

Big Skylights



An internal newsletter of the STATEWIDE ASSOCIATION OF MONTANA RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES

A report from your Chief Executive Officer Dave Wheelihan

October 11, 2007

MECA Annual Meeting Highlights

A highlight of this year's annual meeting was the presentation of four Champions of Cooperative Power awards to four state legislators. These awards, which haven't been given out since 2001, went to Rep. **George Groesbeck**, D-Butte, and Sen. **Gary Perry**, R-Manhattan, for their sponsorship in the 2007 regular legislative session of legislation fixing problems with Montana's Territorial Integrity Act, and to Sen. **Frank Smith**, D-Poplar, and Rep. **Llew Jones**, R-Conrad, for their sponsorship of legislation removing an onerous pole-attachments fee restriction from Montana's electric cooperative enabling law. Speaking of elected officials, a highlight of this year's annual meeting was the annual ACRE fundraising auction, which this year raised \$7,775 to help provide ACRE campaign contributions to elected officials who support electric cooperatives.

Other top MECA award winners were: **Doug Grob**, a trustee at Flathead Electric Cooperative, winner of the Hog-Tied Award for his involvement in Northwest power policy issues and in state legislative efforts; **Larry Tade**, manager of Valley Electric Cooperative, winner of the Hard Ridin' Award for his dedicated service the past six years as manager of both Valley Electric and Northern Electric Cooperative; **Sharon Jacobsen**, a trustee at Missoula Electric Cooperative, winner of the Cooperative Spirit Director Award, for more than 24 years of dedicated service to Missoula Electric, to public power in the Northwest and to the community in which she lives; **Mark Grotbo**, manager of Marias River Electric Cooperative, winner of the Cooperative Spirit Employee Award, for his leadership in revamping MECA's antiquated safety/loss control dues structure.

Top winners of the 2007 MECA communications awards were: Big Flat Electric, top overall award for small electric cooperatives; Yellowstone Valley Electric, top overall award for large electric cooperatives and first place, special publications, for its annual meeting report; Missoula Electric Manager **Tony Sinclair** for Best Managers' Report. Top co-op photo awards went to **Jack Miles** of McCone Electric Cooperative for his black-and-white photo titled "Lineman Silhouette."

No lost time awards went to the following cooperatives: Goldenwest Electric, 51 years without a lost-time accident; Lincoln Electric, 19 years; Mid-Yellowstone Electric, 17 years; Tongue River Electric, 9 years, Fall River Electric, six years; Sun River Electric, five years; Valley Electric, four years; Southeast Electric, four years; Northern Electric, three years; Big Flat Electric, two years; and Yellowstone Valley Electric, Sheridan

Electric, McCone Electric, Marias River Electric, Lower Yellowstone REA and Glacier Electric each with one year of no lost time accidents.

This year's MECA Fitness Challenge Award was shared by two electric cooperatives, Missoula Electric and Hill County Electric. Four electric cooperatives and the MECA statewide office participated in the contest, which yielded a combined 193 pounds lost by employee participants.

RM wants ideas from the field

Rural Montana Editor **James Smith** finds story ideas coming out of MECA meetings and visits to cooperatives and invites all trustees and employees to share topics they'd like to see in the magazine. Many of the best stories such as the hockey facility in Glasgow and the feature on Tongue River Electric Trustee **Charles Patten** came from the field. Mr. Smith emphasizes that not all stories should be about employees and trustees because many of our members have unique talents and activities to showcase.

Co-op 'feeling the pinch' on slow growth of loads

The news at most electric cooperative annual meetings concerns higher wholesale power costs and potential rate increases to members, and at Valley Electric, based in Glasgow, members were told by Manager **Larry Tade** that the co-op was "feeling the pinch" of little growth in residential loads while dealing with an aging plant besides. Even so, "We ended 2006 with a positive margin," Valley Board President **Rick Molvig** told members at their 62nd annual meeting Oct. 10. Even under tight operational budget constraints, the board decided to do a general capital credit retirement to eligible members. Among the cost-saving measures at Valley was a reduction in trustees from nine to seven in 2006.

