



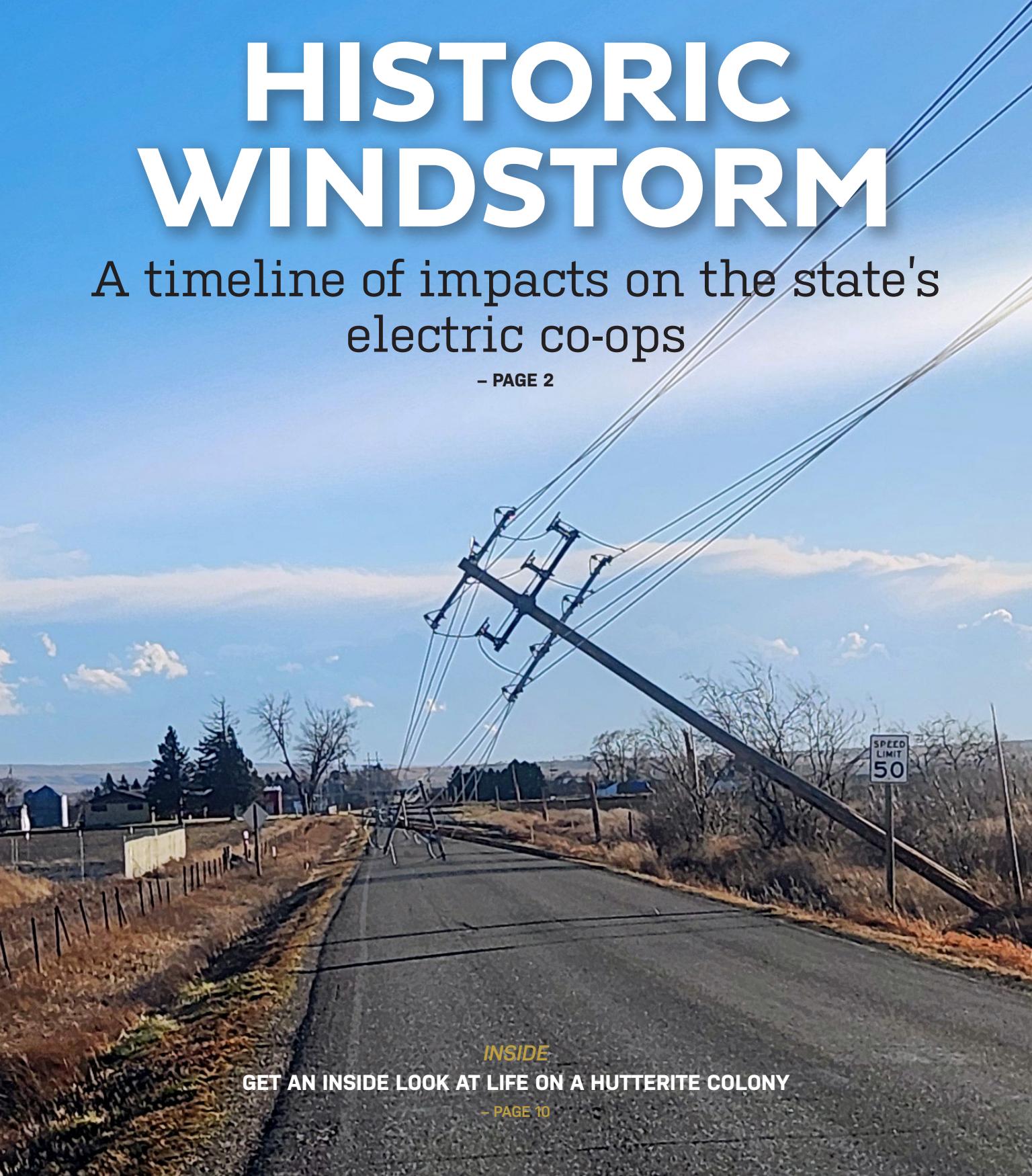
Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | FEBRUARY 2026

HISTORIC WINDSTORM

A timeline of impacts on the state's
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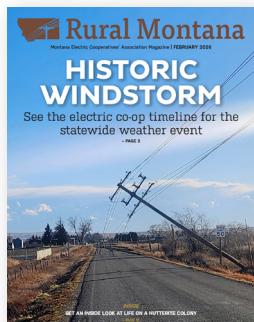
Stories from the famous ranch



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Life on a Colony

Community is central to life on a Hutterite Colony



COVER

About our cover:
High winds knocked down power poles across the state. |
PHOTO COURTESY OF
YELLOWSTONE VALLEY
ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

Rural Montana

February 2026

Vol. 72 | No. 2

(ISSN0199-6401)

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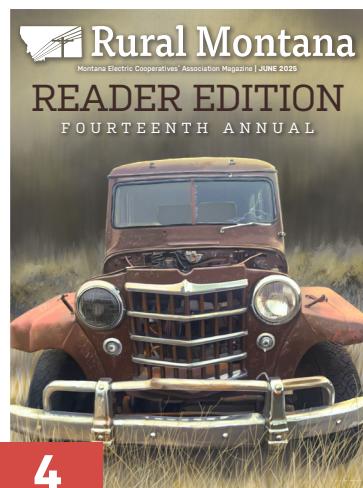
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You think you know someone

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



SEVERAL weeks ago, Mike Milburn invited me to visit his home near Cascade for breakfast and to discuss a few issues before the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. Mike is chair of the organization, which is responsible for developing regional power plans and fish and wildlife programs for the Columbia River Basin.

I first met Mike in 2005, when he was a member of the Montana House of Representatives and I was a lobbyist for a Montana electricity generation company. We stayed in touch over the next two decades, but it wasn't until that morning at his ranch that I learned about his fascinating background and connection to the early days of electric cooperatives.

As I admired the collection of old photographs on his wall, Mike explained they were from the famed N Bar Ranch in central Montana, where he was raised. After hearing several captivating stories about his grandfather, who co-owned the ranch, I asked RM Editor Ryan Hall to sit down with Mike to tell his story, which is included in this issue.

That same day, Ryan mentioned he

was considering a story on Hutterite colonies. I asked what angle he planned to take. Ryan explained that Hutterite colonies are found all over the state, many are served by electric cooperatives, yet few people truly understand what they are. My first thought was, "I've talked to dozens of Hutterites who shopped at the sporting goods store where I worked in high school, and I've hunted on several colonies around the state. I know all about them!" As it turns out, after reading Ryan's story, I realized I didn't know much at all.

