



Rural Montana

Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association Magazine | AUGUST 2026



YOUTH TOUR 2026

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DECIPHERING Data Centers

a five-part
SERIES

part
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POTENTIAL COMMUNITY BENEFITS

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Deciphering Data Centers

*The potential
community benefits
of data centers are
explained*

Rural Montana

August 2026

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CEO | Viewpoint

Data centers in Montana: Opportunities and challenges

MARK LAMBRECHT, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association



NEW stories about data centers have been hard to miss in recent months, with reports on proposed facilities across the country and community forums debating their benefits and drawbacks. Composite polling from Reuters, Gallup and Heatmap indicates that more than 70 percent of respondents nationwide oppose having data centers built in their communities, citing concerns about environmental and community impacts, as well as potential increases in electricity bills.

Montana has far fewer data centers than many other states. The state is home to nine facilities, compared with approximately 600 in Virginia and 335 in Texas, with hundreds more planned across the country. Even so, Montana offers many of the qualities developers seek, along with enough challenges to give them pause.

The Frontier Institute identified several factors attracting data center developers to the Treasure State, including its cool climate, which reduces energy needs for cooling; relatively infrequent natural disasters; proximity to Pacific Northwest technology companies; expanding fiberoptic infrastructure; business-friendly environment; and available land. At the same time, developers must contend with obstacles such as limited

broadband access in some areas, constrained power generation and transmission capacity, and permitting challenges.

Despite those hurdles, data centers continue to make plans to come to Montana because demand continues to grow. As a recent Montana Public Radio article noted, "Data centers support everything people do online, from the banking app on your phone to storing electronic medical records to running 911 call centers. And the need for them is only growing."

MECA does not take a position for or against data centers. We recognize their presence in Montana is likely to increase and we believe it is our responsibility to provide readers with clear, factual information. That's why we invested the time and resources to better understand how data centers operate and to visit communities where they are located.

In this issue of *Rural Montana*, we examine the tax revenue, employment opportunities and charitable contributions data centers can bring to local communities. Whether those benefits outweigh the costs depends largely on how the facilities are powered and cooled — topics we'll explore in the next installments of this series. 

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Deciphering data centers

POTENTIAL COMMUNITY BENEFITS



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

A drive through small-town Quincy, Washington, makes the community impacts of having several data centers nearby abundantly clear.

A new city hall, police station and public services headquarters were completed in 2020, at a cost of more than \$6.5 million; a \$14.5 million aquatic center is opening this fall; a recently built \$55 million hospital; and a new \$84 million high school built in 2019, are among other modern city buildings. There is also the ongoing Q-Plex project – a 143,000-square-foot indoor sports arena with an estimated cost between \$20 million and \$23 million which is currently under construction.

At a population of around 7,500, Quincy is most comparable to Laurel, Miles City, Whitefish and Sidney in Montana.

So why does Quincy boast more than \$200 million in new buildings in the last seven years? Simply put, it's the robust property tax base brought by the nearby data center campuses.

Quincy Superintendent of Schools Dr. Nik Bergman explained that the high school was built with a \$118 million bond approved by voters. The data centers pay 54 percent of all assessed value for such bonds, with remaining businesses and private property/homeowners paying the rest.

"I think it wouldn't have been possible" to build the new school without data centers, Bergman said. "We would still be in our old school, which was built in 1954."

State legislator Alex Ybarra has said that data centers account for about 75

DECIPHERING Data Centers

A FIVE-PART SERIES

PART 2: POTENTIAL BENEFITS

This is the second in a five-part series on data centers. In the coming months, we will examine options to power data centers, the concerns surrounding data centers and the prospects of data centers coming to electric cooperatives' service areas in Montana. The first part, What is a Data Center?, can be found in the July issue and online at www.mtco-ops.com/rural-montana.

next month: THE CHALLENGE OF POWERING DATA CENTERS



Students sit and work in one of the computer labs at Quincy High School. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

percent of Quincy's property tax revenue, while some working groups say it's closer to 65 percent. Either way, the property tax impact and the benefits of it are undeniable.

The first data center opened in Quincy in 2006, when the assessed

value of the top 10 taxpayers in Grant County was nearly \$313 million. As of 2025, the assessed value of the county's top 10 taxpayers is approximately \$6.13 billion, a 1,961 percent increase, according to a report by the Washington State Department of Revenue's

Data Center Workgroup, which was formed by executive order of Washington Gov. Bob Ferguson last year.

There are now seven data center campuses near Quincy, according to the Grant County Public Utility District. Those campuses house 31 data centers, according to *datacentermap.com*.

According to *streamdatacenters.com*, Washington offers a sales and use tax exemption for qualifying data centers on server equipment, power infrastructure and related installation services. There is no property tax abatement offered in Washington. The website notes that Montana offers a property tax reduction for some large data centers. To qualify, a facility must have at least 25,000 square feet and invest \$50 million in land, improvements and equipment within 48 months. The incentive lowers the taxable value to 0.9 percent initially, then it gradually increases over 10 years.

Other community benefits

Sue Kane, chief executive officer of NCW Tech Alliance in nearby Wenatchee, Washington, said the changes in the communities with data centers are clear. In 2005, Quincy and the surrounding areas were largely orchard communities, and they still look the same. However, the impacts of data centers have improved the quality of life for many residents.

"Quincy, Washington, is the wealthiest community per capita in Washington," Kane said, adding that the benefits go far beyond a healthy tax base.

Twenty years ago, Stetner Electric in Quincy had three employees. It now has more than 200, and peaks at more than 400, because it supports the data center industry, Kane said.

"They broke ground in 2006, but they never stopped construction," Kane said of the data centers. "It's been 20 years, (Microsoft) just keeps rebuilding that site."

Kane said the NCW Tech Alliance was founded in 1999 to advocate for technology infrastructure that was needed to support regional economic



Quincy High School Principal Felicie Becker and Assistant Principal and Career and Technical Education (CTE) Director Elizabeth Averill pose in the school library. | PHOTO BY RYAN HALL

development.

"They were not wrong," Kane said, noting that the data centers brought their own connectivity, but having conduit in place was an enticement.

In addition to bringing tax dollars, the data centers near Quincy have proven to be invested in the community, Bergman and Kane said.

This year, to celebrate 20 years in town, Microsoft made 20 \$10,000 donations to community organizations in Quincy. Ryan Beebout, vice president of Sabey Data Centers – West, said Sabey donated \$1 million to the Wenatchee YMCA for a new building, and paid to upgrade Quincy High School's sound system in its performing arts center.

"It was a much-needed new facility," Beebout said of the YMCA.

Another area school wanted Yondr pouches, at a cost of about \$30 each,

to guarantee a cellphone-free environment. The pouches allow a user to keep their phone on them in a locked fabric pouch that can only be unlocked by a designated unlocking station. Sabey bought enough pouches for all of the students, to facilitate a better learning environment. Sabey also provided Chromebook computers to two schools during the pandemic to facilitate at-home learning.

Beebout said Sabey also sponsors robotics teams from various schools, and has paid to send teams to national competitions.

Additionally, Sabey donated \$30,000 each to two different low-income assistance programs through Grant County Public Utility District, to help people struggling with their electric bills.

See DATA CENTERS, next page

DATA CENTERS

Continued from page 3

Kane said it's not just the companies that donate. She said Brad Smith, president of Microsoft, wrote a personal check to the local high school booster club, for example.