In the out-years, the boards of Opheim-based Northern Electric and Valley Electric are considering a consolidation and have authorized a study to determine whether such a move would provide savings to members of both cooperatives. As an aside, consolidation was an issue for the two co-ops at their inception and a source of some colorful tales. The history of Northern Electric includes the description of a trustee from one co-op chasing a trustee from the other co-op around the conference room after taking offense at a comment about being "taken over." Trustees and management of Northern Electric attended Valley's 62nd annual meeting without incident.

Mr. Tade presented a projection of all operational expenses and revenues out to the year 2014, and Valley Electric's senior trustee and vice president, Lynn Cornwell, emphasized the importance of a new commercial service to the oilfields that would help provide revenue to the cooperative. In trustee elections, Mr. Cornwell and Mr. Molvig were re-elected.

**Workshop gives
basic education
on electric systems**

A two-day MECA-sponsored workshop providing electric co-op employees with a comprehensive understanding of electrical system operations, including generation, transmission and distribution will be held Jan. 8 & 9, 2008 at the MECA headquarters building in Great Falls. Titled “Electric Systems Operations for the Non-Engineer,” the workshop will be conducted by the Northwest Public Power Association.

The class is vital for anyone who needs a clear understanding of the technical heartbeat of the utility. Mechanical and civil engineers, engineering techs, purchasing agents, contract specialists and those in public relations will find this course helpful. Organizers say it’s simply a great class for anyone desiring a better understanding of the “nuts and bolts” of an electric cooperative utility.

The fee for this course is \$300 per person with a minimum of 24 participants registered by the early registration date or the course may be cancelled. To obtain more information on registration, contact MECA’s **Sharon McDonald** at 406-761-8333 or via electronic mail. Her e-mail address is: sharonm@mtco-ops.com

**MECA kicks off
first in series
on leadership skills**

The first in a series of courses leading to a certificate in foreman leadership skills is being sponsored by MECA and will be presented Nov. 5-6 at the MECA headquarters building in Great Falls. Northwest Public Power Association is conducting the course titled “Foreman Leadership Skills Program, Part 1.” Three additional courses that are part of the foreman leadership program will be offered by MECA in a multiple day training session in February, 2008. Participants must complete all four courses in order to receive the certificate. However, individual courses may be attended without receiving the certificate. For more information on this course and the series please contact MECA’s **Lea Upshaw** at 406-761-8333 or via electronic mail. Her e-mail address is meca@mtco-ops.com.

**Openings available
for fast-track course**

People can still sign up for the annual NRECA Credentialed Cooperative Director Fast Track Course Series Oct. 29-Nov. 1 at the statewide office in Great Falls. Course No. 2600, “Director Duties and Liabilities,” will be offered Oct. 29. Course No. 2610, “Understanding the Electric Business,” will be held Oct. 30. Course No. 2620, “Board Roles and Relationships,” will be held Oct. 31 and Course No. 2630, “Strategic Planning,” will be offered Nov. 1-2. Also offered Nov. 1-2 will be Course No. 2640, “Financial Decision Making.” Each course will begin at 8 a.m. and course fee of \$450 per course includes a continental breakfast and lunch each day. Oct. 10 is the deadline for registration for the courses. For more information on this series contact MECA’s **Sharon McDonald** at 406-761-8333.

CALENDAR

October

13	Big Flat Electric Cooperative Annual Meeting	Malta, MT
17-19	NRECA Region IX Meeting	Coeur d'Alene, ID
18	CFC District IX Meeting	Coeur d'Alene, ID
20	Sheridan Electric Cooperative Annual Meeting	Medicine Lake, MT
25	Goldenwest Electric Cooperative Annual Meeting	Wibaux, MT
26	Park Electric Cooperative Annual Meeting	Livingston, MT
29-Nov. 1	MECA-Sponsored NRECA Director Fast-Track Course Series	Great Falls, MT

November

5-6	MECA Course: "Foreman Leadership Skills Program, Part 1"	Great Falls, MT
6-8	MECA Operations Conference	Great Falls, MT
7-8	Basin Electric Power Cooperative Annual Meeting	Bismarck, ND
13-14	MECA Workshop: "Electric Systems Operations for the Non-Engineer"	Great Falls, MT