These two stories made me reflect on how much we think we know about people and how little we actually do. That, to me, is a big part of why our country feels so divided right now. It's easy to dismiss opposing viewpoints based on what we read on social media, see on the news or hear on the radio. I'd like to believe there's still a chance we can come together if we take the time to have meaningful conversations and truly learn about one another. 

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Windstorm wreaks havoc

WINDSTORM TIMELINE: DEC. 17



on co-ops across the state



On Dec. 17, high wind warnings across the state turned to reality as trees were knocked over onto powerlines, power poles were snapped and wide outages reported. On these two pages is a timeline of how a majority of the state's electric cooperatives were impacted, highlighting wind speeds, the first outages, peak outages and when power was restored.

WINDSTORM TIMELINE: DEC. 18-24



DEC. 18

- ▲ 2:30 a.m. Majority of Big Flat Electric members back in service
- ▲ 2:45 a.m. Majority of Beartooth Electric members back in service
- ▼ 5:45 a.m. NorVal Electric: 419 members out
- ▼ 7: a.m. Missoula Electric: 4,833 members out
- ▲ 7:22 a.m. All Vigilante Electric members back in service
- ▲ 9:48 a.m. 85 mph winds reported in Livingston
- ▲ 10:45 a.m. 60 mph winds reported in Pryor
- ▲ Noon Last Sun River Electric member back in power
- ▲ 2 p.m. Majority of McCone Electric members restored
- ▲ 2 p.m. Final member of Southeast Electric power restored
- ▼ 2:48 p.m. 3,000 Lincoln Electric members out of power
- ▼ 2:50 p.m. NorVal Electric: 24 members out
- ▲ 3 p.m. All Beartooth Electric members back in service
- ▲ 7:15 p.m. All NorVal Electric members power restored
- ▼ 10:27 p.m. 300 members of Lincoln Electric without power
- ▲ 10:30 p.m. Last of McCone Electric members' power restored
- ▲ 11 p.m. 99 percent of YVEC members have power

DEC. 19

- ▲ 3 a.m. 96 mph winds reported in Mount Aeneas (Bigfork area)
- ▲ 5:48 a.m. 86 mph winds reported in Livingston
- ▲ 10 a.m. Final Yellowstone Valley Electric member had power restored
- ▼ 3:45 p.m. 200 Lincoln Electric members without power
- ▲ 8:30 p.m. Park Electric: All members power restored
- ▲ 9 p.m. All Big Flat Electric members power restored
- ▲ Late evening Majority of Flathead Electric members' power restored

DEC. 20-24

- Dec. 20, 7 a.m. Missoula Electric: Peak workers dispatched (more than 50 lineworkers, tree crew and contractors)
- ▲ Dec. 20, 6:10 p.m. All Ravalli Electric members' power restored
- ▲ Dec. 20, end of day All Lincoln Electric members back in power
- ▼ Dec. 21, 7 a.m. Missoula Electric: 636 members out
- ▲ Dec. 22, 7 p.m. All Northern Lights members' power restored
- ▲ Dec. 23, 11:45 p.m. Last Big Horn County Electric member restored
- ▲ Dec. 24, 3 a.m. All Missoula Electric members' power restored
- ▲ Dec. 24, 10 a.m. Last Flathead Electric member's power restored

Graphic by Nick Daniels | MECA



Send Reader Issue content

WANTED: Reader stories, poems and photos

BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

How quickly time flies when you're having fun! We can't believe that this year will mark our 15th edition of the annual *Rural Montana* Reader Issue.

In 2012, *Rural Montana* debuted its Reader Issue, a unique concept among statewide electric co-op magazines where we turn over nearly the entire magazine to our members.

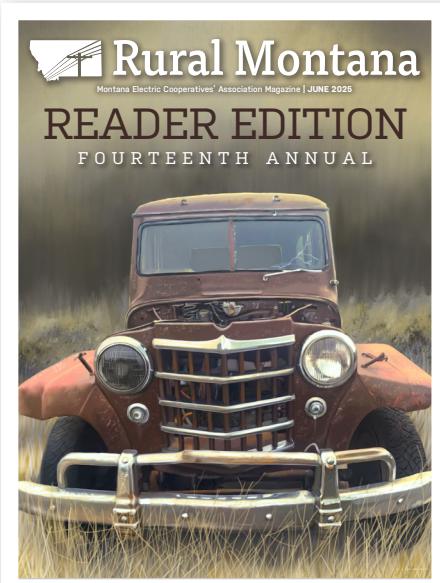
We are asking for your help as we begin preparing for this year's *Rural Montana* Reader Issue, which will take place in June. So find your trusty pen, pull the comfy chair in front of the computer or dust off your camera — this issue will be comprised almost exclusively of content you provide.

All submissions must be received by April 1, and must be your own, *original*

work. **You must include your address and phone number to be considered for publication — submissions without this information will be disqualified.**

Below you can find more specific information on how to get your work published in the state's largest monthly magazine — and seen by about 40 percent of the state's population — as well as what you can expect to get paid if your submission is used:

If you have any questions, call Editor Ryan Hall at 406-761-8333. **To submit stand-alone photos, email rural@mtco-ops.com. Send stories (and related photos) to ryanh@mtco-ops.com, or mail any item for submission to *Rural Montana*, PO Box 3469, Great Falls MT 59403. Good Luck!**



COVER PHOTO

\$100

- Pictures or pictures of paintings must be digital (original and hard copies of drawings and paintings are allowed), **vertical**, at least 300 dots per inch (dpi) and at least 12-inches tall by 10-inches wide. **No photo prints please.**
- Please leave open space, such as sky, at the top for the name of the magazine.
- Be creative. Your photo, drawing or painting can be a landscape, wildlife, people, anything — as long as it's appropriate for all ages. And remember, *Rural Montana* has a policy to not run photos of dead animals.

OTHER PHOTOS

\$10-\$50, depending on size and placement

- All things being equal, unique subjects and creativity typically win. Montana's sunsets and sunrises are undoubtedly among the best in the world, but we probably get 10 pictures of them each month, and double that ahead of the Reader Issue. The same goes for wildlife, so if you plan on submitting a photo of an elk or an eagle, choose one that is unique in some way. Humor — either in the subject matter or the caption — is encouraged.

