

COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

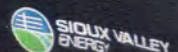
Separating Fact From Fiction

Energy Myths

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Ted Smith, vice president of engineering and operations with Sioux Valley Energy, brings more than 35 years of experience in the electric industry and helps set the record straight on common energy myths.
Photo submitted by Sioux Valley Energy.



Lineman Appreciation Day – April 13: Powering Our Communities Every Day

On April 13, electric cooperatives across the country join the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) in recognizing Lineman Appreciation Day. We proudly recognize our linemen for their professionalism, skill, and service. Their work is challenging. It requires courage, training, and teamwork. Most importantly, it reflects a deep commitment to serving our members and our community.

Linemen perform one of the most demanding and essential roles in the electric utility industry. Their work requires technical expertise, physical endurance, attention to detail, and a strong commitment to safety. They build and maintain the infrastructure that delivers electricity to homes, schools, farms, ranches, and businesses throughout our service territory. They respond to outages at all hours of the day and night. They work in extreme heat, bitter cold, high winds, and challenging terrain. Through it all, their focus remains the same, restoring power safely and as quickly as possible.

This past December, our community saw firsthand just how critical their role truly is.

This past December, our community saw firsthand just how critical their role truly is.

But Lineman Appreciation Day isn't just about the big storms. It's about the quiet, everyday work too. Rights-of-way maintenance, system upgrades, building new services, and year-round safety training keep the system strong. That steady work keeps things reliable and protects everyone.

We also extend our gratitude to the families of our linemen. Storm restoration and emergency calls often require long hours and time away from home. The patience and support of their families allow our crews to answer the call whenever it comes.

So, on April 13, let's give a huge shoutout to our line crews for their skills, guts, teamwork, and heart. Their job's no joke, but their commitment to our members and community is everything.

Please join us in thanking our line crew for their dedication to keeping the lights on and for the vital role they play every single day!

COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

BLACK HILLS ELECTRIC

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SCHOLARSHIP WINNERS ANNOUNCED

Black Hills Electric Cooperative is proud to recognize the recipients of this year's BHEC Basin Electric scholarships, honoring two outstanding local students. The scholarship committee met in February to select the winners.



Zach Conway, a senior at Stevens High School, is the first-place recipient of the \$1,500 Basin Scholarship. Zach will attend the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, where he plans to study physics with minors in mathematics and biology. He is the son of Ruth and Robert Conway.



Carter Stamper, a senior at St. Thomas More High School, is the runner-up recipient of the \$1,000 Basin Scholarship. Carter will attend Montana State University, majoring in civil engineering with a minor in business or mathematics. He is the son of Tracy and Edmund Stamper.

Congratulations to Zach and Carter for their hard work, dedication, and commitment to their communities.

BHEC wishes them every success as they continue their educational journeys.

ANNUAL MEETING SAVE THE DATE: JUNE 4, 2026

Black Hills Electric Cooperative invites members to the 81st Annual Meeting on Thursday, June 4, 2026, at the Mueller Center in Hot Springs. This is a great opportunity to hear updates from your board of directors and management, participate in the board election, and celebrate our continued commitment to our members.

Stay tuned for full details and registration information in upcoming issues of Cooperative Connections. We look forward to seeing you in Hot Springs!

STAYING FOCUSED BEHIND THE WHEEL: A SIMPLE GUIDE TO SAFER ROADS

Distractions behind the wheel aren't just inconvenient – they're deadly. Each moment you allocate to anything other than driving increases the risk for you and everyone sharing the road. According to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, distracted driving claimed 3,522 lives in the United States in 2021, underscoring how costly a split-second lapse can be. The good news is that small, deliberate habits behind the wheel can make a big difference. Here are three practical ways to stay focused.

First, minimize phone use. Store your device out of sight before starting the engine. Texting or scrolling through apps draws your eyes from the road, your hands from the wheel and your mind from the task at hand. If you must communicate, pull over safely or use hands-free features only if absolutely necessary and legal in your area. Remember, many places have laws prohibiting texting while driving, with penalties that reflect the risk. Consider enabling “do not disturb” modes that silence notifications while you drive, and set your status to indicate you're driving. This simple barrier can prevent impulsive checks and help you maintain steady attention.

Second, plan your route before you depart. Entering a destination while driving is a dangerous distraction. Take a few minutes to review the route, check traffic conditions, and set your navigation system in advance. With your route loaded, you can keep your attention on driving rather than on-screen instructions during the journey. If possible, choose routes with fewer turns or fewer heavy-traffic segments, and be ready to adjust if conditions change. Having a mental map of the journey can also reduce the need to peek at the screen for updates.

Third, ensure you are well rested. Fatigue can dull reaction times, reduce concentration, and cause your eyes or your vehicle to drift. Prioritize a good night's sleep before long trips, and consider stopping for short breaks on extended drives to refresh your focus. Even brief pauses for stretching and deep breathing can reset your alertness and help you respond more quickly to changing road situations.