Indirect benefits

Kane said that the presence of the data centers, along with the data center technician program at Quincy High School, helps ensure that the area's high school graduates can stay and make a good living in Quincy. She said that before data centers, those who wanted to work in something other than agriculture or a few trades had to leave the area.

Now there's a plethora of trade and other professional jobs at data centers that allow families to stay. She noted that students can graduate from the data center certificate program at the high school and make \$60,000 a year starting — often more than their parents.

Beebout said that among Sabey's 250 local employees are HVAC technicians, and electrical, building and security jobs, many of which don't require a college degree.

"We actually hire straight out of high school," Beebout said. "It's easy to hire local. Kids can get a great career locally."

Cutting-edge education

The campus of Quincy High School differs from those in comparably sized Montana towns. A large, new barn, sprawling farmland owned by the school, a turf-field football stadium and a large school building with multiple wings dwarf those typically found in a town this size.

The school embraces the town's agricultural roots and prepares students for a technological future, while offer-



The sprawling campus of Quincy High School, which was 54 percent funded by data centers, features modern computer labs, a barn and a performing arts center. | **PHOTO BY RYAN HALL**

ing programs for anything in between. Students can raise farm animals, earn their CNA certificate, build a computer, take a fire-science class or become an EMT while earning their diploma, among other options.

"When we built the high school, we did it with the vision of we are building it for programs we didn't know exist yet," Superintendent Bergman said. "Our students not only leave with knowledge, but with hands-on experience."

Bergman, school officials, teachers and students all said that because of the property tax structure, and the generosity of the data center companies, the school and students benefit in a way that wouldn't be possible otherwise.

On this day Gerardo Guerrero, 17, sat in a side room off of the school's modern computer lab, laptop open, waiting for a one-on-one session with a Microsoft employee who meets with students virtually every day for an AP Computer Science Course.

Guerrero is a student with a bright future, he takes Technology Product Management and this AP course. Each quarter he must pitch and complete a project. This past school year he built a *Dungeons and Dragons* character creator website from scratch, hand writing close to 3,000 lines of code in 45 days, and is designing his own game.

"It's a really fun opportunity," he

said.

The extra work has paid off, Guerrero was recognized as the NCW Tech Alliance Tech Leader of the Year, and spent this summer at Harvard University to take an advanced college-level data structure course and a public-speaking course.

As he works, Guerrero said the laptop he designs on, as well as other school resources, including teachers and access to the Microsoft employee, have made these opportunities possible.

"This has always been like my dream," he said.

"The computer science program is not possible without data centers," Bergman said. "It's as good as any college space."

And it's not just technology, shop teacher Nick Heuker said data centers allow kids to visit construction sites and support the district in many ways.

"The support here is crazy," Heuker said. "You are standing in a shop I would dream of as an industry professional."

"We have a qualified awesome staff," said Felicie Becker, high school principal, noting that several high-level instructors have come either due to spouses working at the data centers or because of the resources available at the school. "A school like this attracts talent. To have beautiful classrooms is an amazing recruiting tool." **RM**

Dog Tag Buddies

Roundup Spotlight: Life-changing results happen when neighbors show up for veterans powered by community

Story by **KATI GROVE** | Operations Director

In mid-May, three veterans living with the invisible wounds of service found new hope in a wagging tail and a wet nose.

Dog Tag Buddies is a Montana-based non-profit, head-quartered in Billings, that provides an integrative therapeutic program for veterans living with hidden injuries. The organization pairs each accepted veteran with a carefully selected canine companion and guides the team through a two-year journey as the dog trains to become a fully-trained service dog tailored to the specific needs of its veteran partner.

This journey involves training at both ends of the leash. The dog learns basic obedience, advanced public access skills and tasks designed around what that veteran needs most. At the same time, the veteran learns new strategies to manage the challenges of their injuries, reduce self-isolation, and rediscover a sense of mission and purpose.

For the veterans who participate, this program is about far more than a dog. For some, it is the last glimmer of hope in a long season of struggle, a lifeline when other approaches have fallen short. While the program is not the right fit for everyone, those who embrace the challenge often experience life-changing transformation.

The impact reaches well beyond the individual. As veterans begin to re-engage with life, the effects ripple outward to their families, their friends and the communities that need them. They become more connected, more present, more alive to the world around them.

In Montana, where veteran suicide rates remain among the highest in the nation and approximately 1 in 11 residents has served, these changes carry profound weight. Every life strengthened creates a ripple that touches countless others.

The program is provided at no cost to participating veterans, making community support the cornerstone of this lifesaving work. Each new team begins with a one-and-a-half-day onboarding experience, where they learn program expectations, foundational training skills and, most importantly, meet their new canine partner for the first time.

Dog Tag Buddies equips every team for success. Leashes,



collars, kennels, grooming supplies and all essential equipment are provided. Travel and meal expenses for onboarding are covered as well, ensuring that no financial barrier stands between a veteran and the support they need.

Community partners such as Yellowstone Valley Electric Cooperative (YVEC) make this possible. A recent Round Up Grant from YVEC helped fund onboarding for the program's newest participants, and we are deeply grateful.

Dog Tag Buddies is proud to welcome Team Charlie, Team Dunkin and Team Emmy to our family. Their journey is just beginning, and it is made possible through the generosity of partners such as you.

TO LEARN MORE,

VISIT dogtagbuddies.org

OR CALL 406.969.1227

(Next application deadline: September 1, 2026)

WALLEYES UNLIMITED OF MONTANA

Crooked Creek Chapter

Group fosters warm-water fishing traditions

STORY BY **CATHY MOSER** | FOR **FERGUS ELECTRIC**

IN 1983, walleye fishermen living in Glasgow and Glendive coalesced to found the nonprofit Walleyes Unlimited of Montana. Then, in the early 1990s, Carl Seilstad and Curley Olsen of Lewistown founded the Crooked Creek Chapter that has since imparted a Walleyes Unlimited presence in Fergus and Petroleum counties. In hand with the national Walleyes Unlimited mission that states, in part, “organize and educate fishermen to promote walleye and warm-water fishing,” Crooked Creek Chapter hosts a Kid’s Fishing Day every summer.

Several members take part in the event designed to familiarize youth with warm-water fish species such as walleye, northern pike and largemouth and smallmouth bass, as well as teach angling skills. At Nelson Reservoir near Glasgow last summer, 30 boys and girls were divided up into smaller groups and matched with a Crooked Creek mentor before they climbed into boats and went fishing.

“Members show up with their boats,” said Dakota Wahl, Crooked Creek Chapter president. “We supply the kids with life jackets, rods, tackle and bait, and we feed them grilled hot dogs, chips and cookies.”

The kids, with their mentors, fish for about five hours. Kid’s Fishing Day is open to boys and girls ages 6 through 12.

Although all fish caught are released, some kids go home with trophies awarded for having caught the largest walleye, northern pike or another species, or for smallest walleye. Every boy and girl goes home with a brand-new spinning rod.



Crooked Creek Chapter President Dakota Wahl and sons Lincoln and Landon are all smiles after landing a lunker. | **COURTESY PHOTO**

“The kids are happy and really enjoy getting the opportunity to go fishing on chapter members’ boats,” Dakota said. “I’m sure for some of the kids it’s the only day of the year they get to fish out of a boat, and knowing we gave those kids a fun day, that brings satisfaction to all of us who help out on Kid’s Fishing Day.”

Crooked Creek members also organize field projects that focus on warm-water and cold-water fisheries in central Montana. These further advance the Walleyes Unlimited mission, or specifically, “improve and

conserve walleye and other warm-water fish in suitable bodies of water.”