STORIES AND POEMS

\$10-\$25, depending on if photos are involved

- Personal, historical, humorous or uniquely Montana stories tend to resonate with our readers.
- Works of fiction are allowed, but please clearly mark it as such.
- Stories with photos get first consideration. Photos must be 300 dpi and at least 4 inches by 6 inches. **Digital photos are required**, with an exception made only for historical photos, with editor approval. If you send a photo from a cellphone, please make sure you select the "send as original size" option.
- Keep stories and poems to a maximum of **450 words**, with one or two photos. **Longer stories without prior approval from the editor will be disqualified.** Stories must be submitted electronically (emailed or sent on a jump drive). Please no handwritten submissions.
- Any use of artificial intelligence to create a story or photo must be disclosed.

Aiding in the efforts for missing indigenous people

Initiative brings advanced search technology to Blackfeet Nation

In late July, the Blackfeet Indian Reservation took a significant step toward improving public safety with the installation of a new license-plate-reader camera system designed to assist in locating missing youth and indigenous people. The effort reflects a growing nationwide push to address the disproportionate rates of disappearances in native communities and to provide law enforcement with more effective tools when time is critical.

The project was made possible through a multi-agency collaboration involving the National License Plate Reader Program (LPR), the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), Blackfeet Tribal Police (BLES), Glacier Electric Cooperative (GEC) and Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association (MECA). Together, these partners coordinated logistics, secured equipment and ensured the technology could be integrated safely along key roadways on the reservation.

"This project was brought to the MECA Tribal Relations Committee, and right away cooperatives around the state jumped on board to get them installed," said Jonnalea St. Goddard, manager of member services and chair of the MECA Tribal Relations Committee. The cameras on the Blackfeet Reservation were the third installed in the state, and plans are in the works to get them installed on every reservation in Montana.

The newly installed cameras include license-plate recognition capabilities, allowing authorities to quickly identify vehicles linked to missing-person investigations or other emergencies. For tribal law enforcement, which often faces vast geographic areas and limited



BLES Staff and Glacier Electric Staff. | COURTESY PHOTO



Glacier Electric employees Jonnalea St. Goddard and Charley Wolf Tail pose with LPR program leaders. | COURTESY PHOTO

staffing, the system represents a major advancement. Officials say the cameras will help narrow search zones, confirm travel patterns and generate leads more rapidly during the first crucial hours of an investigation.

Many families on the reservation

have been directly affected by the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples (MMIP). The hope is this new system brings both prevention and peace of mind. This technology is not meant to replace traditional policing or community vigilance, but to strengthen the tools available to protect residents.

For the Blackfeet Nation, the initiative represents a proactive, collaborative approach to safeguarding their youth and honoring those who have gone missing by improving the chances of bringing them home safely.

"This is a proven system that has already helped in Montana, by bringing someone back home to their reservation. I was honored to be a part of this project and look forward to spearheading many more projects like it in Indian Country," St. Goddard stated.

The collaboration between so many departments and electric cooperatives showcases one of the seven Cooperative Principles – *Concern for the Community.* RM

Supply chain still challenges affordable, reliable service

By CATHY CASH | NRECA

KINKS in the supply chain caused by the COVID pandemic may be in the rearview for most consumers, but new bottlenecks in the flow of goods and services are challenging Montana electric cooperatives' ability to deliver affordable and reliable service. And the circumstances squeezing the supply chains for electric co-ops are unlikely to ease in the foreseeable future.

Basically, there's a higher demand for electricity, but the supply of equipment needed to maintain or build more power plants has not kept up. There's also a skilled labor shortage and tariffs on imported materials. All these things add up to delayed energy projects at increased costs.

With all things going digital, from phones to thermostats, electricity use is up. To sustain the growing digital economy, huge data centers with appetites for electricity akin to that of a small city are sprouting up across rural America and in electric co-ops' service territories. These centers soak up extreme amounts of power to serve the Internet's relentless demand for high-speed networking, data storage and AI (artificial intelligence).

U.S.-based engineering, procurement and construction firms are scrambling to meet work orders for new power projects as there is more demand today than they can keep up with, said Stephanie Crawford, regulatory affairs director at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA).

Electric co-ops are "finding that these firms cannot respond to requests, they're charging price premiums or that planning for projects four years out is already 'too late,'" she said.

As a result, equipment crucial for electricity projects – from new substations to power plant maintenance and outage repairs after storms hit – are on delay and coming in at much higher prices.



Electric co-ops are seeing lag times of up to four years between orders and delivery of transformers at double the prices compared to pre-pandemic times. | **PHOTO BY ERMCO**

tions to power plant maintenance and outage repairs after storms hit – are on delay and coming in at much higher prices.

Co-ops are seeing lag times of up to four years between an order for a transformer and its delivery. Prices are up 70 percent to 100 percent compared to 2020. Lead times for new gas turbines for a power plant can range from three to six years, and those turbines cost 25 percent more than they did just three years ago.

According to one industry insider, an electric co-op that spent \$10 million on materials and equipment for electricity projects and maintenance in 2020 had to spend more than \$15.5 million in 2025 to keep up.

So, what is your electric co-op doing to maintain reliable and affordable service?

Collaboration, which is baked into every co-op's DNA, is key. Co-ops are finding themselves working with equipment suppliers and contractors closer than ever, and planning their orders at least a year in advance of construction to work out the snags of the current supply chain.

Knowing their exact inventory and the physical storage space also helps co-ops keep necessary equipment on hand, materials flowing and projects as near to schedule as possible.

ERMCO, a subsidiary of Little Rock-based Arkansas Electric Cooperatives, makes distribution transformers with American-made steel at its facilities in Tennessee and Georgia, and is not experiencing price spikes or delays. Still, the transformer market as a whole is not immune to price pressures impacting other manufacturers reliant on imported cores made with foreign steel.

The biggest challenge right now is "navigating uncertainty," said ERMCO President and CEO Tim Mills.

"The best path forward is to develop a long-term sourcing strategy and work closely with suppliers to lock in future needs. We need to embrace a more collaborative model between co-ops and their suppliers," he said.