Beyond these tips, practice general safe-driving habits: obey speed limits, maintain a safe following distance and stay alert for pedestrians, cyclists, and other motorists. If you feel distracted or fatigued, it's wiser to pause and reassess rather than press on. Safe driving is about consistent, proactive choices that protect everyone on the road.



"Do not stand underneath trees during lightning storms and stay inside."



**Ramsey Faini,
Age 8**

Ramsey warns readers about the dangers of lightning storms. Thank you for sharing your picture, Ramsey! Ramsey's mom is Katie Faini from Rapid City, 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.

MAIN DISHERS

HOMEMADE MAC & CHEESE

Ingredients:

16 oz. box elbow macaroni noodles
Oil
1 pkg. bacon
3 cups whole milk
1/2 cup butter (melted)
5 oz. can (about 2/3 cup) evaporated milk
16 oz. block Velveeta cheese (cut into cubes)
1 tsp. salt
Guda cheese
Parsley (to taste)
1 tsp. garlic powder
1/2 tsp. black pepper

Method

Cook noodles as directed. Drain noodles and pour a small amount of oil on them while in the strainer. Cook bacon and cut into small pieces. Add all of the ingredients into a Crock-Pot and mix. Cover and cook on low for 1.5 hours, stirring once or twice while cooking. Serve and enjoy.

Cindi Foster
Codington-Clark Electric

CHEDDAR POTATO SOUP

Ingredients:

1 medium onion, chopped
3/4 cup celery, chopped
1/4 cup butter
5 cups peeled potatoes, cubed
3 cups water
3 cups milk, divided
4 tps. chicken bouillon granules
1/2 tsp. salt
1/2 tsp. pepper
1/4 cup flour
4 cups (16 oz.) cheddar cheese, shredded

Method

In large Dutch oven or kettle, saute onion and celery in butter for 5 minutes. Add potatoes and water, bring to a boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer for 15 minutes or until potatoes are tender. Stir in 2 cups milk, bouillon, salt and pepper. Combine flour and remaining milk until smooth, gradually stir into soup. Bring to a boil, cook and stir for 2 minutes or until thickened. Reduce heat, add cheese and stir until cheese is melted.

Sally Florey
Charles Mix Electric

CARAMELIZED HAM & SWISS SLIDERS

Ingredients:

12 Hawaiian dinner rolls, split
1/4 cup horseradish sauce (optional)
12 slices deli ham (or 24 if it's thinly sliced)
6 slices Swiss cheese, cut in fourths (so you will have 24 squares of cheese)
Sauce
1/2 cup butter
1/4 tsp. onion powder
2 tbsps. brown sugar
1 tbsp. Dijon mustard
2 tps. poppy seeds
1 1/2 tps. Worcestershire sauce
1/4 tsp. garlic powder

Method

Spray a 9x9 or 9x13 glass dish with non-stick cooking spray. Set aside. Preheat oven to 325°. Spread roll bottoms with horseradish sauce (if using). Fold up pieces of ham to fit the rolls and place them on the bottom halves of the roll. Next, place 2 squares of cheese. Replace tops and place in a single layer in the prepared pan.

Sauce

In a small skillet, heat butter over medium-high heat. Stir in remaining ingredients. Pour over rolls. Cover with foil and bake covered for 20 minutes. Remove foil and bake 5 more minutes. These can also be made ahead of time. Just cover with foil and refrigerate for several hours or overnight. Bake as instructed.

Jerald & Virginia Jensen
Sioux Valley Energy

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.

ELECTRIFY YOUR LAWN CARE



Miranda Boutelle
Efficiency Services
Group

Electric lawn equipment has seen drastic improvements in cost, motor efficiency and battery power in recent years. From hedge and string trimmers to leaf blowers, chainsaws, and push and riding mowers, there are lots of options for electric lawn equipment.

Electric equipment is quieter than its gas-powered counterparts and typically needs less maintenance. There's no more mixing fuel, changing spark plugs or worrying about gas going bad over the winter. Advances in rechargeable battery technology eliminate having to lug around a heavy extension cord to get your work done. Just pop in a battery and go.

Most popular lawn equipment brands offer battery-powered options, along with newer brands that specialize in electric tools. If you need multiple tools, buying the same brand with the same battery type allows you to swap batteries between different pieces of equipment. That also means fewer battery chargers to store or keep on your workbench.

Opt for equipment with brushless motors. They are more efficient, more powerful and have a longer lifespan than traditional brushed motors. A brushless motor typically costs more but is worth the improved efficiency. A brushed motor transfers electricity using physical brushes, which can wear down over time. The

friction caused by the brushes makes equipment run hotter and noisier. A brushless motor uses electronic commutation with less friction, which makes it more powerful, extends the lifespan and allows you to get more done on a single charge.

