

COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

Fostering Futures

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Dirty Jobs star Mike Rowe with Work Ethic Scholarship
recipient Tayden Wells at Mitchell Technical College
Submitted Photo

From Darkness to Light: Overcoming the December Storm



Walker Witt - CEO
wwitt@bhec.coop

Early on the morning of Thursday, December 18th, over 96% of our system was dark. Your co-op has experienced destructive storms before: the 2000 spring storm left some members without power for over two weeks, and Storm Atlas in 2013 caused widespread damage to our system and significant livestock losses for many members. However, in the history of our cooperative, never have more members been without power than this past December.

Assessment of the damage began at daybreak, and by noon it was clear we needed help. Across the country, cooperatives rely on a long-standing tradition of mutual aid—neighbors helping neighbors—to restore power quickly and safely. Electric cooperatives were founded on the principle of cooperation, and mutual aid is a direct expression of that value. When a major storm hits, the affected cooperative can call on neighboring or even distant cooperatives for assistance. Within hours, crews, trucks, equipment, and materials begin mobilizing.



Because cooperatives are member-owned and rooted in their communities, this system is built on trust, shared standards, and a common mission to serve members first. Crews arrive already trained in familiar safety practices and equipment, allowing them to integrate seamlessly into restoration efforts.

Five cooperatives and our contractor sent trucks, equipment, materials, and 55 linemen to assist with the restoration process. Each day began at 5:30 a.m. with our crews for a debrief of the previous day, a safety talk, and a game plan for the day ahead. Our contractor and the mutual aid crews arrived at 6:00 a.m. to begin their work, which lasted 12–16 hours. Because many of our lines in our territory do not run along section lines, or even roads in many places, each mutual aid crew had a lineman from our co-op work with them. Your co-op provided staging areas,

lodging, meals, and logistical support, while visiting crews focused on repairing poles, restringing lines, and restoring substations. The result is a restoration effort far faster and more effective than any single cooperative could manage alone.



By the fourth day of restoration, which was only three days from Christmas, it seemed unlikely that all power would be restored by Christmas. On Monday the 22nd, all five co-ops said they were staying through Christmas to help our crews restore power. A Christmas miracle happened as 99% of our system was restored by the end of Christmas Eve, allowing our mutual aid and contractor crews to return home to celebrate the holiday with their families.

Black Hills Electric Cooperative would like to thank Butte Electric Cooperative, Cherry-Todd Electric Cooperative, Lacreek Electric Association, West Central Electric Cooperative, West River Electric Association, Kainz Power Lines, and our crews for their commitment, dedication, and professionalism. Our members' Christmas was brighter because of the strength you showed by walking against the wind rather than lying down!

"You find the strength of the wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down."

C.S. Lewis

COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

BLACK HILLS ELECTRIC

(ISSN No. 1531-104X)

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Accepting Scholarship Applications

Black Hills Electric Cooperative is excited to offer scholarships to graduating high school seniors. Basin Electric Power Cooperative has increased its contribution to \$2,500, allowing us to award a \$1,500 first-place scholarship and a \$1,000 runner-up scholarship. Qualifying applicants will also be considered for a \$500 Rushmore Electric scholarship.

Additionally, scholarships will be awarded during the Annual Meeting scheduled for June 4, 2026, in Hot Springs.

Interested students can find the application online at bhec.coop/scholarship-program or request a physical or emailed application. Completed applications, along with all supporting documents, must be submitted to BHEC by Friday, February 6, 2026.

For any questions or concerns, please reach out to Michelle Fischer at 800-742-0085 or 605-673-4461.

DEADLINE: FEBRUARY 6, 2026

WINNERS WILL BE ANNOUNCED IN APRIL

AVAILABLE SCHOLARSHIPS FOR DEPENDENTS OF BHEC MEMBERS:

- \$1,500 Basin Electric first place
- \$1,000 Basin Electric runner-up
- \$500 Rushmore Electric

REQUIREMENTS:

- Be a U.S. citizen
- Be a dependent of a BHEC member
- The graduating senior must be planning to enroll at an accredited college, university, or technical school.

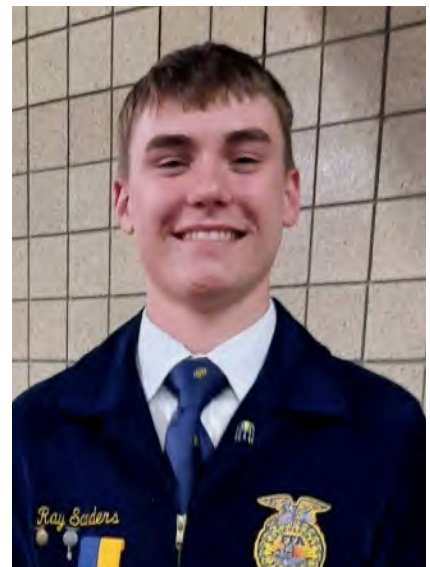
THE RECIPIENTS WILL BE CHOSEN BASED ON:

- A combination of SAT or ACT scores
- Overall grade-point average
- Personal statement of career goals
- One-page essay
- An adult appraisal

YOUTH TOUR WINNER:

Black Hills Electric Cooperative has selected Ray Sanders as its 2026 Youth Tour winner. Ray will join students from across South Dakota and the nation for an educational trip to Washington, D.C., where he will tour historic landmarks, visit national museums, and learn firsthand about the cooperative business model and the role of government. Members are encouraged to watch for details on how to apply for the 2027 Youth Tour, which will be shared later this year.