By working as a team, electric co-ops, manufacturers and their industry partners will be able to improve forecasting their equipment needs, stay ahead of potential demand changes and experience a smoother supply chain. RM

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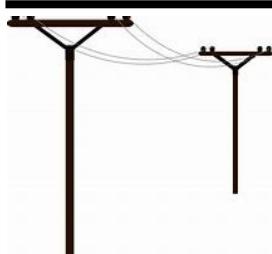
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ALONG THESE LINES . . .



BEWARE OF VAMPIRE ENERGY

Vampire Energy, also called phantom energy or standby power, is the electricity that some devices use when they are turned off but still plugged into a power outlet. The most common culprits are electronics and other 'smart' devices that have a built-in clock or digital display, but other appliances can be energy vampires too. These use the most vampire energy in your home:

- **Televisions.** TVs can be some of the most energy-sucking devices in your home—especially modern "smart" TVs with all the bells and whistles, including satellite TV, Wi-Fi connectivity, DVR capabilities, and more.
- **Computers.** Computers don't use nearly as much energy as TVs, especially if they are smaller devices such as laptops and tablets. But their chargers can be major energy vampires. Unplug the charger from the outlet to avoid using phantom power.
- **Refrigerators.** Refrigerators are major energy vampires, but there is not much you can do about that except to buy one that's more energy-efficient.
- **Thermostats.** Your thermostat, air conditioner, and hot water heater use a lot of energy, but you can't turn them off. The best thing for you to do is to choose a "smart thermostat" and program it so it doesn't use more power than necessary.
- **Kitchen appliances.** Microwaves, coffee makers, and other small appliances don't use a lot of power individually, but together it can add up. Choose items without a clock or digital display to reduce their power consumption.

Other appliances or devices that are vampires of energy, and that you may consider unplugging when you are not using them would be: toasters, can openers, hair curlers/dryers, laser printers, space heaters, lamps, cell phone chargers and video game systems — just to name a few.

Although it would be great if we could eliminate energy vampires entirely, the reality is a little more complicated. Unplugging every single appliance every time you leave the room is impractical, and some devices, like your refrigerator, can't be unplugged at all. Still, you can reduce the amount of electricity your appliances use by choosing the most energy-efficient devices and following practical energy conservation tips.

Source: Internet

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transformers...

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If the problem seems to be just at your location, the other place we might want you to check is under your transformer(s). Many times we find a dead raccoon or other animal on the ground below the transformer, sometimes even still on the transformer!

Knowing where the problem is saves our linemen a lot of precious time and you a lot of inconvenience.



**Know what's below.
Call before you dig.**

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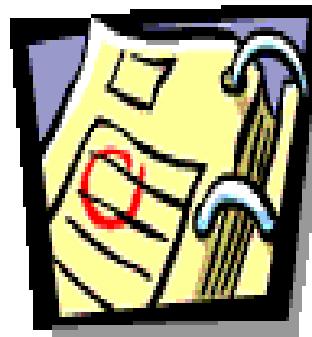
Call Action for Eastern Montana at **1-800-551-3191** to get help through LIEAP or Energy Share of Montana. Applications can be picked up at the office of MYEC, or go on-line to get an application at myec.coop.

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applications are due
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*Happy Valentine's
Day*

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calendars
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87th
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1. Check all breakers and fuses in the building.
2. Check the breakers below your meter.
3. Check to see if your neighbors have power.

MID-YELLOWSTONE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.

Connected Homes:

THE POWER OF WHAT'S PLUGGED IN

By JENNAH DENNEY | NRECA

OUR homes are changing, and so is the electric grid. Across the country, more households are becoming “smart” and connected. From thermostats that adjust automatically to electric vehicles that charge overnight, the devices we plug in are becoming intelligent, flexible and increasingly central to how we use and even produce electricity.

For your electric cooperative, this growing network of connected devices creates new ways for co-ops and their members to work together to keep power reliable and affordable.

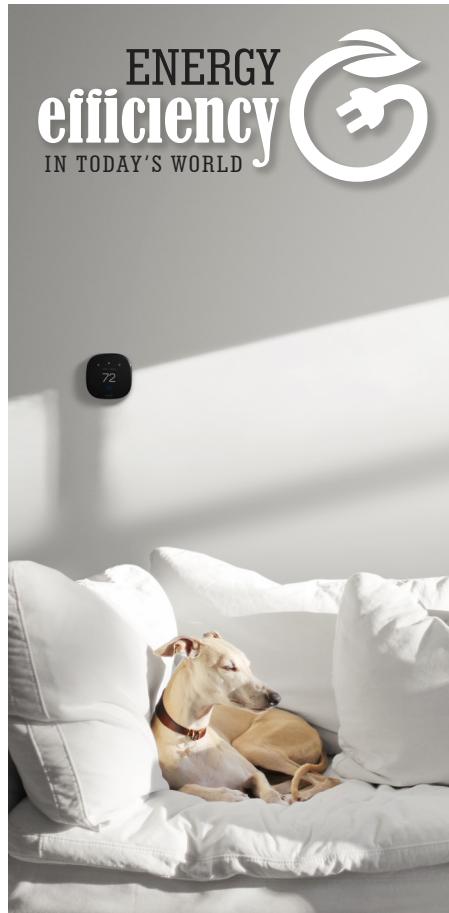
What is a connected home?

A connected home is one where everyday appliances and devices can communicate with each other, you or even with your electric co-op. These could include thermostats that adjust to your patterns and preferences, water heaters that operate when electricity is cheaper, home batteries that store solar-generated power for later use or air-source heat pumps that efficiently heat and cool your home.

Each of these tools can help you use energy more efficiently — and when they are managed effectively, or when many homes coordinate and balance their energy use together, they can also help your co-op keep power flowing reliably and affordably for the entire community.

The power you don't see

You might have heard the phrase “behind the meter.” This simply refers to energy equipment that operates on your side of the electric meter that you own or control. This could include solar panels, battery storage systems or



Connected devices such as smart thermostats can help you use energy more efficiently. When many homes coordinate and balance their energy use together, connected devices can also help your co-op keep power flowing reliably and affordably for the entire community. | PHOTO COURTESY OF LG

connected devices such as EV chargers or smart thermostats.

Individually, they may seem small, but together they can make a big difference. If hundreds of water heaters slightly delay heating during a peak time of day (when electricity use is high), the co-op can avoid purchasing power at a higher cost, which essentially keeps rates lower for members.