Just as gas-powered lawnmowers require safe storage and handling of gas and oil, battery-powered equipment requires proper care for maintenance, charging and disposal. Always use the manufacturer's original charging equipment, charge batteries on hard surfaces away from anything flammable, and store chargers in a cool, dry place.

Most manufacturers recommend charging batteries only until they reach full capacity instead of leaving them on the charger until you are ready to use them. This helps prevent damage to the battery from overcharging and heat buildup and reduces potential fire hazards. Unplug chargers when not in use to avoid energy waste.

Similar to gas and oil, old or damaged batteries should not end up in household garbage and landfills, where they can ignite fires and leak toxic chemicals into soil and groundwater. Instead, recycle them at a big-box store or at a county or city waste management site.

If you're looking for a quieter, more efficient, lower maintenance lawn care routine, rethink your equipment options and consider electric models. If you decide to make the switch, check with your electric utility or state agency for potential rebates.





Co-ops in the

Community Butte Electric Volunteers Bring Fresh Paint and a Smile to Retired Nurse

Jacob Boyko

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Concern for community is the seventh cooperative principle, and when Butte Electric Cooperative CEO Matt Sleep was approached to help with a nearby volunteer project, he knew it was his co-op's time to act.

•••

In Belle Fourche, about 25 miles southwest of Butte Electric's headquarters in Newell, City Code Enforcement Officer Clint Haffner keeps a busy schedule. When he's not on the clock for the city handling code enforcement and animal control matters, he's helping lead the local United Way chapter, where he organizes volunteering projects aiming to make Belle Fourche shine a little brighter.

"When I started the job [with the city], I'd come across situations where people are just physically unable to shovel a sidewalk or take care of things," Haffner said. "Some are simply too old. That's kind of how our group began – there just wasn't anyone helping the people who can't do it."

When Butte Electric reached out

to Haffner about potential volunteer opportunities, it didn't take him long to think of a project. Betty Krause, a 97-year-old retired nurse had spent 45 years of her life from 1950 to 1995 taking care of the Belle Fourche community. Haffner figured it was time the community gave something back to her.

Haffner approached Butte Electric about painting Betty's house, garage and shed. After all, who would be better than linemen with experience on ladders and working with their hands?

CEO Matt Sleep enthusiastically accepted, and a few weeks later on a warm September morning, volunteers from Butte Electric, Monument Health and the Belle Fourche United Way arrived at Betty's house to begin the work.

"We descended on the property with ladders, scrapers, paint buckets, paint brushes, a paint sprayer, weed eaters, tree trimmers, etc. and got busy," Sleep recalled.

The Butte Electric employees split into four teams; two would tackle the house, one the shed, and the other the garage. They made quick work of the project as Haffner kept everyone fed and hydrated.

"The Butte Electric guys are wonderful," Haffner said. "They're hard workers, handy, crafty, good on ladders. The paint job at Betty's place was smooth and efficient work."

It took about a day of work between the setup, scraping and painting of the three

Butte Electric Cooperative employees and other volunteers with Betty Krause after painting her house in Belle Fourche.
Photo submitted by Clint Haffner

buildings – Betty was awestruck when she went outside to see the finished job.

"It was pretty wonderful, and I've had many compliments," she said of the result. "It shows it's a caring community. It's just awesome and amazing that they'd do it for one person."

While Betty's house received a coat of fresh paint, Sleep said the volunteers also took something back with them.

"When the painting was done, I think Betty's appreciation and thankfulness brought a great feeling of joy and accomplishment to all of us there – maybe even a tear or two," Sleep said. "A project like this just adds a little bit of goodness back into a community. And, we all need a little bit of goodness in our lives."



Butte Electric Cooperative employees paint a house in Belle Fourche in Sept. 2025.
Photo submitted by Clint Haffner



From left, in the Sioux Valley Energy shop: Ted Smith, vice president of engineering and operations; Chad Williams, manager of operations; journey lineworker Jager Rus; and journey lineworker Paul Schamber. Photo submitted by Sioux Valley Energy

BUSTING ENERGY MYTHS

with Ted Smith of Sioux Valley Energy

Frank Turner
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Electricity powers nearly every part of daily life, yet most people only think about it when the lights flicker or a bill arrives. Because the system works quietly in the background, assumptions about how it operates tend to fill the gaps.

To sort through several common misconceptions, Cooperative Connections spoke with Ted Smith, vice president of engineering and operations at Sioux Valley Energy, the cooperative serving South Dakota counties of Brookings, Lake, Moody, Kingsbury, and Minnehaha and Minnesota counties of Rock and Pipestone. Smith has worked in the electric industry for 35 years, including 20 years at Sioux Valley, where he

oversees engineering, line crews and dispatch.

Here are several claims he regularly hears from members and how he responds.

Myth: If the lights go out, it must be a local problem.
Smith: That's definitely a myth.

An outage can begin anywhere from inside your home all the way back to a generating station two states away. The electric grid is highly interconnected. A disruption in one area can ripple outward across transmission lines that serve multiple utilities.

