinc.com)  
605-355-3861

### FEB. 1

#### The Great Lake County Hotdish Competition

11:30-1:30 p.m.  
St. Thomas School Gym  
Madison, SD  
605-256-5308

### FEB. 7-8

**The Black Market/Formerly Benson's Flea Market**  
Sioux Falls, SD  
605-332-6004

### FEB. 13-16

**12th Annual Frost Fest**  
Brookings, SD  
605-692-7444

### FEB. 20-22

**Winterfest**  
Fireworks, Parade of Lights,  
Bonfire, Snowshoeing  
Lead, SD  
[www.leadmethere.com/winterfest](http://www.leadmethere.com/winterfest)  
605-584-1100

### FEB. 21

**Bellator Titans**  
**Casino Night Fundraiser**

6-11 p.m.  
City Lights Bar & Event Center  
Aberdeen, SD

### FEB. 22

#### C Street Brass

4 p.m.  
Johnson Fine Arts Center  
Aberdeen, SD

**Note: We publish contact information as provided. If no phone number is given, none will be listed. Please call ahead to verify the event is still being held.**