If home batteries store solar-generated energy during the day and release it back to the grid at night, it helps balance the overall supply and demand of electricity.

How connected devices help

Each day, our electric grid must maintain a perfect balance to match the amount of electricity generated with the amount of electricity we are using — all in real time. Because electricity can't easily be stored at scale, this balancing act is constant and complex.

Connected devices give electric co-ops powerful new tools to help manage this complexity. Traditionally, electricity use was simple: flip a switch and power flows instantly. But today, many devices can shift when and how they use energy, also known as load flexibility. This allows you and your co-op to better align energy use during times when electricity is more affordable, without sacrificing comfort or convenience.

The cooperative advantage

Electric co-ops are led by the members they serve. That means co-ops can design connected home programs that work for your community, not Wall Street. Members who participate can often earn bill credits or incentives, and every member benefits from lower peak costs and improved reliability.

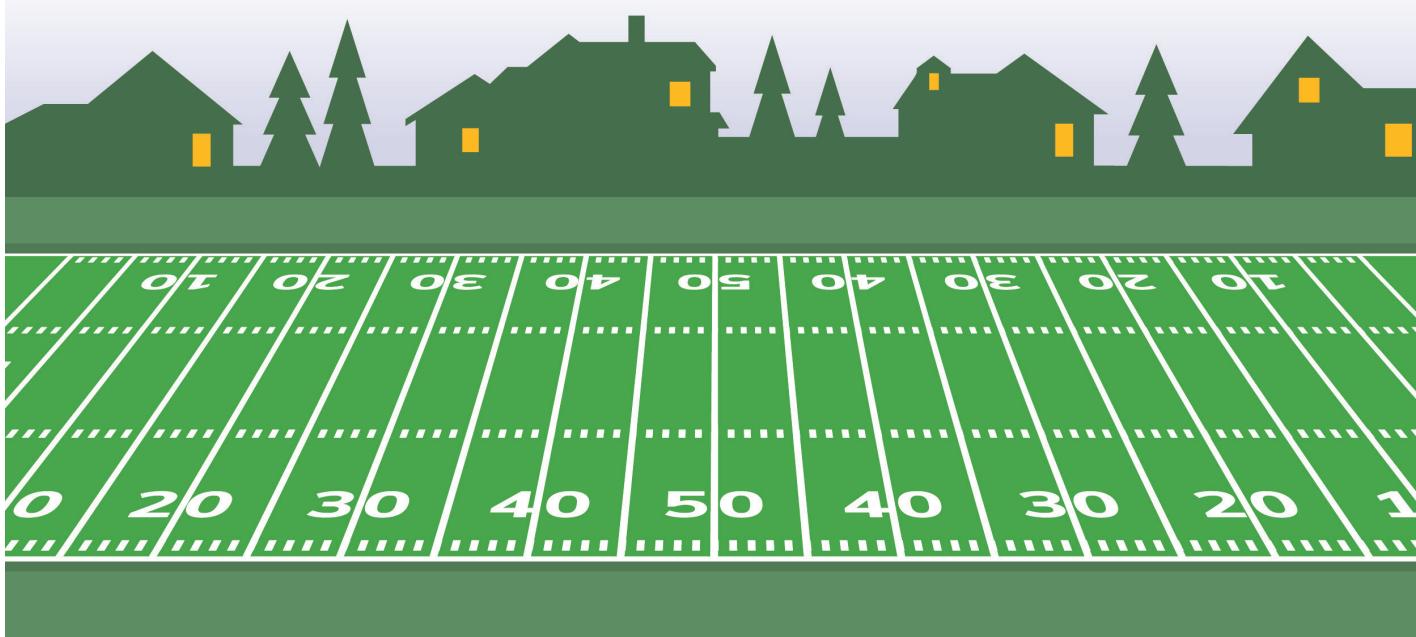
Together, we can build a grid that's smarter, more flexible and ready for the future that's powered by what's plugged in. Contact your local electric co-op or visit their website to learn more about programs for connected devices and additional ways you can save energy (and money!).



**Energy
Explorers**

Score Big with Energy Savings!

Every Super Bowl MVP makes big plays—and you can too! Use the clues below to fill in the blanks and learn how you can help save energy at home by making smart, efficient plays. Double check your work in the answer key.



1. Spend time outdoors or unplugged to reduce your _____ time and save energy.
2. Turn off the _____ while brushing your teeth.
3. When it's cold, wear an extra layer of _____ instead of turning up the thermostat.
4. Keep doors and _____ closed when your home's heating/cooling system is turned on.
5. Unplug smaller electronics like _____ when you're not using them.
6. Turn off _____ when you leave a room.

Word Bank:
windows
clothing
water
lights
screen
chargers

Answer Key: 1. screen 2. water 3. clothing 4. windows 5. chargers 6. lights

MONTANA U.S. REPRESENTATIVES

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

THIS MONTH'S QUESTION:

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

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



Rep. Zinke

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 Ph: (202) 225-5628

Representative Ryan Zinke

As the representative of western Montana, I'm heading into 2026 focused on defending our Montana way of life and supporting the men and women who live and work here. For me, that starts with standing up for our public lands. I will continue to oppose any wholesale sale of public lands and fight to expand public access so Montanans can hunt, fish, hike, bike, kayak, camp, rock climb and enjoy what we all own. Protecting public lands also means expanding responsible resource development and keeping our lands working. We burn more feet of timber than we harvest every year, so active management and expanding timber harvests have never been more important. I'm also advocating for commonsense predator policies, including the full delisting of all grizzly bear populations, to protect ranchers and their livestock. Our public lands should be open for all uses by all people, and I will remain one of their strongest defenders here in D.C.

I'm also staying focused on infrastructure and public safety for our counties and rural communities.

More than \$8 million for water infrastructure and law enforcement needs across eight western Montana counties just passed the House, including upgrades to water systems in Philipsburg and Missoula County, and added support for sheriffs and first responders in Mineral, Lake, Beaverhead, Lincoln and Sanders counties. As a member of the Appropriations Committee, I'm working to get these funds signed into law and the funding delivered to the counties that need them. I also have more than \$20 million in funding for shovel-ready infrastructure projects for bridges and roads across western Montana. I will keep pushing to get those projects across the finish line to benefit our communities and improve the quality of life for all Montanans. My North Star remains unwavering: putting Montana first in every decision and delivering tangible results that improve the lives of Montanans across the state. I am confident the 2026 session of Congress will be a productive one, and I look forward to working every day to deliver for rural Montana. RM



Rep. Downing

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

Representative Troy Downing

Hello! Congressman Troy Downing checking back in. I appreciate the opportunity to share an update on my work with *Rural Montana*.