Congratulations, Ray!



FIVE WAYS TO SAFEGUARD YOUR HOME THIS WINTER

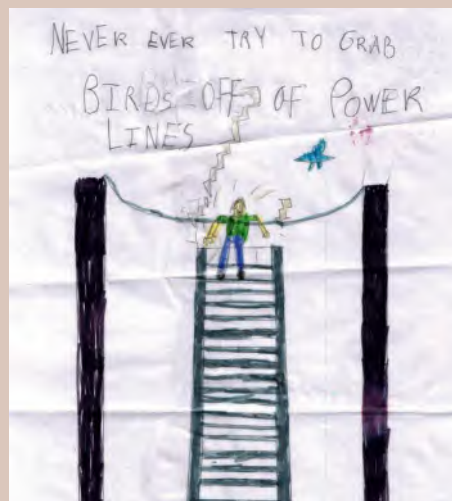
As the temperatures drop and the days grow shorter, there's a natural inclination to create a warm and cozy haven at home. Unfortunately, as we see increased use of heating equipment, candles and electrical items, the number of home fires tends to increase during winter months.

Here are five ways you can safeguard your home for the winter season.

1. Ensure carbon monoxide and smoke detectors are working properly. If your detectors are battery-operated, replace the batteries annually. Test the detectors once a month and give them a good dusting to ensure the sensors are clear of dirt and debris.
2. Inspect electrical cords. We depend on more cords during winter, whether for holiday lighting, extension cords or portable heaters. Before using any corded items, double check to make sure cords aren't frayed or cracked. If you use portable space heaters, remember to keep them at least three feet away from flammable items. Use models that include an auto shut-off feature and overheat protection. Space heaters can take a toll on your energy bills. Use them efficiently (to heat smaller spaces) and safely. Never plug a space heater into a power strip. Speaking of power strips...
3. Avoid overloading electrical outlets and power strips. When overloaded with electrical items, outlets and power strips can overheat and catch fire. If you use power strips for multiple devices, make sure the strip can handle the electrical load. For a safer bet, look for power strips that include surge protection.
4. Clean the fireplace to improve safety and efficiency. There's nothing better than a warm fire on a chilly night, but it's important to maintain your fireplace for safety. As wood burns, a sticky substance known as creosote builds up in the chimney. When creosote buildup becomes too thick, a chimney fire can ignite. The chimney should be cleaned at least once a year to reduce fire risks. Regular cleaning

also improves air flow and limits the amount of carbon monoxide that seeps indoors.

5. Practice safety in the kitchen. As we spend more time in the kitchen during the holiday season, be mindful of potential fire hazards. Never leave food that's cooking on the stovetop unattended. Clean and remove spilled foods from cooking surfaces and be mindful of where you place flammable items like dish towels.



Naomi Krcil, Age 8

Naomi warns readers to never, ever grab birds off power lines. Great job, Naomi! Naomi's parents are Andrew and Andrea Krcil from Dante, 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.

Family Night FAVORITES

SAUERKRAUT BEEF BAKE

Ingredients:

1 lb ground beef
1 can sauerkraut, rinsed and drained
1/2 cup instant rice
1 can cream of mushroom soup
1 soup can water
2 tbsps. onion soup mix
1 small can sliced mushrooms (optional)

Method

Brown ground beef, drain excess fat. In large bowl, mix all remaining ingredients. Transfer to a greased 2-quart casserole or baking dish.

Cover and bake at 350°F for one hour or until heated through.

Sally Florey
Charles Mix Electric

MINI BBQ BACON CHEDDAR MEATLOAF

Ingredients:

2 lbs. ground beef
6 oz. chili sauce
4 slices bacon, cooked and crumbled
1 1/2 cups sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
1/2 cup panko breadcrumbs
2 large eggs
1 tsp. onion powder
1 tsp. seasoned salt
1 tsp. garlic powder
2 tbsps. Worcestershire sauce
1 tsp. yellow mustard
1/2 cup BBQ sauce

Method

Preheat oven to 425°F.

Cook and crumble bacon.

In a mixing bowl, mix together all meatloaf ingredients except the BBQ sauce.

Divide the mixture into 8 round loaves. Press a small depression into the middle of the meatloaves.

Brush BBQ sauce on top of the meatloaves.

Bake for 25 minutes. Turn on broiler and brown the BBQ sauce for 2 to 5 minutes.

Kayla Beaner
Southeastern Electric

SMOKED MEATLOAF

Ingredients:

1 cup panko breadcrumbs
1 cup whipping cream
1.5 lbs. 93% lean ground beef
1 lb. ground pork
1/2 pkg. bacon
2 eggs, beaten
2 tps. Worcestershire sauce
1-2 tps. minced garlic
1/8 cup ketchup
2 tps. Heifer Dust (spice)
1/2 tsp. ground pepper
1/2 sweet onion, chopped
1/2 green pepper, chopped
1-2 carrots, chopped
1-2 celery stalks, chopped
1/2 carton mushrooms, chopped

Basting Sauce

Cookies BBQ Ketchup
Brown sugar Dry mustard
Apple cider vinegar

Method

Turn Traeger to Smoke then set to 225°F and preheat for 15 minutes.