There have been large historical outages, especially in the eastern United States, where a single event such as a tree contacting a transmission line triggered a cascading failure across multiple states. Entire cities lost power

because one initiating fault spread across the network.

Closer to home, severe weather in one region can affect transmission lines feeding a much broader footprint. If a major transmission line trips offline, and another line is already out for maintenance, service interruptions can extend far beyond the original storm area.

“Just because your lights go out doesn't mean the problem started down the road, close to home” Smith said. “It could be much farther upstream.”

Myth: The grid can be powered entirely by renewable energy.
Smith: At times, yes. Around the clock, no.

Smith pointed to hydroelectric dams along the Missouri River as renewable generation that run continuously, but other renewable resources, such as wind and solar, simply aren't reliable sources of energy and only contribute

significantly when conditions allow.

“Although sometimes it seems like it, the wind doesn’t always blow in South Dakota,” Smith said. “And solar only produces during daylight hours.”

Although battery storage has improved in recent years, Smith says storing enough energy to power the grid around the clock is prohibitively expensive at this point in time.

For now, maintaining reliability requires a mix of generation resources so supply remains available regardless of weather or time of day.

Myth: If my neighbor has power and I do not after a storm, the cooperative skipped me.

Smith: That’s not how it works.

In some cases, the cooperative may not yet know a member is without service. Reporting outages remains important.

Another possibility is that the issue is on the member side of the meter. Crews may restore cooperative equipment and determine that the damage is within the member’s own service.

“When crews see it’s a problem on the member side of the meter, they will call dispatch and have them contact the member,” Smith said.

He also emphasized the importance of keeping current phone numbers on file. Fewer households rely on landlines today, which makes updated cell phone numbers critical during storm response.

Myth: Burying all power lines would eliminate outages.

Smith: No.

Underground lines are not exposed to wind and ice, but they are not immune to failure. Over time, underground conductors deteriorate. Rodents such as gophers can damage them. Excavation damage is also common when individuals dig without confirming where utilities are buried.

Before digging, members should always contact 811, the national call-before-you-dig number. That service

notifies utility providers so buried lines can be located and marked before excavation begins. Failing to call 811 can be dangerous and increase the risk of damaging underground infrastructure, causing outages.

And even when damage occurs naturally, locating the fault underground can take time.

“With overhead lines, crews can usually see the damage,” Smith said. “Underground, it takes troubleshooting to figure out exactly where the fault is, sometimes leading to longer outage durations.”

He recalled one outage that proved especially difficult to diagnose.

“One time we had an outage that we just could not narrow down,” he said. “When we finally found the damage, we saw that a gopher had chewed the bottom of the wire. You could not see it from the top. We had to dig up about 20 feet of cable and turn it over before we could see the damage.”

Underground systems can reduce certain types of outages, but they do not eliminate them, and repairs often require more time and labor.

Myth: Wind and solar power are free once installed.

Smith: The fuel is free, but that’s the only thing that’s free.

Wind turbines require ongoing maintenance, including mechanical components that need to be regularly serviced. Solar power relies on inverters and other equipment that must be maintained and eventually replaced.

There are construction costs, financing costs and transmission costs involved in delivering electricity from generation sites to homes and businesses. Those transmission and maintenance assets are accounted for over time and included in the overall cost of electricity.

Free fuel lowers one portion of cost. It does not remove the need to build, maintain and replace infrastructure.

Myth: Electric cooperatives raise rates to increase profits.

Smith: No. Cooperatives are not-for-profit.

Electric cooperatives are member owned, not investor owned. That means there are no outside shareholders expecting earnings. Instead, cooperatives operate on margins, collecting enough revenue to pay expenses, maintain infrastructure and meet financial obligations.

“The only place we get money is from the people at the end of the line,” Smith said. “We don’t have a printing press in the basement.”

In fact, if revenue exceeds expenses in a given year, a portion of those margins are allocated back to members as capital credits when the board determines it’s financially appropriate. Capital credits represent a member’s share of the cooperative’s financial performance during the years they received service.

However, in recent years, equipment costs have risen significantly. Smith cited bucket trucks that once cost around \$220,000 have since more than doubled in price, and major system components have seen similar increases. Usually, the cost of wholesale power from the cooperative’s power suppliers makes up the largest share of the budget and those costs have been increasing as well.

Rate adjustments reflect those rising operational costs and the need to maintain reliable service, not profit distribution.

Electricity may seem simple at the flip of a switch, but as Smith makes clear, the system behind it involves infrastructure, coordination and constant evaluation. Understanding how it works helps members separate assumption from reality and better appreciate the network that serves them every day.

Lineman Appreciation Day Coloring Contest

Contest Dates

- Opening Day: March 3, 2026
- Final Day to Submit: April 9, 2026
- Winners Announced on: April 13, 2026

Winners will be chosen by BHEC employees.