Members’ work at these sites is almost always hands-on. At Casino Creek Reservoir south of Lewistown, the group repaired aging gazebos and undertook a general clean up around that small lake.

At East Fork Reservoir, also south of Lewistown, members started the project from scratch, building gazebos and a wheelchair-accessible fishing pier. At Petrolia Reservoir southeast of Winnett, their work included extending the boat ramp by 60 feet.

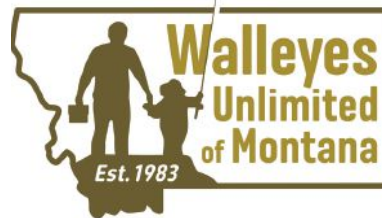


The Crooked Creek Chapter organizes Kid's Fishing Day to energize and excite youth about the sport of fishing. | **COURTESY PHOTO**

By erecting "Selected Harvest" signs at various lakes, chapter members help fishermen differentiate a walleye, a member of the perch family, from its lookalike perch cousin, a sauger. The signs inform anglers about fish size and age, using size as a reference point in determining age. Selected Harvest signs encourage anglers to release large fish for the overall good health of the fishery.

The sport of fishing has been a mainstay throughout Dakota's life, or as he put it, "I'm 38 and I've been fishing ... forever." A succession of boats in his lifetime included the one with a 16-foot tiller (the handle used to steer a motor) from which he fished as a kid with his father. Nowadays, Dakota fishes from the comfort of a Ranger. It's from that boat he passes the warm-water fishing tradition to his two sons. Ten-year-old Lincoln and 8-year-old Landon both love to fish, but recently, Lincoln has enjoyed learning how to net fish properly.

Spirited debates among warm-water fishermen as to which warm-water game fish is the trickiest to catch continue from one generation to the next. When Dakota finds himself in such a debate, he quotes the "old



Walleyes Unlimited of Montana has 17 chapters and is the largest warm-water fishing organization in Montana.

walleye fisherman" who quipped: "God created a bass so anyone could catch a fish, and then he created the walleye to separate fishermen from real fishermen."

Expert angler P. Allen Parsons, writing for *Outdoor Life*, stated this about the walleye in his in-depth coverage of warm water fish: "Its large eyes, which look as though the fish were half or wholly blind, give it its name.... Walleye fishing is a sport for those with patience." The walleye is not native to Montana, and is believed to have been introduced in the 1940s. Parsons also called the walleye "some of our best-fla-

vored fishes." Legions of fishermen who relish the challenge of outsmarting a walleye also relish eating the fish's firm white flesh.

Dakota joined the Crooked Creek Chapter seven years ago. His profession at Fergus Electric Cooperative is journeymen lineman. Two co-workers, Darek Dygert and Jake deRosier, are also Crooked Creek members.

"We're a good organization with a good group of people," Dakota said, adding that members' expertise and mentoring have helped him improve his own walleye fishing skills.

At the monthly meetings, members bounce around ideas about how to improve local fisheries as well as support communities. The money that is raised through memberships and the annual banquet in February in Lewistown, a popular event with its walleye feed, is not necessarily earmarked for fishing-related projects. Crooked Creek members, in addition to hosting Kid's Fishing Day, support local youth in other ways. They have helped fund trips to Washington, D.C., and donated \$5,000 for the new baseball fields at Veteran's Park in Lewistown.

RM

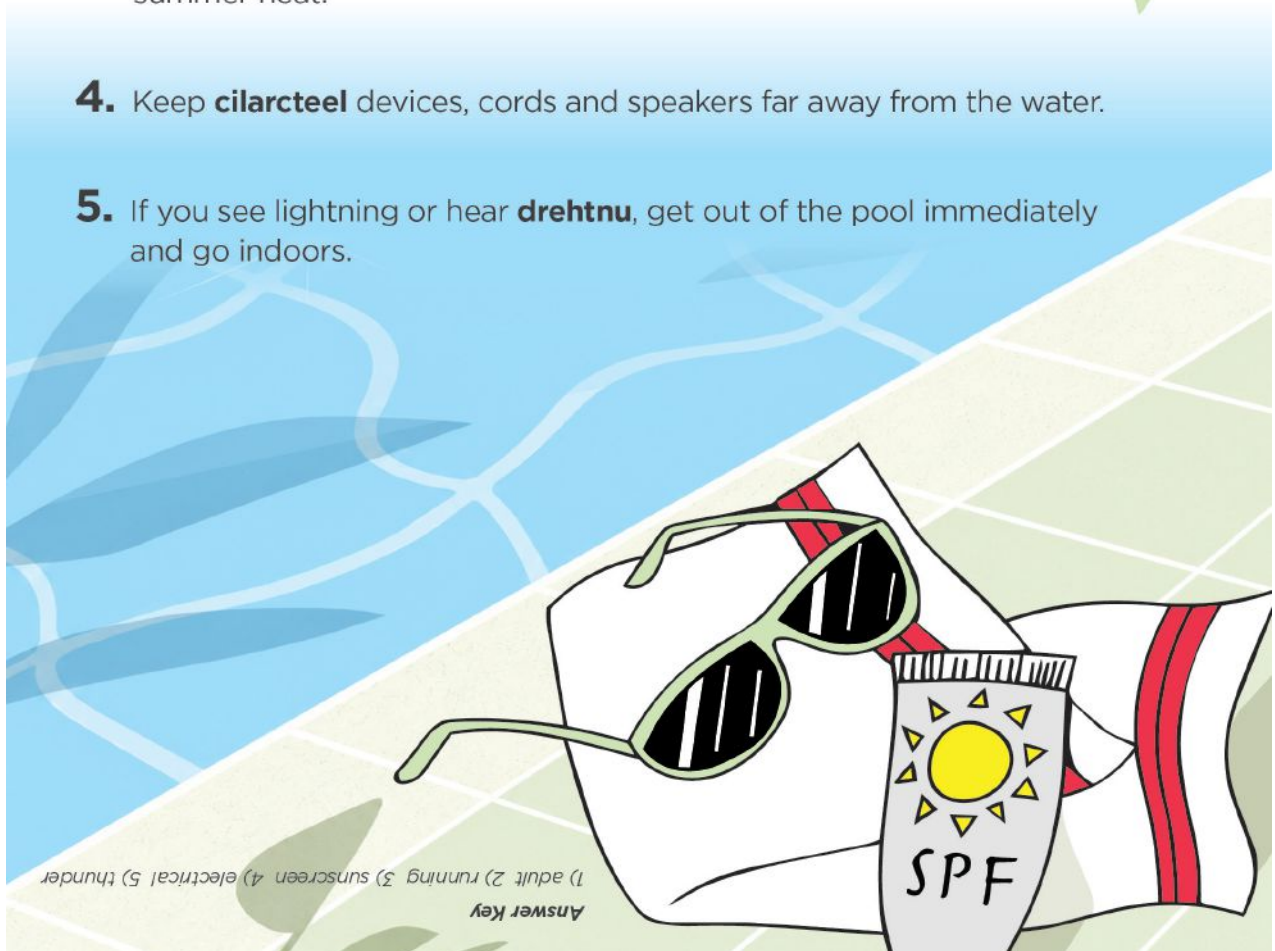
SWIMMING POOL SAFETY WORD SCRAMBLE



Dive into this word scramble challenge! Read the pool safety tips below to uncover the scrambled words. Remember these tips to stay safe while having fun in the sun.

Double check your work in the answer key.