Combine the vegetables, drizzle with olive oil and microwave for about 2 minutes to soften. Cool for 10 minutes. Mix everything in a large bowl with hands. Form into a large loaf on parchment paper. Place bacon strips on grate pan. Gently flip loaf onto the bacon lined grate pan.

Place on grill and smoke for 45 minutes. Increase temperature to 325°F. Preheat for 10 minutes. Return to grill and insert probe. Cook until internal temperature reaches 160°F – about 1-2 more hours depending on size of loaf.

During the last 15-20 minutes, baste heavily with barbeque sauce mixed with brown sugar, ketchup, mustard and a little apple cider vinegar or apple juice.

Deb Prins
Cam Wal 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 2026. All entries must include your name, mailing address, phone number and cooperative name.

CONNECT WITH US AT THE 2026 AREA MEETINGS!

With the new year underway, BHEC is preparing for our upcoming area meetings, and we look forward to visiting with our members in the weeks ahead. These gatherings are a long-standing



tradition and give our directors and staff the opportunity to connect with members over a warm bowl of soup, homemade desserts, and good conversation. More than just meetings, they are a chance to say thank you and celebrate the communities we serve.

Each year, the cooperative partners with local civic organizations to co-host the area meetings. BHEC provides a monetary donation to support each event, while our civic partners prepare the meal. Any donations collected during the meeting go directly to the co-hosting organization and help fund projects and initiatives that benefit the local community. This partnership reflects our cooperative values and strengthens the ties we share with our service area.

Area meetings offer a relaxed setting to enjoy a free meal, catch up with friends and neighbors, and hear directly from the co-op team. Members will also learn about the challenges and opportunities on the horizon for the cooperative and have the chance to ask questions, share ideas, and stay informed.

Bring your appetite and join us at one of the locations listed below. We look forward to seeing you, sharing a meal, and connecting with the members who make BHEC strong.



AREA MEETINGS SCHEDULED FOR 2026

A meal will be served from 5:30 - 6:30 p.m. at all meetings.

AREA MEETING	DATE	LOCATION	CO-SPONSOR
Oelrichs	February 12th	Oelrichs Community Hall	Oelrichs Rodeo Association
Hermosa	February 13th	Hermosa Elementary School	Battle Creek Fire District
Whispering Pines	February 16th	Whispering Pines VFD	Whispering Pines VFD
Rockerville	February 20th	Rockerville Community Hall	Rockerville Community Club
Johnson Siding	February 26th	Rimrock Community Center	Rimrock Community Club
Rochford	April 10th	Rochford Community Hall	Rochford Community Club

DIRECTOR NOMINATING PROCEDURES

BHEC's 81st Annual Meeting will be held Thursday, June 4, 2026, at the Mueller Center in Hot Springs. Three directors will be elected at the meeting—one from the Meade, Pennington & Lawrence Counties geographical area, where incumbent Thad Wasson is seeking re-election, one from Custer & Oglala Lakota Counties geographical area, where incumbent Alan Bishop is seeking re-election, and one from Fall River County where incumbent Dennis Quivey is seeking re-election. The qualifications of a director and nominating procedures, as set forth by Article IV, Sections 3 and 4 of the bylaws, are:

No person shall be eligible to become or remain a Director of the Cooperative who has been employed by this or any other electric cooperative during the previous five years, or who is a close relative of an incumbent Director or of an employee of the Cooperative, or who has been convicted of a felony in any court of law in the United States of America, or who is not a member in good standing of the Cooperative and receiving service therefrom at his or her primary residential abode.

No person shall be eligible to become or remain a Director of, or to hold any other position of trust in, the Cooperative who does not have the legal capacity to enter into a binding contract or is in any way employed by or financially interested in a competing enterprise, or electric utility, or a business selling electric energy to the Cooperative, or a business primarily engaged in selling distributed generation equipment such as wind turbines, solar systems, or fuel cells to, among others, the members of the Cooperative. Upon establishment of the fact that a nominee for Director lacks eligibility under this Section or as may be provided elsewhere in these Bylaws, it shall be

the duty of the Chairman presiding at the meeting at which such a nominee would otherwise be voted upon to disqualify such nominee. Upon the establishment of the fact that any person being considered for, or already holding, a Directorship or other position of trust in the Cooperative lacks eligibility under this Section, it shall be the duty of the Board of Directors to withhold such position from such person, or to cause him to be removed therefrom, as the case may be. Nothing contained in this Section shall, or shall be construed to, affect in any manner whatsoever the validity of any action taken at any meeting of the Board of Directors, unless

such action is taken with respect to a matter which is affected by the provisions of this Section and in which one or more of the Directors have an interest adverse to that of the Cooperative.