Who Can Enter:

The contest is open to children 12 years old and under. (One entry per child, please!) Age groups are divided into three “lineworker” ranks:

- Apprentice Lineman – Ages 5 and under
- Journeyman Lineman – Ages 6–9
- Foreman – Ages 10–12

One winner from each age group will be selected.

How to Enter:

- Download a coloring sheet at bhec.coop/coloring-contest or pick one up at BHEC’s office at 25191 Cooperative Way, Custer, SD 57730
- Complete the artwork and turn it in at BHEC during normal business hours or mail it to P.O. Box 792, Custer, SD 57730

Important: Be sure to fill out the contact information on the last sheet so we can notify winners! (Digital entries via email or social media will not be accepted.)

Coloring Gift Baskets

A group of BHEC employees will select one winner from each age group. Winners will receive a shockingly awesome gift basket packed with:

- Art supplies and goodies to inspire future masterpieces
- BHEC Swag

Winners will be contacted after the contest ends with instructions on how to claim their prize.

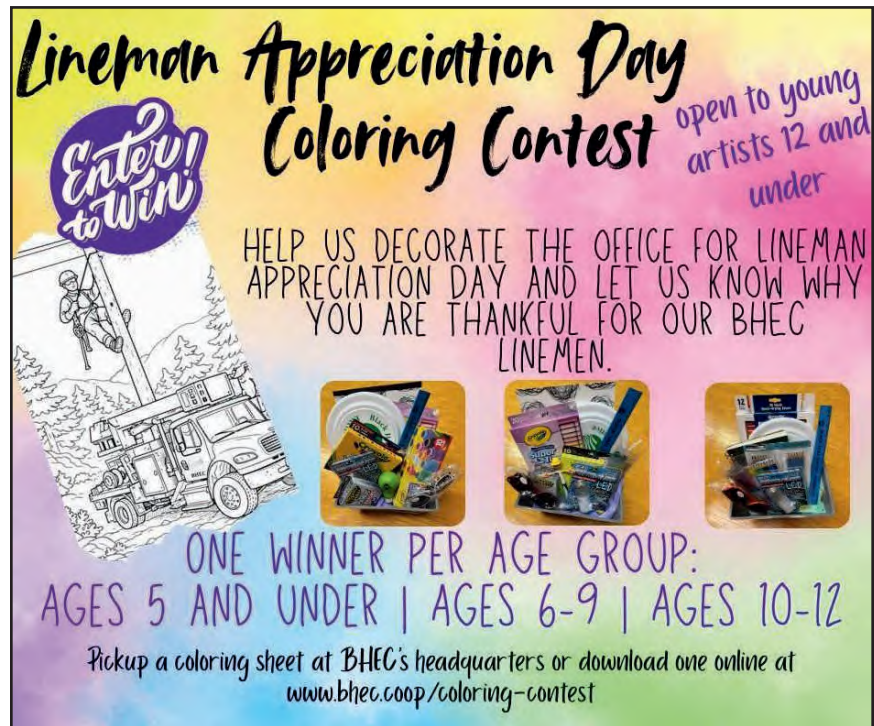
Important Rules & Guidelines

- Children should complete the artwork themselves if possible. Groups will be evaluated with age-appropriate expectations.
- Acceptable Materials: Crayons, colored pencils, markers, and paints are allowed. We want you to be creative!
- Artwork Return: No entries will be returned. We encourage you to take a photo or make a copy of the completed artwork before turning it in.
- Display: Artwork will be proudly displayed at BHEC’s office and used in social media and digital publications.

Judging Criteria

Entries will be judged based on:

- Creativity
- Age-appropriate coloring skills and artistic effort



CO-OPS READYING FOR EXTREME WEATHER TAP TOOLS AND SHARED RESOURCES

Cathy Cash
NRECA

The epic Gulf Coast Blizzard of 2025 smothered New Orleans and surrounding communities in 10 inches of snow but that's just one of many recent weird weather phenomena.

"Tornado alley" is widening from the Great Plains into the Deep South and wildfires are no longer just a western worry but spreading smoke and destruction into the Midwest and Southeast.

As storm season comes, what is your electric cooperative doing to keep the lights on in the face of Mother Nature's shifting paradigm? Plenty.

"Electric co-ops are experiencing more extreme weather events all across the country and are busy preparing, planning and forecasting differently than they have in the past," said Jennah Denney, senior program manager of technology integration at NRECA.

"Even co-ops who've yet to see unprecedented events, like the winter storms that hit Louisiana and Texas or the hurricanes ravaging parts of the Tennessee Valley, are definitely trying to limit how

much of their system goes down and to restore power as fast as they can using automation, technologies and outage data."

New sensors and weather-risk tools are giving co-ops early warning and situational awareness of threats like wildfires. Co-ops are also applying historical outage data in developing intelligent weather models to forecast potential crisis spots in their service territory.

"Co-ops are winterizing equipment in places like Arkansas and Louisiana that may not have had to winterize equipment before," said Denney.