It has been an honor to represent Montana's Second Congressional District over the past year. My team and I have been hard at work returning millions of dollars to Second District constituents, securing funding for community projects across central and eastern Montana, and getting legislation passed through the House. I even had my first bill signed into law by President Trump.

This year, I hope to build upon this success by honing in on Main Street, ensuring burdensome regulation stays out of the way of Montana businesses and expanding access to capital for job creators, especially those in the rural areas that I represent.

In 2025, the House rolled back 22 regulations that hamstrung energy producers and small businesses alike. This included my H.J. Res. 104, which prevented an outright ban on coal leasing in the Powder River Basin and will proliferate affordable, reliable energy for Montanans across the Second District. I look forward

to maintaining this momentum in 2026.

House Republicans also passed the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, the most significant support for working families, small businesses, farmers, ranchers and energy producers our country has ever seen. I'm proud to have worked alongside my colleagues to deliver results for Montanans, and I can't wait to see many of the provisions enacted in this landmark legislation bear fruit come tax season.

Finally, last year, I introduced the Expanding Access to Capital for Rural Job Creators Act. This legislation ensures that rural Main Street receives the long-overdue attention it deserves from the SEC's Office of the Advocate for Small Business Capital Formation to allow these businesses to flourish. In the new year, I will be hard at work to get my bill signed into law.

If you have a question, require assistance or would like to learn more about arranging a meeting with me or my staff, please give us a call or stop by any one of our offices in Helena, Billings or Washington. Every day, I am humbled to serve you. It is truly the honor of a lifetime. RM

LIFE ON A Hutterite Colony



Religion and community at center of colony traditions

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

THE good of the community and all its members is the top priority on a Hutterite colony.

Midway Colony near Conrad is a member of Sun River Electric Cooperative. Its pig barn, egg-laying facility/poultry barn, kitchen, laundry and homes are all powered by the co-op.

Built from 2004-2008, the colony spun off of the Miller Colony after that one topped 160 members.

"If you don't have enough work for everyone, the colony can't sustain itself," said David "Shorty" Hofer, colony secretary, in explaining why new colonies are built. He said the Midway Colony is currently at 102 members.

Life on the colony isn't much different than that on a farm in most ways. Everyone has a job and kids start working at a young age.

The differences come in the religious focus and the emphasis on success as a community, and community ownership of most assets.

"From an outsider looking in, you'd call it socialism," Hofer said, adding

that the difference, is the religious base to the Hutterites' system.

Importance of the church

Shorty said Hutterites are called that because they followed the teachings of Jakob Hutter, who founded the movement in 1528 to escape religious persecution. He mentioned that their way of life is very similar to that of Mennonites, as both came from the same movement out of the Catholic Church. Their Confession of Faith is also the same.

The entire colony attends church everyday at 5:30 p.m., where men and women sit separately, rather than as families. There is also a 90-minute service every Sunday morning. Children younger than age 6 do not attend church.

The first minister serves as the head of the colony. There is also a second minister, a secretary, the farm boss and several directors, which together form the colony leadership. The colony elects the ministers, which then must

be affirmed by other nearby colonies' ministers. The other leadership positions are decided by a popular vote on each colony, with no affirmation required.

Shorty noted that Hutterites are baptized at age 20, instead of at a young age, so they can choose to commit to God.

Farming as a way of life

The colony sustains itself through its farming operation – which is a lot more than just the produce many people see at summer farmer's markets across the state. Midway Colony also grows barley, wheat, lentils and canola, and raises animals.

Shorty said the colony is home to 50,000 laying hens, which produce organic eggs for Wilcox. They also raise about 7,000 fryer chickens a year, 1,500 sow pigs that are sent to the Midwest for finishing, 300 cows, 800 turkeys and 800 ducks. While the fryer chickens, pigs and turkeys are mostly sold, the ducks are used by the colony,

being served about once a week in the cafeteria.

Colony setup

Each family is given its own three-bedroom, two- or three-bath home, but very few things are owned individually.

"There's no individual checking account," Shorty explained. The money the colony makes from farming goes into the colony's account, and it provides for each family. All of the vehicles are owned by the colony and the trips must be approved by an official, usually the secretary at Midway Colony.

Shorty said that the person traveling to town will typically let the secretary and others know, and then a list of what anyone on the colony needs will be provided to that person, who will do the shopping for the whole colony.

There are also no individual kitchens or laundry in the homes, the cooking is done in the colony's kitchen, and meals are eaten together. The women sit at one set of tables, and the men at another. A community meal is served, with a blessing said before and after each meal. During the day, children who are in school eat after the adults.

There also is a community laundry room with six washers and three large dryers. "It's the most used building on the colony," Shorty said.

As far as schooling, Shorty said kids stay at home with their mom from birth until they are 2½ years old, then they attend little kid school until they are 6, at which point they start kindergarten.

Midway Colony has its own K-8 school on site. It is part of the Dutton-Brady School District, which provides the teachers. The children do have



ABOVE: A group of women on the Midway Colony near Conrad move butchered beef to be packaged and frozen.

LEFT: A cold-smoke room with a rack is where 3,000 pounds of sausage is smoked once a year, then used by colony members.



school events, such as a Christmas program, but there are no sports teams.

"We don't do sports," Shorty said.

Around age 6 or 7, the kids start rotating jobs, observing the adults working with calves, or in the chicken or hog barns. They also help with crop farming in the summer. Children attend school until eighth grade, at which point they start the apprentice program, learning from older colony members. Jobs are typically passed down within a family when they open up, so if your father is a mechanic, that will likely be your specialty as well.

"We've been able to get by with the apprentice system," Shorty said in explaining why the colony's children do not attend high school.

Jobs are specific to men and women.

Men do most of the farm, wood and metal work, while women cook, clean, sew almost all of the clothes colony members wear and do the finish butchering.

Hi-tech colony

Technology is more prevalent than one might expect, at least when it comes to work.

