



Ross Oveson and Mark Hansen at the MAGIE show.

## Sun River Electric meets and greets members at MAGIE

At times, it was a lot like watching neighbors talk over the back fence as Ross Oveson and Mark Hansen manned the Sun River Electric Cooperative booth at the MAGIE trade show in Great Falls in February. SRE is based in Fairfield.

“We talked to both consumers and non-consumers,” said Oveson, manager of marketing and member services. “The message from consumers was encouraging. They tell us they are happy to be on our system and that they like the personal service. They were glad to see us at the show and told us to keep up the good work.”

The MAGIE is the annual Montana Agriculture and Implement Exposition at the Four Seasons, where farm and ranch exhibits of all kinds fill the exhibition halls.

Oveson said that geography dictates that Sun River participate in the show.

“We surround the bigger cities in the area and get to talk to many of our members from the rural areas who visit the show. We’re ambassadors to our members in agriculture.”

Ambassadors bearing gifts. “We gave away nearly a thousand magnetic yellow ribbons with the message: Support our troops.”

Oveson said that many non-members stopped by to express the wish that they were on the cooperative system, too. Few people had complaints.

“Many of our members say they have been meaning to get in touch to mention small problems. Some ask about scholarships for high school and college-age students. Others ask about the possibility of getting new services. We hand out a lot of business cards and tell them to get in touch. We help them get things going on those minor repairs and scheduling new installations.” But the real payoff comes when people stop by to pat Sun River employees on the back.

“Some thank us for getting the power back on quickly after an outage,” Oveson said. “Some just compliment us in general about the co-op. That’s a good feeling.”

## Council of co-ops board elects credit union VP as new president

The Montana Council of cooperatives has a new hand at the helm, as Clarence “Fritz” Keller, board president for eight years stepped aside at the annual meeting election of officers Jan. 17 in Great Falls.

The board elected Bernie Neibauer president.

Neibauer, a vice president of Avanta Federal Credit Union, thanked Keller for his years of service.



Keller

“Fritz put the Council of co-ops on the map,” Neibauer said. “I hope to carry on from here and do as good a job. We have a good board, and my goal will be to increase membership as much as we can and work to show even more value to our members.” Neibauer is based in Columbus.

Keller who serves on several electric cooperative boards, including as president of Hill County Electric Cooperative and as Montana director on the National Rural Electric Cooperative Board, said “Bernie will add strength and leadership to the council by reaching out to Montana credit unions.”

Keller will remain a trustee on the board of the Council of Cooperatives, he said.

## Cooperative Development Center reports on year’s project growth

Cooperatives in all kinds of business settings and communities across Montana are on the rise as a way of bringing jobs and economic development, according to the people in the know at the Montana Cooperative Development Center.

At the annual meeting of the MCDC in Great Falls Jan. 16-17, one after another technical assistant reported progress on cooperatives from clothing stores to food co-ops and even a multimillion dollar methane digester project near Bozeman.



Owens

Technical assistants are employees of other agencies who devote part of their time to cooperative development projects.

MCDC board president Rich Owen praised the TAs as vital to the outreach program of the center. “These energetic people will determine the success of new cooperative business models in communities all

across the state,” he said.

MCDC executive director Cheryl MacArthur said, “This successful annual meeting is proof that MCDC is on the right track, in that the number of projects has grown three-fold in recent years.”

MacArthur pointed out that the technical assistant network is one-of-a-kind, and Montana’s center is the only one in the nation that functions using the TA network model. Other cooperative development centers operate from a centralized location with staff and tend to be more limited in the number and variety of projects. Indiana’s development center has invited her to brief the TA network model there.