Automated sensors, communications systems and data analytics allow co-ops to monitor their generation, powerlines and other vital equipment in real-time.

Drones are being equipped with cameras trained by artificial intelligence to scan electricity distribution system equipment and spotlight potential weak spots if severe weather rolls in. Co-ops are also updating their maintenance and vegetation management plans with the help of drone cameras or satellite imagery.

Co-ops continue to replace aging wooden poles for steel and underground powerlines where it's cost-effective and environmentally

sound to combat destruction from wind, floods and wildfires.

To shorten blackouts, co-ops are installing battery energy storage systems.

Then there's co-ops' real superpower: Mutual aid.

In the wake of the worst disasters, co-op crews volunteer to rise at any hour on any day to travel hundreds of miles to help rebuild another co-op's powerlines and restore electricity to members, often in treacherous conditions.

"Mutual aid, grounded in the foundational principle of cooperation among co-ops, is one of the best stories we have in co-op land," said Denney. "As a co-op and a co-op member, you get help from faraway places during these crisis events."

Co-ops work hard to get mutual aid agreements and their logistics – from meals to laundry and lodging for the arriving crews – in place in advance of storm seasons.

The mission could take weeks and thousands of co-op lineworkers, like when horrific Hurricane Helene made landfall in Florida then roared up into the Carolinas' rural mountain communities in September 2024.

And there's no limit to the help a co-op can receive. Co-ops southwest of Houston welcomed mutual aid crews from outside Texas in the aftermath of Hurricane Beryl in July 2024, just three years after volunteer lineworkers answered the call when deadly Winter Storm Yuri shocked the state.

"That's a great story of cooperation amongst cooperatives," said Denney, who last winter witnessed co-op bucket trucks from Indiana coming to New Orleans' aid. "As co-ops experience more of these extreme weather events, the history and tradition of co-ops helping co-ops is going to be even more important."

In and of itself, a co-op is an exceptional tool for surviving unexpected catastrophes.

"The co-op model lends itself to making sure that one area served by a rural electric co-op has the resources of our shared network," she said. "Willing to lend that helping hand is important as we all are navigating new weather patterns and weather events."



ON THE LOOKOUT FOR ENERGY SCAMS

Photo by Frank Turner

Frank Turner

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It's no April Fools' joke. Consumers with an electricity connection have long been targets for scams. In today's digital world, those schemes have evolved. As more daily business is conducted online, scammers have shifted their tactics to match. They now use phone calls, texts and emails to create urgency, confusion and fear, hoping consumers will act before taking time to verify the claim.

For victims, these scams can lead to financial loss and identity theft, but understanding how the most common schemes work and what they typically look like is one of the best defenses to staying safe.

The "Past Due" Disconnection Threat

One of the most common tactics that scammers use is the disconnection threat. They use a fake message claiming a bill is past due and that service will be disconnected immediately unless payment is made on the spot.

The call may sound official. The message may include account numbers

or appear to come from your local cooperative's phone number due to caller ID spoofing. The scammer's goal is simple: create panic so you pay first and question later.

In reality, cooperatives follow clear procedures and provide advance notice before any disconnection. A demand for instant payment, especially with threats attached, is a major red flag.

The "You Overpaid" Refund Scam

Who would not want a refund? Scammers take advantage of that instinct.

In this scheme, a text, call or email claims a member overpaid an electric bill and is owed money. The message often includes instructions to click a link or provide banking information so the refund can be "processed."

The message can sound especially convincing to cooperative members because electric cooperatives do return margins to members in the form of capital credits. Capital credits represent a member's share of the cooperative's annual margins and are returned over time.

However, capital credits are distributed through established,

official processes. They are not issued through unsolicited texts, surprise phone calls or links requesting personal banking information. When your local cooperative retires capital credits, members are notified through official channels such as billing statements, newsletters, verified mailings or even through Cooperative Connections.

An unexpected refund message that asks for sensitive information is a red flag. When in doubt, pause and contact your local cooperative directly using trusted contact information.

Gift Card and Cryptocurrency Demands

Scammers often insist on unusual payment methods such as gift cards, prepaid debit cards or cryptocurrency. They may provide detailed instructions on how to purchase gift cards and read the numbers over the phone.

This is a clear warning sign. Legitimate cooperatives do not request payment in gift cards or cryptocurrency. These forms of payment are nearly impossible to trace or recover, which makes them attractive to criminals.

Spotting a Scam

Regardless of the method, every scam has similar warning signs that members can watch for:

- High-pressure tactics that demand immediate payment
- Requests for payment through gift cards, prepaid debit cards or cryptocurrency
- Emails or text messages with poor grammar, spelling errors or unfamiliar web addresses

Scammers rely on urgency. Taking a few extra minutes to verify a message can prevent lasting financial consequences.