"We've (got) all the technology in the world. We utilize technology," Shorty said as he described the electronic feeding system in the hog barn. The colony mixes 15 tons of feed a day – hitting precise mixtures through an electronic system – and feeds hogs using technology that recognizes each animal and its feed needs through an ID tag. The system will even automatically order ingredients when the colony gets low.

Shorty said that almost everyone on the colony has a cellphone, but no smart phones are allowed. There is a cyber shack that is open each day from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. It has three computers and Internet access, with some limits applied. There are no TVs on the colony, and members aren't permitted to watch TV or movies. There is no Internet access in any of the homes except the secretary's, who requires it for business purposes. RM



LEFT: From left, Tom Wipf and Midway Colony Secretary David "Shorty" Hofer pose at the sign near the hog barn on the colony.

Memories of the N BAR RANCH

Milburn recalls grandfather managing, owning part of the ranch

STORY BY RYAN HALL | RURAL MONTANA EDITOR

THE famous N Bar Ranch in central Montana is known for many things, including being an integral part of bringing angus cattle to the state. But did you know it has ties to a prominent figure in Montana's energy sector?

Mike Milburn of rural Cascade currently serves as the chairman of the Northwest Power and Conservation Council, to which he was appointed by the governor. He previously served as Speaker of the House for the Montana House of Representatives. His grandfather, George Rozelle Milburn Jr. – better known as “Jack” Milburn – managed and co-owned the N Bar Ranch from 1930-1965. Mike’s father “Jack Jr.”, was raised on the ranch, as was Mike for much of his formative years.

“I was there from my birth until age 13,” Milburn said of one of the largest ranches in Montana.

He recalled attending a small country school during those years.

“I was the only one in my class,” Milburn said before cracking a wide smile. “I was the smartest one in my class. I brag about it. I don’t tell them I was also the dumbest.”

Memories of the N Bar

“It was the old cowboys who had the stories,” Milburn said in remembering his time on the now 200,000-acre ranch located 10 miles south of Grass Range, in Fergus Electric Cooperative’s service area.

“The characters who were hired at the time,” he said of the crew that came



Mike Milburn poses with his family's phone from his days on the N Bar Ranch. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

in for haying or working cattle, when asked about his most vivid memories from growing up on the ranch. “They were bow-legged as a barrel. That’s all they’d ever done (be cowboys).”

Milburn laughed as he remembered one hired man who enjoyed taming wildlife.

“He brought all types of things

home,” including an antelope the kids would play with, Milburn said.

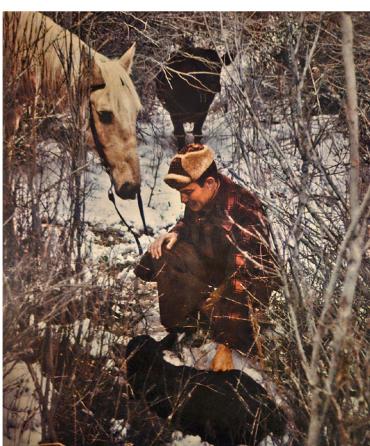
“It would get excited and start butting us when we were running,” he said.

He recalled a game warden asking the hired man how he got the antelope, guessing he rescued it from a dying mother.

“Nope, I just had a long rope and a

“The characters who were hired at the time, they were bow-legged as a barrel. That’s all they’d ever done (be cowboys).”

— MIKE MILBURN



fast horse," the man told the warden.

Milburn added that he wished he would have asked more questions of the cowboys who showed up to work on the ranch.

One was a tail-gunner on a B-17, and one would sweat profusely because he was gassed in World War II.

"All of those men could have told so many stories," Milburn said.

As he spoke, Milburn was only feet away from an old phone from the ranch that now hangs on his wall. It has a corded earpiece, a mouthpiece on the front of the wooden box and two large bells.

"Everyone had their own ring. Ours was three shorts and two longs. Everyone on Flat Willow Creek could hear it ring," Milburn said.

He also recalled his grandfather being one of the first Montanans to raise certified Angus cattle in the state, returning the ranch to its roots after years as a sheep operation.

The last time he drove through the ranch was two years ago, but he has flown over it more recently — which was an emotional experience.

"You can see what (Jack) put together. What a special person he was with a talent to be able to do it," Milburn said. "He knew how to get things done."

A Milburn Legacy

Milburn said his grandfather was involved in his community throughout his life.

He served as a board member for Montana Power, was on the school board, was president of the Montana Stockgrowers Association and served as president of the American National Cattleman's Association. He also was a founding member and inductee of the Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame.

"He was just in everything," Milburn said, adding that his grandfather also helped Fergus Electric Cooperative and the federal Rural Electric Administration bring reliable power to rural areas.

He said his grandfather was an important agriculture figure not just

in Montana, but nationwide, though Milburn wasn't aware of that until later in life.

"I didn't realize the gravity of the ranch or how important my grandfather was," Milburn said.

An Inspiration

Milburn said he has always admired his grandfather, and learned a lot from him. Jack was a humble man who accomplished many things that Milburn had never been told — he still discovers new things when doing family research. Those who know Milburn know he is cut from the same cloth.

"I don't ever talk about myself," he said, when pressed about his humble nature. "You just do it."

Milburn was an Air Force fighter pilot, following in the footsteps of Jack, who flew in World War I. Milburn said despite the family legacy, he was never pressured by relatives to join the military.

"No one said anything to me about it. I just thought it's what you did," he said.

Milburn said he wished he had known more about his grandfather's experiences.

"A lot of my grandfather's stuff occurred in my lifetime," Milburn said. "You wish you would have asked more questions."

He said he would have liked to ask Jack about how difficult the 1930s and '40s were, and about his service in World War I.

"I would ask him about the emotional stress of the war both on the ground and in the air," Milburn said. "What were they thinking when the chance of survival was so low?"

He said that even today he frequently thinks of Jack, who pinned his wings on Milburn when he became a pilot.

"My grandfather means a lot to me. He's stayed with me," Milburn said. "He was someone I always admired, a role model for me." RM

SEND IN YOUR RECIPES

Recipes for RM magazine are submitted by cooperative members across the state. First, second and third place monthly winners are awarded \$30, \$20 and \$10 prizes, respectively. Send your recipes to RM Recipes, Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403, or email rural@mtco-ops.com. **Please include your name, hometown and an address. If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted.** For March send your favorite Irish-inspired recipe or dish that is green in color (mostly) by February 12. Please send in April recipes anytime: Your favorite recipe that uses cream cheese. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.