1. Never swim without an **lutda** nearby, even if you know how to swim.
2. Walk around the pool. **Gunnrin** on wet surfaces can cause slips and falls.
3. Wear **cessrnuen** and drink plenty of water to stay safe in the summer heat.
4. Keep **cilarcteel** devices, cords and speakers far away from the water.
5. If you see lightning or hear **drehtnu**, get out of the pool immediately and go indoors.



Answer Key
1) adult 2) running 3) sunscreen 4) electrical 5) thunder

ALONG THESE LINES...

HYSHAM, MT | 406-342-5521

Lineworker **Ryan Silvis** uses a bucket truck to work on a utility pole at dusk, silhouetted against a dramatic sky of coral, pink and orange clouds. The rural setting with open fields and bare trees emphasizes the essential, around-the-clock nature of line work in a striking image of dedication and beauty.

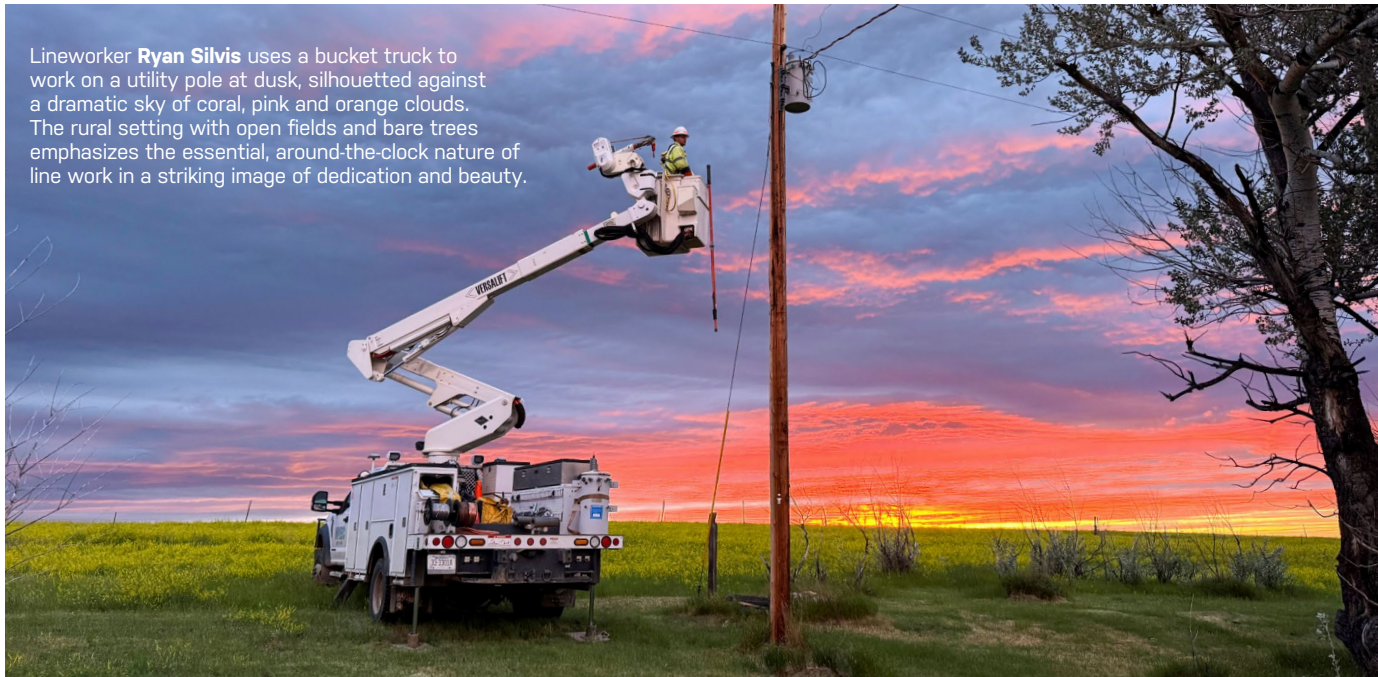


PHOTO BY DAREN REEDER

Honoring Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative lineworkers

Every day, the lineworkers at Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative dedicate themselves to keeping the lights on across our communities. Their work often goes unseen, but it is essential to the comfort, safety and productivity of every member we serve. From early mornings to late nights, through all kinds of weather, these skilled professionals ensure electricity flows reliably to homes, farms and businesses throughout our service area.

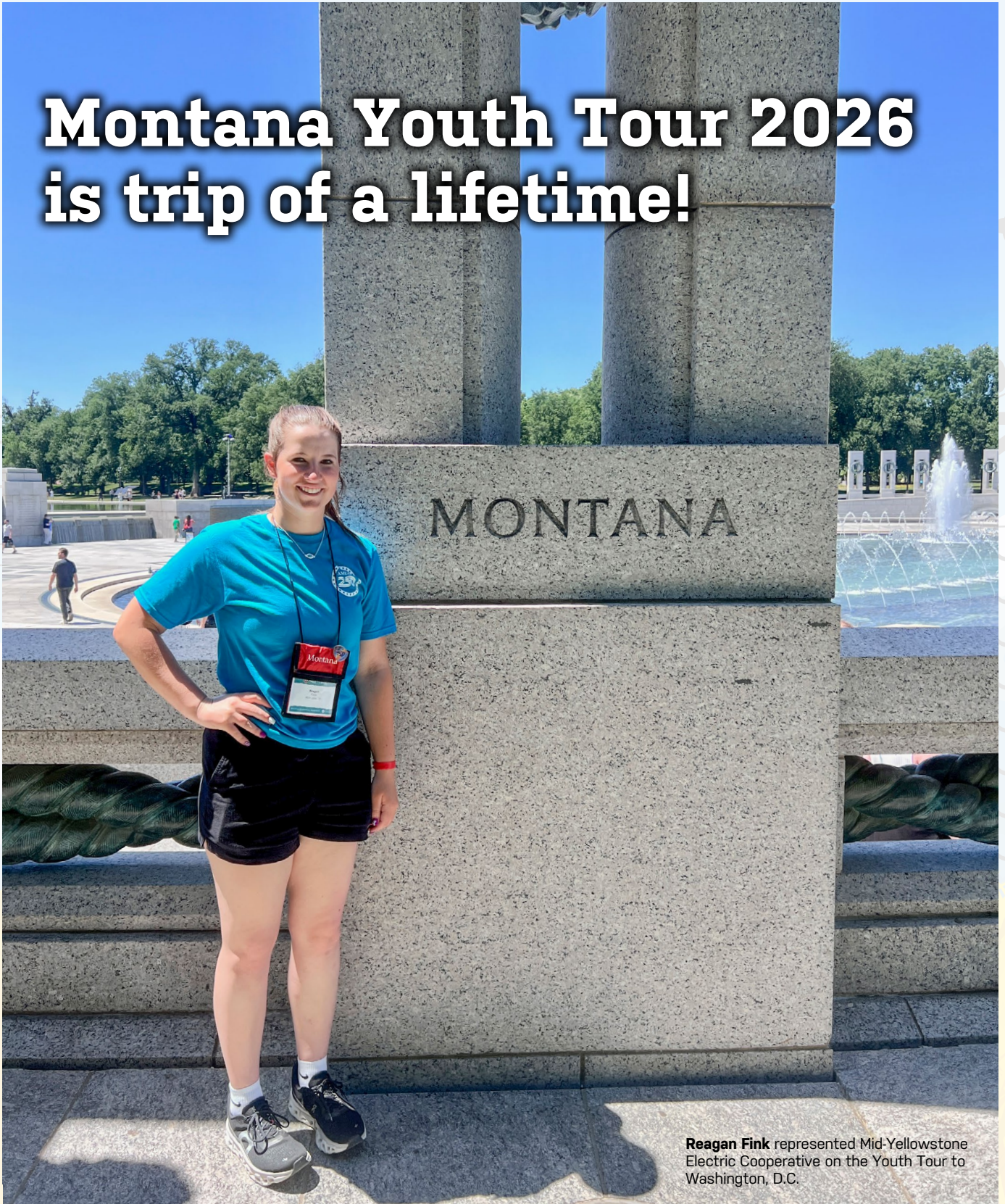
Lineworkers face challenging conditions, climbing poles, repairing lines and responding to outages caused by storms or accidents. Their commitment to safety, teamwork and precision keeps our system strong and dependable. Whether maintaining existing infrastructure or

building new lines to support growth, their efforts are the backbone of our cooperative's mission to provide reliable, affordable power.