It shall be the duty of the Board of Directors to appoint not less than forty-five days or more than one hundred eighty days before the date of the meeting of the members at which Directors are to be elected, a committee on nominations consisting of not less than five nor more than eleven members who shall be selected from different sections so as to ensure equitable representation. No member of the Board of Directors may serve on such committee. The committee, keeping in mind the principle of geographical representation, shall prepare and post at the principal office of the Cooperative at least thirty days before the meeting a list of nominations for Directors which may include a greater number of candidates than are to be elected. Any fifty or more members acting together may make other nominations by petition not more than one hundred twenty days nor less than thirty days prior to the meeting, and the Secretary shall post such nominations at the same place where the list of nominations made by the

committee is posted. The Secretary shall mail with the notice of the meeting or separately, but at least ten days before the date of the meeting, a statement of the number of Directors to be elected and the names and addresses of the candidates, specifying separately the nominations made by the committee on nominations and also the nominations made by petition if any.

An individual serving on the Board of Directors can expect to serve a number of days in a given year. An example of service would be as follows:

BOARD MEETINGS

A minimum of twelve regular board meetings per year. These meetings are typically held at the headquarters office in Custer on the first Tuesday after the third Monday of each month. Meetings start at 8:30 a.m. and are usually over by 4:00 p.m.

TRAINING, SEMINARS, & CONFERENCES

Involvement in Cooperative training courses, seminars, and conferences for a total of between 5 and 15 days per year. These meetings normally last from two to four days each and are held at various locations throughout the year.

ANNUAL MEETING & AREA MEETINGS

Attendance at the Annual Meeting of members, and from time to time, local area meetings.

Applications must be returned by Friday, February 13, 2026

Strong Cooperatives need active members.

Call
800-742-0085 for
an application!

FOSTERING FUTURES

'Mike Rowe Scholarship' Winner Kicks Off Career at Electric Co-op

Jacob Boyko

jacob.boyko@sdrea.coop

For many high schoolers, figuring out the next steps after graduating is a time for making big decisions and answering tough questions. What do I want to do for a career? Should I go to a university or technical college? Will I be able to pay off all of this college debt?

Tayden Wells' mind was already made up following a great high school internship and a little bit of faith and support from others. Wells was awarded numerous scholarships, but none as prestigious – nor time-consuming – as the Work Ethic Scholarship from 'Dirty Jobs' star Mike Rowe.

Discovering the Passion

Growing up around linemen, Tayden had an early appreciation for their work, unpredictable schedules and the expansive grid of wires and poles that keeps everyone's lights on.

"As a child I'd be sitting in the house and all of a sudden, Dad would up and vanish," Tayden explained. "And I always wondered, what's he doing? Where's he going? Why is he going to work on a Saturday or in the middle of the night? And then finally it occurred to me that we rely on the power grid, and when the power goes out, linemen go to work."

Tayden's dad, Travis, is a lineman at Clay-Union Electric in Vermillion, S.D. Tayden recalls the long car rides on hunting trips with his dad and uncle – also a lineman – where the conversations would drift to the power lines outside the truck windows.

"I'd hear them talking, using linemen slang like 'distro' (distribution lines) and 'T-lines' (transmission lines)," Tayden said. "They really sparked my interest."

When Tayden's high school business teacher told students to think about internships, he knew exactly where he wanted to go.

It All Started With an Internship

Tayden's teacher made the call to Union County Electric Cooperative in Elk Point, S.D. After getting the green light from the board of directors, Tayden was cleared to shadow the crew for about 10 hours a week as he learned the ins and outs of the job.

"He was always looking for something to do, and he also asked a lot of questions and had an eagerness to learn," General Manager Matt Klein said about Tayden's work ethic. "When I saw that, I knew he would fit in well with the rest of our team."

Klein offered the high school senior a full-time summer



Tayden Wells of Vermillion is an apprentice lineman at Union County Electric Cooperative in Elk Point.
Submitted Photo

internship where he continued to expand his skills before heading to Mitchell, S.D., in the fall.

Mike Rowe's Work Ethic Scholarship and the S.W.E.A.T. Pledge

With his mind made up after the internship, Tayden's next step was to enroll in the power line program at Mitchell Technical College for a formal education – and find scholarships to help pay for it.

A straight-A student involved in athletics and extracurricular activities, Tayden applied for numerous scholarships, including the highly competitive Work Ethic Scholarship.

The scholarship, founded and administered by Mike Rowe and his foundation, offers millions of dollars to kids around the nation interested in pursuing trade careers.

Electricians, linemen, HVAC, nursing, culinary, automotive, even cosmetology – just no four-year bachelor's degrees.

"We promote skilled trades and want to get people into good-paying jobs without them drowning in debt," explained mikeroweWORKS President Mary Sullivan, who oversees the scholarship. "It's just heartbreaking seeing the amount of kids taking on college debt and graduating and aren't able to find jobs in their chosen field. Even more heartbreaking – but less reported – is the number of kids that drop out partway through the program with the debt and no piece of paper."

The scholarship's application process is different too – it's intensive, spanning several months and requires applicants to submit a video, answer questionnaires, gather references and think critically about the scholarship's curriculum.

The scholarship attracts thousands of applicants, but by the end, only the most committed, hardest working remain.

"We want to give scholarships to the kids who are passionate – they show up early, stay late and help others," Sullivan explained. "One of the recipients said he applied for 20 scholarships, and if you put all the other 19 into a bucket, ours still took more

time – but he said there was a level of pride in receiving it. High school kids today need to see 18-20 year olds who are successful, and the scholarship program allows us to meet students we believe are good representatives for the industry.”