Warm Melting Chocolate Cake

Diane Carter | MOLT

INGREDIENTS

- 6 oz. chocolate (recipe calls for dark chocolate but you can use dark, semi-sweet or milk chocolate chips or bar)
- 6 oz. butter
- 4 eggs (room temperature)
- 6 oz. sugar
- 6 T all-purpose flour

DIRECTIONS

1. Melt butter and chocolate (this can be done in the microwave if watched closely)
2. Mix eggs and sugar and whisk together for a few minutes. Stir in flour. Do not use a mixer as it will incorporate too much air into mixture.
3. Add the egg mixture to the melted chocolate and stir until combined.
4. Pour the mixture into 4 greased ramekins. (I used 4 6-oz. ones)
5. Bake at 390 degrees for 14-19 minutes until a toothpick inserted 1/2 inch from edge is clean. The edge should slightly crisp, but the center should not be totally set. Dust top with powdered sugar.
6. Serve with vanilla ice cream.

STAFF FAVORITE

Hot and Spicy Pepper Steak

Lea Potoczny | MECO CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

INGREDIENTS

- 2 pounds thin top round steak, sliced into strips about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick
- 1-1/2 T Spice Blend, recipe follows
- 3 T all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup vegetable oil
- 3 cups chicken broth, divided
- 6 cups sliced onions
- 2 cups sliced bell peppers
- 3 teaspoons salt
- 1/2 tsp. cayenne
- 1/2 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

Egg noodles or white rice for serving

Spice Blend:

- 1 T dried oregano
- 2-1/2 T paprika
- 1 T dried thyme
- 2 T salt
- 2 T garlic powder
- 1 T black pepper
- 1 T onion powder
- 1 T cayenne pepper

DIRECTIONS

Combine the meat with the spice blend and flour in a mixing bowl and toss to combine.

Heat the oil in a large cast iron Dutch oven or high-sided skillet over medium-high heat and brown the meat, in batches, until browned on all sides, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove meat from the pan. Add 2 cups chicken broth to the pan and stir, scraping the bottom and sides of the pan to loosen any browned particles.

Add the onions, bell peppers, salt, cayenne and black pepper.

Cook, stirring frequently, for 6-8 minutes, or until the vegetables are wilted.

Return all the meat to the pan, reduce the heat to medium, cover and cook, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes.

Add the remaining cup of broth and continue to cook, uncovered, for about 1 hour longer, or until the meat is very tender and the gravy is thickened and flavorful.

Serve immediately over egg noodles or white rice.



Events Calendar

SUBMIT YOUR EVENTS

To list an event, send it to: RM Events, PO Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403 or email us at: rural@mtco-ops.com — Submit items by February 12 for March events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.**

NORTHWEST

February 1

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

February 10

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

February 15

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

February 16

Westerners Int'l presents "The Birth of Kalispell" by Bruce Guthrie — Northwest Montana History Museum, 6:30 to 8 p.m., 309-0958 | **KALISPELL**

February 17

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

February 18

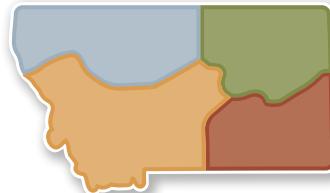
Columbia Falls Women's Connection Luncheon — Guest speaker is Jade Owens, 827 9th St. West, 11:30 a.m., call 892-3621 for reservations | **COLUMBIA FALLS**

February 20

Open house for exhibit update — Northwest Montana History Museum, 2 to 4 p.m., 756-8381 | **KALISPELL**

February 21

Ferndale Sewing Circle Souper Fundraiser — S. Ferndale Dr., 4 to 7 p.m., 890-4368 | **BIGFORK**



February 21-22

Seize the Day Flathead Presents Beat the Winter Blues Pop Up Market — Northwest Montana Fairgrounds Expo Building, Sat: 9 a.m., to 5 p.m., Sun: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 885-9913 | **KALISPELL**

February 23

Flathead Valley Community Band Chamber Concert — First Presbyterian Church, 7 p.m., 270-1696 | **KALISPELL**

March 1

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

March 14-15

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

March 16

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

March 18

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

SOUTHWEST

February 3

Ladies of Love — CCMT at Homestead Organics Farm, 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m., or 5:30 to 9 p.m., CultivatingConnectionsMT.org | **HAMILTON**

February 7

Sourdough Basics Workshop — CCMT at Homestead Organics Farm, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. CultivatingConnectionsMT.org | **HAMILTON**

February 10

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

February 25-28

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

March 6

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

March 7

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

March 8

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

March 14

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

March 21-22

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

NORTHEAST

March 21

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

March 27

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

March 28

MonDak Spring Soiree — Music by The McDades, hors d'oeuvres, beer & wine, a specialty mocktail, desserts, silent auction, gemstone raffle, wine pull & more, MonDak Heritage Center, 7 p.m., tickets: \$50, 433-3500 | **SIDNEY**

SOUTHEAST

February 14-15

Vendor Market — Big Sky Optimist Club Fundraiser, 505 Orchard Ave., doors open at 10 a.m., 855-2416 | **BILLINGS**

February 19

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

February 25-March 1

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

March 12

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

March 27

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

YOUNG MONTANANS

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

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

SEND YOUR SPRING DRAWINGS
AND POEMS



Elliana Nakonechny, 7, Columbia Falls | **FLATHEAD ELECTRIC**



HAPPY Valentine's Day



Annabelle Knudsen, 10, Laurel | **YELLOWSTONE VALLEY ELECTRIC**

Adi Horak, 9, Dutton | **SUN RIVER 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.



Anita Bozich Art and Photography

Taking a Break

A California quail rests on a branch in the Lee Metcalf National Wildlife Refuge. **Photo by Anita Bozich of Stevensville**

Dusting of Snow

A patch of moss is barely covered by snow in Kila. **Photo by Kaisley Jarvis of Kila**



Otter-ly Ridiculous

An otter family sits on the ice in Yellowstone National Park.
Photo by Dave Hopkins of Columbia Falls

Winter Buck

A buck beds down. **Painting by Colton Eckert of Townsend**



RM

The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

Email: rural@mtco-ops.com

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