To celebrate and recognize their dedication, Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative will begin featuring photos of our lineworkers each month. These snapshots will offer a glimpse into their daily routines, the challenges they overcome and the pride they take in serving our members. Each image tells a story of hard work, skill and community spirit.

Be sure to check the local pages each month to see our lineworkers in action and join us in appreciating the people who keep Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative and our communities powered every day. ■

Montana Youth Tour 2026 is trip of a lifetime!



Reagan Fink represented Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative on the Youth Tour to Washington, D.C.

ALONG THESE LINES...

Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative was thrilled to announce Reagan Fink was selected as this year's student representative for the Montana Youth Tour to Washington, D.C. Reagan joined students from electric cooperatives across Montana for an unforgettable experience June 13-20.

The Electric Cooperative Youth Tour is a nationally recognized program that gathers high school students from electric cooperatives to explore our nation's capital, learn about government and build lasting friendships with peers from across the country.

During the trip, Reagan and fellow Montanans visited iconic landmarks, including the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, U.S. Capitol, Arlington National Cemetery and the Smithsonian museums. They also toured the World War II Memorial, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

The schedule also included:

- **June 17** - Meeting with Sen. Steve Daines, and Rep. Ryan Zinke's and Rep. Troy Downing's legislative aides, Capitol tour and a boat cruise with Georgia, Colorado and Wyoming delegates
- **June 18** - Tour of Gettysburg Battlefield,

followed by Youth Event

- **June 19** - Tour of National Museum of the Marine Corps, visit Mount Vernon and Co-op Connections Night
- **June 20** - Visits to the International Spy Museum, Holocaust Memorial Museum and travel back to Montana

Beyond the monuments, students had the opportunity to visit world-class museums, such as the National Air and Space Museum, the National Museum of American History and the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The trip also included meetings with Montana's congressional delegation, giving students a firsthand look at how our government works.

The Youth Tour experience was designed to inspire the next generation of leaders and help them understand the cooperative business model that powers rural America. Students returned home with a deeper appreciation for democracy, history and community service.

Congratulations to Reagan on this incredible opportunity! Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative was proud to invest in the future leaders of our community. ■



Thunderstorm safety tips

When thunderstorms are rolling your way, stay safe with these helpful tips from the American Red Cross:

- Listen to local news or NOAA Weather Radio for emergency updates. Watch for signs of a storm, such as darkening skies, lightning flashes or increasing wind.
- Postpone outdoor activities if thunderstorms are likely to occur. Many people struck by lightning are not in the area where rain is occurring.
- If a severe thunderstorm warning is issued, take shelter in a substantial building or in a vehicle with the windows closed. Get out of mobile homes that can blow over in high winds.
- If you can hear thunder, you are close enough to be in danger from lightning. If thunder roars, go indoors! The National Weather Service recommends staying inside for at least 30 minutes after the last thunderclap.
- Avoid electrical equipment and telephones. Use battery-powered TVs and radios instead.
- Shutter windows and close outside doors securely. Keep away from windows.
- Do not take a bath, shower or use plumbing.
- If you are driving, try to safely exit the roadway and park. Stay in the vehicle and turn on the emergency flashers until the heavy rain ends. Avoid touching metal or other surfaces that conduct electricity in and outside the vehicle.



- If you are outside and cannot reach a safe building, avoid high ground, water, tall, isolated trees and metal objects, such as fences or bleachers. Picnic shelters, dugouts and sheds are NOT safe. ■



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Tyler Fennern.....	Apprentice Lineman
Ryan Silvis.....	Apprentice Lineman
Dustin Melgaard.....	Apprentice Lineman
Mason Simanton.....	Apprentice Lineman

Reporting outages

Trouble calls may be placed to the office 24 hours a day. After normal working hours, the phone will be forwarded to one of our lineworkers who are on call. Please check with your neighbors to see if they have power, along with resetting your breakers below the meter prior to calling Mid-Yellowstone.



YOUTH TOUR 2026

Feature | **Youth Tour**

Each year electric cooperatives throughout the state send incoming high school juniors and seniors on an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington, D.C., for a week to learn more about the history of the United States and electric cooperatives.

They visit monuments and museums, meet other electric cooperative youth from across the country and get to ask questions of the state's congressional delegation.

Here is how this year's trip impacted participants, in their own words.

JOIN NEXT YEAR'S TOUR

Send in your essay to win a trip to Washington, D.C., next year. See mtco-ops.com/youthtour.

YOUTH TOUR IN THEIR WORDS

SEE MORE YOUTH TOUR CONTENT ON PAGES 10-11 AND 17

I made so many friends on Youth Tour

By **REATA WALDEN** | *McCone Electric*

WHEN I stood in front of the hotel in Great Falls just before the Youth Tour meeting, I thought to myself, "That has to be the biggest hotel I've ever stayed in."



Two days later, that record was broken.

I never thought I would go on a trip to a place I'd never been, be with people I'd never seen, traveling cross-country with 34 people I'd met only hours before. Who knew it would only take a week before those strangers became my friends?

In the beginning, I was terrified of being that lonely wallflower that nobody knew the name of and the chaperones forgot to count during roll call. I was soon proven wrong.

I've never met such a personable and sociable bunch of teenagers. The ones I know are usually too focused on being "cool" to make much of a connection. Somehow, Montana's electric co-ops managed to handpick the brightest and best delegates possible. By the end of the first day, I had been part of many conversations, introduced myself to everyone, and became a part



Montana Youth Tour participants Payton Labette and Keira Stentoft, both of Sheridan Electric Cooperative, Reagan Fink of Mid-Yellowstone Electric Cooperative, and Sicily Scalese of Fergus Electric Cooperative sit on deck of a boat cruise. | **PHOTO COURTESY OF REATA WALDEN**

of our little Montana community within the big city of Washington, D.C. By the end of that trip, we were laughing, touring, taking pictures and chatting together like we had been friends since kindergarten.

In addition, our chaperones were wonderful and always made sure we had what we needed, when and where we needed it. And last, but not least,

our bus driver was amazing! We were never late anywhere, even in the big city traffic.

I would like to give a warm thank you to everyone who made this trip possible for me and for all of my newfound friends.

My journey with the Montana electric cooperative Youth Tour was an experience I will not soon forget. RM

From nerves to creating connections

By **JOSIE CRABB** | *Missoula Electric*

LEADING up to the moment when I stepped into the large ballroom filled with people I had never seen before, I was jittery with nerves. Orientation night was a gathering for Youth Tour participants and their families to feel welcomed and learn all about the busy week ahead.