Part of the curriculum includes the S.W.E.A.T. Pledge (Skill & Work Ethic Aren't Taboo) video series that walks students through 12 pledges Rowe designed to promote strong work ethic and foster successful careers, which include:

“I do not follow my passion. I bring it with me. I believe that any job can be done with passion and enthusiasm.”

“I deplore debt and do all I can to avoid it. I would rather live in a tent and eat beans than borrow money for a lifestyle I can't afford.”

After completing all of the curriculum and proposing a 13th S.W.E.A.T. pledge for a final project, Tayden was awarded \$16,000 to cover his education.

And when Rowe traveled to MTC in 2024, Tayden got the chance to thank Rowe face-to-face.

“Mike told me, from his mouth, that my scholarship was one of the highest amounts they gave out that year,” Tayden said. “That was very cool to hear.”

Rowe said Tayden stood out among thousands of applicants and embodies the qualities the scholarship promotes.

“Tayden checked all the boxes, and then some,” Rowe said. “His references were great, his attitude was great, his essay was great, and his comments about The SWEAT Pledge were spot on. His willingness to pursue a skill that's in demand, along with his attitude and work ethic, make him a perfect example of the qualities we're trying to encourage with our scholarship program. The country needs thousands more like him.”

Reflecting On the Journey

Tayden graduated from the power line program in 2025. He credits his success in part to his internship, saying the out-of-classroom experience set him up for a good year of training at MTC and a rewarding career with electric cooperatives.

“I kind of had the upper hand going into the program with my internship,” Tayden said. “I was able to see stuff before I went to school, so I kind of had a good understanding of the basics. But for kids coming in, some of them obviously struggle. I'm a very hands-on, visual learner, so because I was able to see it beforehand, the bookwork and the schooling really clicked a lot better with me.”

Today, Tayden is a full-time apprentice lineman at Union County Electric, where he continues to accumulate hours and complete coursework to earn his journeyman lineman certification. He encourages other young people not to overlook a career in the trades – or the Work Ethic Scholarship.

“With all of the talk about AI now, the trade jobs are always going to be there,” Tayden said. “Without oil fields we wouldn't have gas, and without electricity we wouldn't have lights. Mike realizes that the world revolves around the trades, and he wants to see kids strive and succeed because in the trades there are endless opportunities, just like any other job.”

Why is it so important that more young Americans enter the trades, and what does a shortage of skilled workers mean for the country?

For decades, the skills gap has been a tragedy of missed opportunity, both for students who weren't encouraged to consider a lucrative and viable path and the industries that rely on skilled labor. It still is. Today though, it's also a matter of national security. Not a week goes by that MRW doesn't get a call from an industry leader, desperate to hire skilled workers. The US Maritime Industrial Base told me they need 250,000 tradespeople to build nuclear subs. The automotive industry has over 100,000 openings for mechanics and collision repair techs. The energy industry needs half a million electricians, and the construction industry has so many openings they've stopped counting. The skills gap is real, and I can tell you that every CEO and every elected official I know are paying attention like never before.

What's one piece of advice you have for young people who are deciding their career path?

With regard to choosing a career, there's nothing more dangerous than dispensing advice to people you've never met. Same thing with choosing an education. We told an entire generation of kids that a four-year degree was the best path for the most people and then pressured them to borrow whatever it took to buy a degree, regardless of the cost. That kind of cookie-cutter advice was a colossal mistake and a big reason why we have millions of open jobs today that don't require a college diploma and lots of college graduates with a trillion dollars in student debt and no work in their chosen field. The only advice I generically offer to young people is to be very careful about “following your passion.” Just because you're passionate about something doesn't mean you can't suck at it. Obviously, it's important to be passionate about whatever you do, but passion – like work ethic – is a choice, and life is a lot easier when you figure out a way to be passionate about whatever it is you're good at. (People hate hearing that, by the way, but it's the truth.)

What do you see as the single biggest misunderstanding young people have about working in the trades today?

The trades are surrounded by dozens of stigmas, stereotypes, myths and misperceptions that dissuade people from giving them an honest look. I guess if I had to pick one, I'd point to the stubborn belief held by many parents that their kids can't make six figures working with their hands. It's laughably and demonstrably false. And fun to disprove. Also – the simple fact that the road to so many successful small businesses often starts with the mastery of a skill that's in demand. The number of successful entrepreneurs in the skilled trades is enormous, and more people need to understand that.

What can teachers, community leaders and co-ops do to better identify and support young people interested in a trade career?

Start a “Career Reality Day” where local linemen, meter technicians and substation operators come in and talk real numbers. Not feel-good fluff, but actual wages, benefits, and career paths. When kids hear that a journeyman lineman can make \$80,000 a year without student loan debt, that gets their attention.





BLACK HILLS BLOWDOWN

Staying Connected During the December Wind Storm

At Black Hills Electric Cooperative, we rely on multiple channels to keep members informed. Social media, particularly Facebook, has become an essential tool. During the storm, we posted real-time updates on outages, restoration progress, and safety reminders. For many members, these posts were their first source of information, helping them plan, stay safe, and remain connected when the lights went out.