What Your Local Cooperative Will and Will Not Do

Your local cooperative will not demand immediate payment without prior notice. Cooperatives follow

established procedures and provide advance communication before any service interruption.

Your local cooperative will not ask for Social Security numbers, banking details or other sensitive information through unsolicited phone calls, emails or text messages.

Members have secure payment options available through official cooperative channels, including the cooperative's verified website and approved payment systems. When in doubt, independently locate the cooperative's official contact information rather than using links or phone numbers included in a message.

Text alerts are only sent to members who have enrolled in official notification programs, such as outage updates.

Avoiding Energy Scams

If you receive a suspicious call, text or email claiming to be from your local cooperative, do not use the contact information provided in that message. Instead, use the phone number printed on your billing statement or listed on the cooperative's verified website.

Also, reporting suspected scams helps protect fellow members. By alerting your local cooperative to fraudulent activity, members help strengthen the community's defense against energy scams and ensure the cooperative network remains secure for everyone.

Have a question about whether something is real or not? Reach out to your local cooperative. Electric cooperatives are owned by the members they serve and powered by the communities around them.

SIGNS OF AN

ENERGY SCAM

High-Pressure Tactics

Scammers will pressure you, creating a sense of urgency. Claims that your power will be disconnected without immediate payment are common with utility scams.

Sketchy Payment Methods

Scammers may ask for unusual payment methods like gift cards or cryptocurrency. In these cases, it's likely a scam.

Dodgy Communication

Whether an email, text message or letter, utility scams typically include poor grammar, spelling errors or unusual email addresses. These are common warning signs of a scam.





DIAL 8-1-1 BEFORE DIGGING

South Dakota One Call teamed up with South Dakota's Electric Cooperatives to promote safety at the South Dakota State Fair. Photo by Jacob Boyko

S.D. One Call/811 Q&A With Steve Barnett

Jacob Boyko

jacob.boyko@sdrea.coop

When planning any excavation project in South Dakota – whether installing a backyard fence, planting trees or building an outdoor shop – one simple phone call can protect lives, property and vital infrastructure. South Dakota One Call is the statewide system that helps homeowners, contractors and landowners locate underground utilities before digging begins. It's easy to get started – all you do is call 8-1-1.

Steve Barnett has served on the S.D. Call Board since 2022 when he was hired as the general manager of the South Dakota Rural Electric Association.

Barnett attends S.D. One Call's board meetings where he advocates for the interests of the utilities and co-op member-owners he represents, while helping guide the organization to better respond to the needs of utilities, rate payers, excavators and everyone else who may use the service.



Steve Barnett

S.D. One Call Board Member
Representing Electric Cooperatives
SDREA General Manager

Barnett sat down with Cooperative Connections to discuss the importance of S.D. One Call and how it benefits electric cooperatives and their members.

Q: What's your role on the South Dakota One Call board?

I serve on the South Dakota One Call Board of Directors as the representative for the 31 rural electric cooperatives operating within our state. The One Call board includes representatives from different utility sectors as well as excavators. I've been involved in this role to help ensure our members' infrastructure is protected and that we're promoting safe excavation practices statewide.

Q: Why was South Dakota One Call founded, and why is calling 811 so important?

South Dakota One Call serves as a centralized notification center for underground infrastructure. The system was created in 1993 to provide one central point of contact for excavators to encourage more responsible digging. Prior to the founding of S.D. One Call, excavators doing their due diligence needed to make multiple calls to various utilities. Today, thanks to S.D. One Call, the only number you need to dial is 811. That call triggers notification to all participating utilities in the area so they can send locators out to the digsite.

It's important to call 811 because state law requires it. If someone digs without a locate ticket and damages a buried utility, they are fully responsible for the damages and liability. Beyond that, hitting a gas or electric line can be extremely dangerous. There are thousands of miles of buried electric, gas, water, sewer, communication lines and drain tile underground.

Calling 811 is free, and it protects the excavator and the utilities.

Q: What happens after I call 811?

When you call 811 or submit a request through sdonecall.com:

- Your information goes to the South Dakota One Call center.
- You identify and map out where you plan to dig.
- The system notifies all utilities with infrastructure in that area.

Utilities have 48 hours from the start of the next business day to respond by marking their lines with paint or flags.

After that 48-hour period, excavation can begin.

The service is free to the caller, as the utilities fund the system by paying a small fee every time their infrastructure is identified in an excavation area. The utility is responsible for marking its own facilities.

During this year's legislative session in Pierre, legislators voted to enact a change to how the 48-hour locate window is determined.

Starting July 1, South Dakota will be a "midnight state," meaning the day you submit the ticket does not count toward the 48-hour window. The clock begins at 12:01 a.m. the next business day.

If you submit a ticket at 4 p.m. on a Tuesday, the 48-hour window will start Wednesday at 12:01 a.m. Your project start time will be Friday.

Q: Since serving on the One Call board, what's one interesting thing you've learned?