I walked around the room, trying to find the table with my name on it. Only one girl was sitting there at the time, but she broke the awkward silence right away by making a joke and introducing herself. As I took my seat, I was still a little anxious, unsure of how I would interact with the other participants and the upcoming adventurous days in Washington, D.C. After enjoying a taco bar dinner and visiting with other families, the parents left. It was up to the delegates to engage with one another. This is when I met my roommate, with whom I would be spending seven nights.

Alivia and I connected almost immediately, relating to one another through our small-town communities and hobbies. Unfortunately, we were not paired up on the plane ride to D.C., but we had opportunities for small talk along the way. After arriving at our hotel and scarfing down Chipotle, we were two peas in a pod for the rest of the week. Monday night, our group attended a Washington Nationals Baseball Game, where we sat with co-op participants from North Dakota and Alabama. Many youth participants surrounded us, excited to trade their state pins for our popular Montana one. Trading pins to hook to our travel bags was a great way to interact with other states and build

excitement everywhere we went. Little did we know that on the upcoming day, we would be involved in a special ceremony honoring those who served our country.

While we were walking around in awe of the Air Force Memorial, a group of men and women unloaded from a bus and propped themselves on some seating blocks. Montana Youth Tour delegates huddled around each other, intrigued by what was about to happen. We soon learned that these individuals were part of a Kansas Honor Flight group and were brought to D.C. for a Spirit Flight Ceremony. After a few minutes of standing and listening to one of their leaders talk, we were invited to join them. As we sat among the men and women, we listened to a long list of names of fallen heroes as well as those unable to make the trip. An older gentleman concluded the ceremony with the playing of *Taps*. We walked around expressing gratitude face-to-face. There were many happy tears, and I will never forget the sparkle in their eyes. They were so grateful for the Montana Youth Tour group, and the love we showed them.

The experience with the veterans left a lasting impression on me, but the friendships I built with other students showed me another side of making connections. A favorite memory from this trip was when my Montana group and three other states went on a boat cruise and had dinner and a dance. It was a special moment because everyone was hyped to be there, and welcomed anyone they saw on the dance floor.

At first, Alivia and I stood in the corner, dancing in our own goofy ways, but a few moments later, we were grabbed by a large group of people and thrown into the dance circle. It was very cool to see boys and

girls from different states bonding and having a great time, even though we had never met. The following night, our co-op group attended the NRECA Youth Event, where more than 1,700 kids from across the country were seated. The inspirational speakers had amazing stories and great life lessons that I will forever remember. I learned about each state's electric co-ops and the people who dedicate themselves to making sure communities have reliable electricity, along with the ways they benefit many communities.

The final NRECA event the Montana group attended was another dinner and dance, but this time with representatives from every state. We all piled into a very large room and enjoyed a meal with some of our group, along with others who wanted to get to know us. After scarfing down the delicious meal, Alivia and I ran onto the dance floor and once again were swept away by other co-op youth participants. We danced for hours, and when it was time to go, 1,700 kids who had become attached to each other all screamed, "One more song!", not wanting the night to end.

The connections I made on the Montana Youth Tour were incredible. I never imagined I'd be traveling many miles away from home with people I had just met, while experiencing breathtaking monuments, museums and friendships. Looking back, the monuments and museums were unforgettable, but the connections I made had the biggest impact. I nervously boarded a plane full of strangers traveling to Washington, D.C., but returned home with lifelong memories, friendships and a greater appreciation for the people who serve our country and the communities that bring us together.

This is what made the Montana Youth Tour truly unforgettable. 



Learning the cost of freedom

By **ELISABETH FREISS**
Flathead Electric

OUR nation is at a crossroads each and every day. The old cliché is true that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. Being in Washington, D.C., for the first time really helped me understand this fact on a deeper level.



The most important impression I was left with, and I hope and pray every person comes to realize, is the price of freedom. So often we prioritize comfort and complain when we don't receive it quick enough, while we cannot or choose not to comprehend the bloody, tear-ridden trail that has been blazed before us to allow us the right to continue walking. The price of freedom is too high for language to express, and certainly monuments only cover a glimpse of the true impact.

We need to understand that brave men and women sacrificed their very



| PHOTO COURTESY OF ELISABETH FREISS

essence to preserve the next generation. They sustained mental, physical and spiritual toil that is often brutally overlooked, especially by the younger generation. We enjoy the fruits of their labor.

I remember the most impactful statement that was spoken to me this trip after I thanked a man for his service: "we did it for you". It caught me a bit off guard. It was uttered by a veteran who

had served in Vietnam, and had seen many friends sacrifice their lives for our country. Those who survived never received a welcome home, and many felt shamed and doubted. Had the cost been worth it?

This statement resonated with me because of how personal it was; this is not just coming face to face with history or some lecture. This man was one of many, many souls who chose to plant seeds that they hoped someone else would water.

I believe it should resonate in the very core of every citizen in this nation as a voice for those who have served us, as we are the future. It presents a legacy that we would not exist without. Since the founding, our nation has been forged by blood, sweat and tears, and by the grace of God we must never let America go. Not only is our nation worth preserving, but it needs to be celebrated as the City on a Hill that it is.

We must make a choice in the way we use our freedom every day, for good or for evil: Will we let the cost of freedom be forgotten? RM

Simply submitting an essay changed my life

By **SICILY SCALESE** | *Fergus Electric*

THE moments that change our lives are not always monumental events. For me, it was the simple task of submitting an essay.



From that point, stemmed thousands of unforgettable experiences in the heart of our nation — Washington, D.C. While it may seem dramatic, Youth Tour changed my life. While in Washington, D.C., I stepped so far out of my comfort zone that I barely recognized myself. But the new me was brave and

confident, humbled by the actions our predecessors had made in the name of the beautiful United States of America. Anyone who walks among the rows of pearly white gravestones at Arlington National Cemetery or gazes upon the green fields of the Gettysburg battlefield can't help but witness the sacrifices of our brave men and women.

That girl was me, just a better version — a person who I admired greatly. I went through this metamorphosis all because I decided to put aside my fears and apply to Youth Tour. While the sites of Washington, D.C., were truly something to behold, the people I met were just as incredible.

I have never been in an environment that was invested in the same things I wanted before, and it was inspiring. The connections I made with my fellow Montanans, and even people from other states, were some of my favorite parts of the trip.

Whether it was the places or people that helped me grow the most, I know that I emerged from Youth Tour as a different person. I gained lasting friendships, confidence, and the courage to speak out and let my voice be heard. While some may think only big moments can spark so much change, I know that sometimes the smallest actions can change a life forever. RM

THE RACE FOR U.S. HOUSE DIST. 1



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

THE SAME QUESTION WILL BE ASKED TO MONTANA'S U.S. SENATE CANDIDATES IN NEXT MONTH'S EDITION



Aaron Flint

flintformontana.com

REGARDLESS of political party, I think we can all agree on two things: we want a clean environment and affordable, reliable energy. That is my energy policy. We can protect our natural resources while ensuring families, farmers, ranchers and small businesses have the energy they depend on every day. Keeping energy affordable helps lower the cost of filling up your truck, heating your home and putting food on the table.

The United States has succeeded by embracing an “all of the above” energy strategy. Hydropower, drilling, mining, solar, wind and nuclear energy have strengthened America’s energy portfolio. Every source has a role to play. But we also have to be honest about reality. Sunshine and a stiff breeze cannot get a semi-truck from Billings to Missoula, and renewable energy alone cannot reliably power our economy or electric grid. Additionally, traditional energy supports thousands of Montana jobs, from the Stillwater Mine to our coal fields and the Williston Basin.