During large outages, we reroute incoming phone calls directly to our dispatch team so our office can focus on managing the logistics while our

crews remain focused on restoring power. Social media interactions, including Facebook, can be both helpful and challenging during these events. Positive engagement, such as members thanking crews, sharing helpful tips, or accurately reporting outages, allows us to respond more efficiently. Posts that spread misinformation or make unrealistic demands can create additional stress and slow down restoration efforts.

We encourage members to use social media thoughtfully: report outages through official channels, check for updates from verified cooperative accounts, and remember that our employees are working tirelessly to restore power safely.



High winds and fallen trees caused significant damage to the electrical infrastructure.



Repairs were also needed on a transmission pole, with support from Kainz Power Lines to help complete the work.

Constructive feedback and appreciation go a long way in keeping morale high and the system running smoothly.

This storm was unlike anything we've seen before. We truly appreciate everyone's patience and understanding as our crews worked to restore service as safely and quickly as possible. We also encourage members to have backup power sources ready for future severe weather, especially for those who rely on medical equipment or electric heat. By staying informed, staying safe, and engaging responsibly, our community can weather storms together, literally and figuratively.



A steep ridge and challenging terrain required linemen to work from both the top and bottom during restoration efforts.



Working into the dusk hours, a group of linemen makes repairs during storm restoration.



**STAYING INFORMED
AND BEING
PATIENT HELPS
OUR COMMUNITY
WEATHER THE STORM
TOGETHER, LITERALLY
AND FIGURATIVELY.**



Strong winds uprooted this large tree, leaving the root ball intact and illustrating the storm's impact. According to the National Weather Service, wind gust reached 101 mph in the Rapid City area.



UNDERSTANDING THE SOUTHWEST POWER POOL

Basin Electric's trading floor connects the cooperative to the broader wholesale electricity market.

Submitted Photo

Frank Turner

frank.turner@sdrea.coop

When looking at the entire electric grid, electric cooperatives are just one component in a much larger system. Understanding how that system works, and how power is planned and shared across the region, provides important context for decisions that affect reliability, long-term infrastructure investments and, ultimately, the cost of electricity.

Southwest Power Pool

Every electric cooperative in South Dakota operates within the Southwest Power Pool (SPP), a regional transmission organization that oversees the grid. Really, electric cooperatives are all essential pieces of a larger,

regional puzzle that keeps the lights on.

SPP manages a wholesale electricity market and operates transmission lines across all or parts of 14 Midwest states, including South Dakota.

In 2015, East River Electric Power Cooperative joined the Southwest Power Pool along with Basin Electric Power Cooperative and the Western Area Power Administration Upper Great Plains Region. This move allowed electricity generators in the state to participate in a larger regional market, making it easier and more efficient to buy and sell energy across the grid.

Electric cooperatives aren't the only utilities operating within this regional system. Investor-owned utilities and

municipal utilities also participate in the SPP, all feeding into the same wholesale electricity market. By sharing transmission lines and following the same market rules, these utilities help create a broader, more flexible grid, allowing power to move long distances to where it's needed most.

"SPP is like a traffic director of electricity, because it doesn't own any assets," said Kristi Fiegen, South Dakota Public Utilities Commissioner and chair of the Southwest Power Pool's Regional State Committee. "They direct traffic and work to make sure the transmission lines and generation are bringing electricity to about 18 million customers on a second-by-second basis. That supply has to equal the demand every single second."

Winter Storm Uri

Another important benefit of participating in SPP is its ability to support the grid during extreme weather or unexpected outages, when regional coordination becomes especially important. Because SPP manages electricity across such a large footprint, the system can draw on resources from far beyond state borders. For example, when a power plant in North Dakota goes offline for routine maintenance, electricity from another state can cover the gap. Likewise, during severe winter weather in the South, generation from the Dakotas can help support the southern part of the grid.

That system maintained regional reliability until Feb. 2021, when it was pushed to its limits by Winter Storm Uri, which caused widespread power outages across Texas. According to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, 4.5 million people in Texas lost power during the storm.

“Winter Storm Uri woke up the entire nation, because we didn’t know how vulnerable we were,” said Fiegen.

The storm prompted SPP to reexamine how the grid maintains regional reliability during the winter. Part of that change involved increasing the reserve margin — the extra electric generation capacity kept on hand beyond what is normally needed — to help the system withstand extreme cold and unexpected outages. The goal, according to Fiegen, is to ensure enough power is available across the region, especially on the coldest days of the year.

“Since Winter Storm Uri, we have spent much of our time focused on resource adequacy policies,” Fiegen said, referring to SPP leadership and regulatory committees.

Reserve Margin

One significant change set to take effect in the 2026/2027 winter season is SPP’s adoption of a winter planning reserve margin, which increases the amount of generation required to be available during the winter season. The change will apply across the SPP footprint, including impacts to Basin Electric, which supplies power to cooperatives across South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Minnesota and much of the Midwest.

Through an increased winter reserve margin, the SPP aims to better prepare the entire SPP footprint for extreme weather and periods of unusually high electricity demand, helping ensure reliable power for homes, businesses and industries across the SPP footprint.

So, what does this mean for cooperative members in South Dakota? Valerie Weigel, senior vice president of Energy Markets and Dakota Coal Operations at Basin Electric, said higher reserve margins means Basin Electric needs to supply more generation capacity to the SPP market to meet expected peak winter demands, which affects Basin Electric’s wholesale rates for the cooperatives it serves.