What I've come to better understand is how much protection the system provides the excavator. When you call 811 and obtain a valid locate ticket, you've documented that you followed state law and gave utilities the opportunity to mark their facilities. If something is properly marked and you dig carefully around those markings, you've significantly reduced both safety risks and liability exposure. On the other hand, if you dig without a ticket and hit a line, you are fully responsible for the damages and any related costs.

I've also learned how many different types of underground infrastructure exist – everything from electric and fiber to water, sewer, gas, and even private drain tile that crosses into public right-of-way.

Q: What's the mission of the One Call board?

I think you can summarize the board's mission pretty succinctly: promote public safety by preventing damage to underground utilities, and ensuring excavation across the state is conducted safely and responsibly.

Apart from that, our goal is to continue improving our one-call notification system, making it more efficient and effective, as well as just getting the word out. We've done some of that through letters to the editor in various newspapers and with booths at events including, the South Dakota State Fair. The more we can get the word out, the less problems we have, and that means keeping costs low for our member-owners.

At its core, the board's mission is to reduce injuries, prevent service disruptions and protect both excavators and utility providers through communication, compliance and education.



Mark Meier, Chairman

Watertown Municipal Utilities
South Dakota Municipalities

Ryan Barr, Vice Chairman

Midco
Community Antenna Television Companies

Kay Braaten

Northern Border Pipeline
Interstate Pipeline Carriers

Steve Barnett

South Dakota Rural Electric Association
Rural Electric Cooperatives

Scott Wiese

Otter Tail Power Co.
Investor-Owned Electric Utilities

Brad Wenande

NorthWestern Energy
Investor-Owned Natural Gas Companies

Loren Beld

LL & Sons Excavating, Inc.
Excavating Contractors

Jim Wedin

CenturyLink
Telecommunications with > 50,000 customers

Lloyd Rave

Minnehaha Community Water Corporation Board
Rural Water Systems

John Morris

Morris Inc
Excavating Contractors

Jake VanDewater

SDN Communications
Small Telecommunications with < 50,000 customers



APRIL 9-11
Annual Schmeckfest
 German Festival of
 Tasting
 Freeman, SD
 605-925-4237
 www.schmeckfest.com

Travel South Dakota Photo

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.

MARCH 28
Black Hills Electric Cooperative
Easter Egg Hunt
 10 a.m.
 Hermosa Baseball Field
 Hermosa, SD

MARCH 29
Run for the Rangers
 Registration: 11:45 a.m.-12:45 p.m.
 Granite Sports
 Hill City, SD

MARCH 29
Palm Sunday Ham Dinner
& Silent Auction
 11:45 a.m.-1:30 p.m.
 Granite Sports
 Hill City, SD

APRIL 3
Bachelors of Broadway:
Gentlemen of the Theatre
 7 p.m.
 Johnson Fine Arts Center
 Aberdeen, SD

APRIL 4
Hop With a Cop – Free But Ticketed
 10 a.m.-12 p.m.
 Sensory-Friendly Hunt 12:30-1 p.m.
 Box Elder Events Center
 Box Elder, SD
 605-390-9341

APRIL 5
Easter Sunrise Service
 7 a.m.
 Mount Rushmore
 605-391-9156

APRIL 9-11
Annual Schmeckfest
 German Heritage Celebration
 Freeman, SD
 605-925-4237
 www.schmeckfest.com

APRIL 10
Rochford Area Meeting
 5:30-6:30 p.m.
 Rochford Community Hall

APRIL 10
Hill City Arts Council Bingo
 6-8 p.m.
 Hill City Prairie Dog Taproom
 Hill City, SD

APRIL 11
Women VetsConnect Retreat
 A Wellness Retreat for
 Women Veterans and Military
 Spouses
 9 a.m.-2 p.m.
 Our Savior's Lutheran Church
 909 W. 33rd St.
 Sioux Falls, SD

APRIL 15
Hill City High School Annual
Job Fair
 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.
 Hill City High School Gym
 Hill City, SD

APRIL 18
Brookings Quilt Show XII
 9 a.m.-5 p.m.
 Admission: \$10
 Dakota Bank Center
 Brookings, SD
 605-690-3246

APRIL 18
Hill City's Spring Craft Fair
 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
 Hill City Middle School Gym
 Hill City, SD

APRIL 19
Natl. Park Service Fee-Free Day
 6-8 p.m.

APRIL 20
The Bronx Wanderers
 7 p.m.
 Johnson Fine Arts Center
 Aberdeen, SD

APRIL 22
Hill City Garden Club Meeting
 Great Plains Bumblebee Atlas
 1 p.m.
 Super 8 Conference Room
 Hill City, SD

APRIL 22
Hill City Garden Club Meeting
 Great Plains Bumblebee Atlas
 1 p.m.
 Super 8 Conference Room
 Hill City, SD

APRIL 22
Vinyl Record Club
 5:30-6:30 p.m.
 Custer County Library
 Custer, 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.