The idea of removing fossil fuels from America’s energy mix is neither realistic nor responsible. Doing so would drive up costs, weaken our energy security and eliminate jobs. I do not support the federal government picking winners and losers through mandates and regulations. America’s energy future depends on producing more energy here at home, of all kinds, and using every resource available. This approach keeps costs down, people employed and maintains our energy independence. 



Sam Forstag

samformontana.com

TOO often, politicians from both parties push one form of energy or another because it benefits the bottom line of the corporations that are bankrolling their campaigns — even if it hurts the people they represent. In Congress, the first question I’ll ask myself before every decision will be: “Does this improve the lives of everyday Montanans?”

In terms of energy, I’ll push for federal policy with working Montanans’ wellbeing at its core. As we transition to cleaner forms of energy, I’ll also fight to make sure that Montanans’ jobs are never collateral damage.

That means real investments in renewables — Montana has some of the nation’s highest potential in both wind and solar, two industries that are being knee-capped by needless bureaucracy. If we cut the red tape restricting the build-out of a sustainable grid in Montana, we could create thousands of high-paying jobs and position ourselves at the forefront of the 21st Century energy sector. We should update the power plant in Colstrip to make it more efficient, and when it becomes outdated, the federal government should invest to make sure the jobs that have supported families there stay in the community.

It’s time Montana’s representatives finally prioritized the needs of the working and middle-class over massive corporations. So, as we transition to more renewable forms of energy, this build-out needs to generate good union jobs, and we need to invest in training and apprenticeship programs so that Montanans are the ones who get those jobs.

The future of Montana is extremely exciting: If we pass sensible policy and make the right investments, this state will be a leader in the energy sector for generations to come. That means rewarding, well-compensated careers and a clean, healthy environment for our children and grandchildren. That is the Montana I’m fighting for. 



THE RACE FOR U.S. HOUSE

DIST. 2

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



Troy Downing

www.troydowning.com

AFFORDABLE and reliable energy is essential to Montana's economy and America's national security. As your Congressman, my energy priorities are simple: protect Made-in-Montana energy, lower costs for families, and stop Washington from punishing the industries that keep the lights on.

Montana is an energy state. Coal, oil, gas, hydropower and emerging technologies all play a role in powering our homes and supporting good-paying jobs. I believe in an all-of-the-above approach, but that approach must be grounded in reality. Coal remains critical to our nation's energy security and a major source of electricity generation in Montana. It provides dependable baseload power when families and businesses need it most.

That is why I have worked to support Montana coal and push back against harmful federal overreach. At the end of last year, President Trump signed into law my Congressional Review Act resolution reversing the Biden Administration's disastrous Miles City RMPA, unlocking coal leasing in Eastern Montana for years to come. The Department of the Interior's approval of the Bull Mountains mining plan modification is a major step forward as well, and I will keep working to make sure that certainty is protected long term through my Crow Revenue Act.

I have also worked to protect Colstrip from harmful Biden-era regulations. The EPA recently reversed the 2024 MATS rule, which placed unfair burdens on coal-fired power plants and threatened grid reliability in Montana. That was an important step, but we need to make sure this rule cannot be revived by a future administration. That is why I introduced the COAL POWER Act to roll back the 2024 MATS rule and protect reliable coal-fired energy.

As a former Montana Land Board Commissioner, I understand how important responsible resource development is to our state. Montana can produce energy, protect our land and create opportunity at the same time.

In Congress, I will continue fighting to streamline permitting, prevent anti-energy mandates, protect coal communities, support oil and gas production and keep energy costs low. Reliable energy means stronger businesses, safer communities and more money in the pockets of hardworking Montanans.

My priority will always be making sure Montana has a strong voice in America's energy future. 



Brian Miller

www.miller4congress.com

FIRST, we need to put a stop to the data center invasion in Montana. If we let these data centers in, our electricity rates will shoot through the roof — on top of all of the other issues these destructive data centers bring, such as water consumption, noise and pollution. I have been leading on this issue among all of the candidates. I am actively supporting the Yellowstone County Data Center initiative, which will give local control and decision making over data centers to the people. I believe this should be a state-wide law. We the People need to have local control, full transparency and final decision-making authority over all data centers; but if it was up to me, I wouldn't have any of these things in Montana. I don't trust these data center billionaires at all. They don't care about what happens to us. They don't have our interests in mind.

Beyond that, we need to continue to expand our portfolio of renewable energy in Montana. Again, it always needs to be subject to local control, but these are a great way to insulate us from the effects of international supply chain disruptions (like those caused by the disastrous War in Iran). We also need to do big work on developing our transmission infrastructure in Montana. There are lots of opportunities to export energy if we have the transmission capacity.

Finally, we need to crack down on NorthWestern Energy, as they keep jacking up rates for consumers, while making huge profits for their CEOs and shareholders. Did you know that consumers pay higher rates than commercial and industrial users do? I'm not sure that makes much sense. In this connection, I am deeply skeptical of the proposed acquisition of NorthWestern Energy by Black Hills Corporation, as it will only make things worse. 

SEND IN YOUR RECIPES

Recipes for *RM* magazine are submitted by cooperative members across the state. First, second and third place monthly winners are awarded \$30, \$20 and \$10 prizes, respectively. Send your recipes to *RM* Recipes, Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403, or email rural@mtco-ops.com. **Please include your name, hometown and an address.**

If you do not include this information, your submission will not be accepted. For September send your favorite snack (or after-school snack) recipes by August 17. Please send in October recipes anytime: Your favorite German-inspired recipes. Try to limit the ingredients and length of directions for space. Please include a photo, if possible.

1st
PLACE

Marinated Tomatoes

Karen Graham | CHESTER

INGREDIENTS

2/3 cup canola oil
1/4 cup white wine vinegar
1/4 cup thinly sliced green onions
2 T mayo
1 clove garlic, minced
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. black pepper
1 tsp. dill weed
1/4 cup fresh parsley
6-8 medium tomatoes cut into wedges

DIRECTIONS

Combine all ingredients except tomatoes; let refrigerate at least one hour or overnight. Pour over room temp tomatoes. Serve within an hour.



2nd
PLACE

Zucchini Bake

Bev Mix | MISSOULA

INGREDIENTS

1 large zucchini
Salt and pepper
Garlic powder
2 medium tomatoes, sliced
Parmesan cheese, grated

DIRECTIONS

Slice zucchini into 1/2-inch to 1-inch thick slices.

Place in a shallow round glass baking dish; salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle lightly with garlic powder.

Cover with waxed paper. Microwave on high for 5 minutes, until zucchini is partially cooked.

Top with tomato slices, sprinkle with grated Parmesan cheese. Bake in 400 degree oven until cheese on tomatoes is bubbly, approximately 5-8 minutes. Serve hot.

Serves 4-6.



3rd
PLACE

Grilled Summer Squash

Pamela Forrest | ROUNDUP

INGREDIENTS

6-8 summer squash, halved lengthwise with stem ends removed
4 T olive oil
2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. black pepper
1 tsp. granulated garlic
1 tsp. dried parsley
1 tsp. granulated onion

DIRECTIONS

Preheat the grill to high.

In a small dish, combine the salt, pepper, parsley, onion, and garlic.

Lay the squash out cut-side up and brush with olive oil. Sprinkle generously with the seasoning mixture.

Once the grill is at high heat, place the squash on the grate cut-side down. Let cook for 10 minutes.