“The increase in reserve margins means we need to build additional generation to ensure we have enough accredited resources to meet new planning requirements,” Weigel said. “As we look toward the rate increase in 2026, part of that increase reflects the cost of adding these resources to meet updated market requirements.”

Learning The Lingo

Transmission

High-voltage power lines and related infrastructure that move electricity long distances from power plants to local utilities. Transmission allows electricity to be shared across regions, especially during emergencies or peak demand.

Generation Capacity

The maximum amount of electricity that a utility’s power plant or portfolio of power plants can produce at one time. Capacity matters most during peak demand, when the grid is under the most strain. This may happen during extreme heat or cold, when people are using more electricity to heat or cool their homes.

Southwest Power Pool (SPP)

A regional transmission organization that coordinates electricity transmission and wholesale power markets across 14 Midwestern states, including South Dakota and Minnesota. SPP does not own power plants or transmission lines; instead, it manages how electricity flows across the regional grid.

Regional Transmission Organization (RTO)

A federally approved organization, like SPP, that operates the electric grid across multiple states. RTOs balance supply and demand, manage wholesale electricity markets and plan for long-term grid reliability.

Reserve Margin

The extra amount of generation capacity kept available above expected peak demand. This extra capacity helps the grid handle extreme weather, unexpected outages or sudden increases in electricity use.

CO-OPS GIVE LENDING HANDS

How Electric Cooperatives Fund Economic Development In Their Communities

Jacob Boyko

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Small towns and rural communities are the backbone of electric cooperatives. That's why co-ops across South Dakota are committed to investing in their communities and promoting economic development.

Through co-ops' Rural Electric Economic Development (REED) Fund and other lending sources, co-ops can further support their communities by lending money to projects they determine will provide jobs in the community, improve services or otherwise benefit the co-op's membership.

How It Works

As member-owned utilities, electric co-ops are eligible for a USDA program called the Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program (REDLG). Through this program, co-ops can apply for grants and zero-interest loans and re-lend the money to qualifying projects in their communities.

There's also the Intermediary Relending Program (IRP), a USDA program that offers low-interest loans to organizations including nonprofits, public agencies or other eligible intermediaries that relend the money to help kickstart local economic development projects.

A co-op can apply for the USDA funding and lend it to a qualifying project in their community. Since the funds come from USDA, the co-op is not risking its own capital, but it does carry responsibility for managing the loan and ensuring repayment.

The Rural Electric Economic Development (REED) Fund

In the 1990s, co-ops wanted to support economic development beyond what they were receiving from existing programs.

East River Electric Power Cooperative, the generation and transmission cooperative serving distribution co-ops in Eastern South Dakota and Western Minnesota, kickstarted the REED Fund in 1996. REED lends money from the USDA's REDLG program at 0% interest and IRP program at a rate slightly higher than what the USDA lends to cover loan losses and other administration expenses. This creates a revolving fund, building up the REED Fund so it can support even more economic development projects in the future.



(From Left) Oahe Electric Cooperative CEO Jordan Lamb with Tori and Garrett Peterson after finalizing their REED loan to purchase their daycare in August, 2025. About 50% of their total funding was through their REED loan.

Photo by Jacob Boyko

REED doesn't fund projects alone – it acts as a co-lender. When a traditional lender like a bank or credit union won't lend for the total amount needed, REED can lend up to 50% of a project cost to get it over the finish line. Plus, REED's often-lower interest rates can reduce overall costs to the business, which is pivotal for projects with high start-up expenses.

Through REED, cooperatives have helped fund more than 400 projects since the fund's inception, said Eric Fosheim, East River Electric's economic development director in charge of the REED Fund. Fosheim says the roughly \$130 million lent by REED has supported more than 10,000 jobs and generated more than \$1 billion in economic impact in South Dakota and Minnesota.

Lil' Gov's Bright Beginnings

One of those projects is Lil' Gov's Bright Beginnings, which opened last August in Pierre.

Garrett and Tori Peterson never thought they'd own a daycare, but when the couple learned they'd soon have their third child, they knew they'd have to make a difficult decision about childcare.

"Financially, it would almost be my whole paycheck going to daycare," said Tori, who at the time worked as a seventh grade science teacher. "Do I continue to work and send my kids to daycare, or do I stay home with them?"

Garrett saw an online listing for a daycare business and sent the listing to Tori. After some thought, Tori decided it would work well – she'd get to be with her children, help support her family, and provide a needed service in her community.

Tori's father, Scott Moore, is the general manager at FEM Electric Association, the cooperative serving Faulk, Edmunds and McPherson counties in northeast South Dakota. He suggested Tori and Garrett reach out to Oahe Electric Cooperative, the electric cooperative serving the Pierre area, to apply for REED funding.

Jordan Lamb, CEO of Oahe Electric, worked with Tori and Garrett through the application process. He called the Petersons' daycare a "great asset to the Pierre area."

"Commitment to community is one of the seven cooperative

principles, and we saw a declining population of daycare providers in our rural area,” Lamb said. “Safe, affordable daycare promotes a pillar to the safety in the homelife of many families in our community, and we were planning to ensure that affordable, reliable and safe daycare facilities are accessible to not only our members but also the surrounding area to improve and promote child development. This will ensure the next generation has proper tools and guidance to one day change the world in a positive way. We are blessed to have the Petersons locate their business here.”

