

# RM

## Rural Montana

Vol. 52, No. 12, August 2005 (ISSN0199-6401)

*Rural Montana* is an official publication of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association and is published monthly by Montana's rural electric and telephone cooperatives in the interest of better rural and urban understanding of the benefits and the problems of rural utilities.

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**Design/Layout:** Sherri Carl, MECA.

**Printer:** Northwinds Publishing,  
Great Falls, Montana

**Change of Address:** Mail change of address to your local rural electric cooperative, or the *Rural Montana* office, P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403. Please include a mailing label from a recent issue of *Rural Montana* you received.

**Subscriptions:** \$6.75 per year.

**Postmaster:** Published monthly by Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association, 501 Bay Drive, Great Falls, Montana. Periodicals postage paid at Great Falls, Montana. Postmaster send address corrections to P.O. Box 3469, Great Falls, MT 59403.

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## VIEWPOINT

Dave Wheelihan



*Dave Wheelihan is CEO  
of the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association*

## AFTER A DISASTER

*Gov. Schweitzer, MECA, urge FEMA to reverse denial of disaster funds to co-ops and avert rate hikes*

Summertime seems like an odd time to be talking about spring snowstorms, but the ramifications of a spring storm that hit several electric cooperatives in Montana is ongoing. Traditionally, electric cooperatives that have had systems damaged from these types of disasters have been eligible for funding assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

One of the criteria for eligibility for FEMA funding is a request for major disaster declaration from the governor of the affected state. On May 2, 2005, Governor Schweitzer requested such a declaration from the federal government. The spring storm that hit electric cooperatives in central and eastern Montana wreaked significant damage in terms of distribution poles and wires being toppled, transmission lines down, and the resultant power outages.

In June of 2005, Gov. Schweitzer received a reply from the under-secretary, Emergency Preparedness and Response, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, denying the governor's request for major disaster declaration, stating in part "...it has been determined that the damage was not of such severity and magnitude as to be beyond the capabilities of the state and affected local governments."

Gov. Schweitzer has asked the

federal government that his request be reconsidered and the Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association has sent a letter in support of his request.

The million dollars-plus in damage would appear to cause an undue financial burden on both local governments and the affected electric cooperatives.

As the governor points out in his request for reconsideration, "The repair costs of the transmission and distribution systems are an unfunded financial burden to the members of the three RECs. These RECs serve 5,740 members and have 28,383 square miles in service areas that cross county boundaries and include the entire Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. Without the help of federal assistance, the RECs have no recourse except to pass the repair costs onto their members. This includes REC members in the southern portion of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, which has an 80 percent unemployment rate."

We're pleased the governor appreciates the significance of this disaster and that he and his administration are staying on top of this issue.

FEMA funding in the past has averted rate hikes to electric cooperative consumers subjected to natural disasters, and we hope it will be the same in this case.