Flip each piece of squash over and let cook until your desired doneness (about 5-10 minutes).



Events Calendar

SUBMIT YOUR EVENTS

To list an event, send it to: RM Events, PO Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403 or email us at: rural@mtco-ops.com — Submit items by August 17 for September events. Include date, time, site, city and contact number with your event. **Events without such info will not be used.** Some items may be cut for space concerns.

NORTHWEST

August-September

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

August 1

Cabin Fever Quilters 25th Annual Quilt Show — *Superior High School*, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., 591-5753 | **SUPERIOR**

August 1

Eureka Montana Quilt Show — *Historical Village and along Main Street*, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 596-4890 | **EUREKA**

August 1

Kevin Montana Fun Days — *Car show, raffle, games and music*, 11 a.m., 450-5176 | **KEVIN**

August 2

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Sull'aria — *Free outdoor concert, Indian Springs Ranch*, 5 p.m., 297-0197 | **EUREKA**

August 2

7th Annual Lavender Event — *Woods Bay Wine*, 1 to 5 p.m., 420-2247 | **BIGFORK**

August 3, 10, 17, 24, 31

Downtown Kalispell Walking Tours — *NW Montana History Museum*, 10 a.m., 756-8381 | **KALISPELL**

August 4

Sunburst Arts and Education Presents: Toast of the Town — *Annual fundraiser at Indian Springs Ranch, silent auction, wine and food*, 5 p.m., 297-0197 | **EUREKA**

August 8

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

August 17

Weterners Int'l present Jim May on An Eras Tour of America's 250 Years — *NW Montana History Museum*, 6:30 to 8 p.m., 309-0958 | **KALISPELL**

August 18

Kalispell Women's Connection Luncheon — *Guest speaker and international gospel singer is Lillie Knauls*, 1830 Hwy. 35, 11:30 a.m., call 261-9894 for reservations or information | **KALISPELL**

August 19

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

August 25

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

August 26

Kirby Lambert presents Montana History in 101 Places — *NW Montana History Museum*, 6 p.m., 756-8381 | **KALISPELL**

September 5-7

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

September 11

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

September 11-12

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

September 12

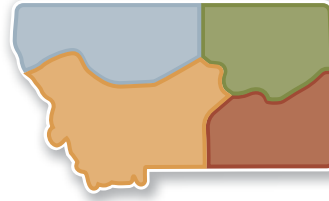
Community Yard Sale — *Bigfork Senior Center*, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. | **BIGFORK**

September 18-19

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

September 26

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



SOUTHWEST

August 1

Centennial Valley Historical Society Annual BBQ and Fundraiser — *Taft Nicholson Center*, 925-2415. | **LIMA**

August 3, 17

Shields Valley Farmers Market — *Veterans Park*, 4:30 to 7 p.m. | **WILSALL**

August 6

Friends of the Jaycee Park hosts a dinner and live music by Sammy Steele — *Jaycee Park*, dinner at 5 p.m., music at 6 p.m. | **DILLON**

August 8

Sun River Valley Fun Day — *Main Street*, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., 970-290-7452 | **SIMMS**

August 10

Shields Valley Farmers Market — *Holliday Park*, 4:30 to 7 p.m. | **CLYDE PARK**

September 5-6

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

September 12-13

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

September 19

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

SOUTHEAST

August 13-16

Fallon County Fair & Rodeo — *Fallon County Fairgrounds*, 778-2451 | **BAKER**

August 15

18th Annual All Euro Car Show — *Open to all European marques, vintage and contemporary, sports, SUVs and sedans, Check in 9 a.m., Veteran's Park*, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., 698-9513 | **BILLINGS**

August 15

4th Annual Drivin' For a Cure Car Show — *Live music in the park, silent auction, funds raised go to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, registration is 7 a.m., Awards at 2:30 p.m., Main Street downtown*, 321-9008 | **COLUMBUS**

August 16

Big Sky Chorus presents Class Reunion Barbershop Harmony — *Rhoadside Event Center*, 2 p.m. | **HUNTLEY**

August 22

Big Sky Chorus presents Class Reunion Barbershop Harmony — *Shiloh United Methodist Church*, 7 p.m. | **BILLINGS**

August 30

Big Sky Chorus presents Class Reunion Barbershop Harmony — *Red Lodge Community Church*, 1 p.m. | **RED LODGE**

STATEWIDE

All year

Blood Drives — *Various locations, see website for full schedule, redcrossblood.org.*

Blood Drives — *See website for full details, vitalant.org.*

YOUNG MONTANANS

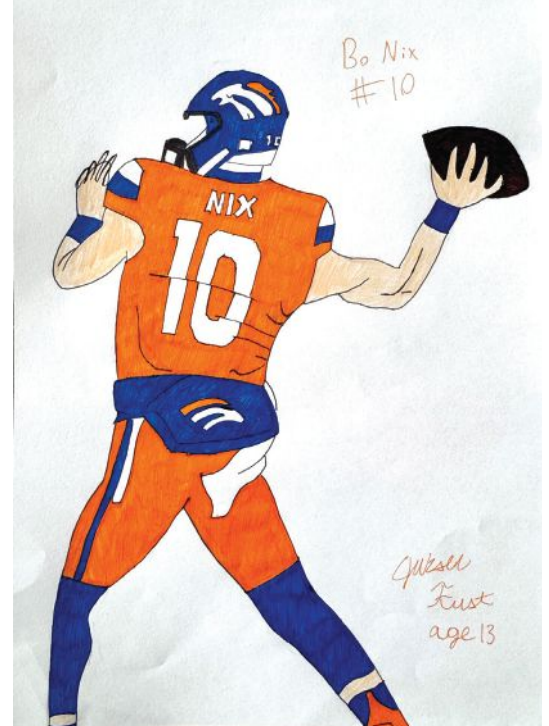
RM invites youngsters to send in original art and poems. If we use it, we'll pay you \$10. **Mail to:** Young Montanans, P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403.

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

**SEND US YOUR FALL
DRAWINGS AND POEMS**



Lisa Tuck, 11, Kalispell | **FLATHEAD ELECTRIC**



Jaksen Fust, 13, Bozeman

Alissa Hamilton, 12, Augusta | **SUN RIVER ELECTRIC**

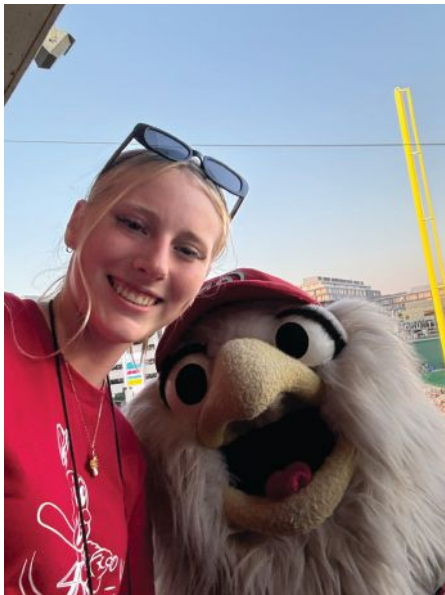
Jeremiah Spencer, 13, Billings | **YELLOWSTONE VALLEY ELECTRIC**





YOUTH TOUR 2026

Feature | **Youth Tour**



YOUTH TOUR 2026 IN PHOTOS





The Magazine of the
Montana Electric Cooperatives'
Association

Visit us online: www.mtco-ops.com

Email: rural@mtco-ops.com

BASIN ELECTRIC



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