Tori’s goal for Lil’ Gov’s Bright Beginnings is to be more than a daycare. She offers an included service where parents who are low on evening free-time can sign their kids up for daytime YMCA swim lessons, and she will shuttle the kids to and from the lessons. She’s also developing the curriculum for her new preschool program.

“One thing we struggled with as working parents was that it’s really hard to find a preschool,” Tori said. “A lot of preschools are only a couple of hours per week, and you have to leave work to drop your kids off and pick them up. As a teacher, if it didn’t work in my schedule, I couldn’t just leave. And my husband has meetings and can’t always drop everything. My goal is to have a one-stop-drop where you drop your kids off before work, and they can have preschool, get fed, go outside, do arts and crafts, and you pick them up after work.”

Today, Lil’ Gov’s Bright Beginnings has eight employees, and provides childcare for about 30 community children – a number Tori hopes to see grow. She credits the REED fund for giving her business the boost it needed to get off the ground and begin serving the community.

“I just think it says a lot about how co-ops are for the community,” Tori said. “I’m not an Oahe Electric member – I live in city limits, and they were willing to fund a daycare that wouldn’t help them financially either because it’s also in city limits. But their willingness to give us a lower rate and help us finance shows how much they are willing to give back to the community.”

REED Serves Non-Profits and Municipals

REED isn’t just for small business ventures – it also offers reduced-rate financing for community nonprofits and municipalities.

Over the last year, REED helped finance infrastructure expansion for three business parks in the Corsica, Hartford and Parkston communities.

“All three of these projects will bring new jobs and investment into their respective communities,” explained REED’s Eric Fosheim. “In some cases, communities that haven’t seen those new



Garrett and Tori Peterson meet with Jordan Lamb and East River Electric's Senior REED loan officer, Janis Dailing. *Photo by Jacob Boyko*



At the time of publishing, Lil' Gov's Bright Beginnings provides childcare for 30 children, including space for five children under 1 year old. *Submitted Photo*

job opportunities for some time.”

While Hartford is served by Sioux Valley Energy, the Corsica and Parkston communities rely on other, non-co-op power sources. Still, the projects were approved for REED funding because ultimately, co-ops’ goals are to improve rural communities and the lives of their members in and around those communities.

“Even if a project is not served by the cooperative, it will very likely be beneficial to the membership living in that region,” Fosheim added. “One of the top determining factors considered by the board when approving a loan is whether this project will be good for the community. If that answer is yes, it is almost always followed by an approval from the board.”

He continued, “In an era where we are seeing populations in rural areas of the state slowly dwindle, these communities are saying, ‘That’s not going to be us. We need to take steps to keep our young people here, and to give our young people a reason to move back after they go and get further educated.’”



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FEB. 20-22
Winterfest 2026
Lead, SD
www.leadmethere.org/winterfest

Photo Courtesy of Lead Area Chamber of Commerce

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.

JAN. 28
Hill City Garden Club
Why Farmers Markets Matter to Small Towns
1 p.m.
Super 8 Motel Conference Room
Hill City, SD

JAN. 30
Box Elder Ball
6 p.m.-8 p.m.
Box Elder Events Center
Box Elder, SD
605-390-9341

JAN. 30-FEB. 7
Annual Black Hills Stock Show
Central States Fairgrounds
Rapid City, SD
www.centralstatesfairinc.com
605-355-3861

FEB. 12
Oelrichs Area Meeting
5:30-6:30 p.m.
Oelrichs Community Hall
Oelrichs, SD

FEB. 13
Fe"Brew"ary
3:30-6:30 p.m.
Granite Sports
Hill City, SD

FEB. 13
Hermosa Area Meeting
5:30-6:30 p.m.
Hermosa Elementary School
Hermosa, SD

FEB. 14
Polar Bear Chili Cook-Off
11 a.m.-2 p.m.
Hill City, SD

FEB. 14
Tour de Chocolate
Main Street
Hill City, SD

FEB. 16
Whispering Pine Area Meeting
5:30-6:30 p.m.
Whispering Pine VFD
Whispering Pines, SD

FEB. 20
Rockerville Area Meeting
5:30-6:30 p.m.
Rockerville Community Center
Rapid City, SD

FEB. 20-22
Winterfest
Fireworks, Parade of Lights, Bonfire, Snowshoeing
Lead, SD
www.leadmethere.com/winterfest
605-584-1100

FEB. 21
All Ability Skate
12-3 p.m.
Main Street Square
Rapid City, SD
disabilityaac@rcgov.org

FEB. 23-MARCH 1
Custer Restaurant Week
Custer, SD

FEB. 25
Hill City Garden Club
Back to Eden Organic Farming
1 p.m.
Super 8 Motel Conference Room
Hill City, SD

FEB. 26
Johnson Siding Area Meeting
5:30-6:30 p.m.
Rimrock Community Center
Rapid City, SD

FEB. 28
Law Enforcement Special Olympics Polar Plunge
10 a.m. Check-In
Omaha St. Rapid Spa
Rapid City, 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.