

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.

Remembering Mike



Jeff Birkeland
CEO

It is with a heavy heart that I share the passing of Mike McQuiston, a long-time director and dedicated leader of West Central Electric Cooperative. For 29 years, Mike served our membership with integrity, foresight, and an unwavering commitment to the people at the end of the line.

Mike joined the West Central Electric Board of Directors in October 1996 and helped guide the cooperative through significant industry changes. From evolving regulations to advancing technologies, he approached every challenge with thoughtful consideration and a steady hand. He served as secretary-treasurer from October 2004 to October 2016 and as board president from October 2016 to October 2020. As president, Mike led with humility and resolve, always focused on what was best for our membership and the cooperative's long-term strength.

Mike also represented West Central Electric on the board of Rushmore Electric Power Cooperative beginning in March 2010 and continued in that role until his passing. In addition, he served on the board of Basin Electric Power Cooperative from November 2013 until his passing. In West Central Electric's 76-year history, Mike was the only director to serve on Basin Electric's board while also representing our cooperative. This rare accomplishment reflects

the deep trust others placed in his leadership and his steadfast dedication to our members. Mike had a remarkable ability to see issues from multiple perspectives and never lost sight of the member at the end of the line. He understood that every decision made in the boardroom affected families, farms, and businesses across our service territory.

On a personal note, Mike was serving as board president when I became manager of West Central Electric, and I will always be grateful for the confidence and support he gave me. He was a mentor, a trusted leader, and a good friend.

His dedication to the cooperative and to the community was second to none. While he will be deeply missed, his legacy will continue to live on through the strength and stability of West Central Electric and the many lives he impacted over the years.



**COOPERATIVE
CONNECTIONS**

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(USPS No. 018-988)

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Design assistance by SDREA



**The following is an excerpt
from Mike McQuiston's
obituary:**

Born on November 15, 1968, in Little Falls, MN. Mike moved to Fort Pierre in 1970 and was a lifelong resident of Stanley County and Fort Pierre, South Dakota. He proudly carried on the family tradition as a fifth-generation rancher on their family ranch in Northwest Stanley County.

A graduate of Stanley County High School, Mike devoted his life to the land and the community he loved. Known for his deep passion for sports, he was an avid fan of the Dallas Cowboys and enjoyed sharing his love for baseball through fantasy baseball with his son, Zach. Mike always enjoyed history, and loved to share his knowledge with others. This resulted in numerous times of sharing with friends and family.

Mike is survived by his significant other, Becky Hurst; Leah McQuiston, mother of their two children; their son, Zach McQuiston and daughter, Ally McQuiston (fiancé Alejandro Cortina); bonus son Aven Angyal; bonus grandsons Daxton, Hayze and Daycen Sack; parents, Larry and Barb McQuiston; sisters, Kris (Nick) Moreland and Lynn (Richard) Siedschlaw. Also survived by aunts Sandy (John) Rudek, Jean McQuiston, Mary Fenger, Patty (Lou) Chamales, Pam Koch, Patty (Gary) Wietgreffe and numerous "special" cousins.

He was preceded in death by his maternal grandparents, Robert and Donna O'Day; paternal grandparents, J. Clinton and Esther McQuiston; and several uncles, including John, Gary, and Kristine McQuiston, and Ken and Jim O'Day.

Mike's legacy is marked by his dedication to his family and friends, his work, and his community. He sat on many boards, some of which were Basin Electric Co-op since November 2013 to present, Rushmore Electric Co-op since March 2010 to present and West Central Electric Co-op since October of 1996 to present. His presence will be deeply missed, yet his influence will continue to be felt by all who knew him.



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.

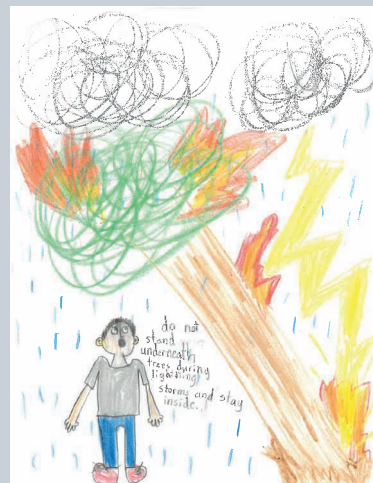
Second, plan your route before you depart. Entering a destination while driving is a dangerous distraction. Take a few minutes to review the route, check traffic conditions, and set your navigation system in advance. With your route loaded, you can keep your attention on driving rather than on-screen 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 DISHES

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.





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

Co-ops in the Community

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

Jacob Boyko

jacob.boyko@sdrea.coop

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

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.



HOW CO-OPS ARE KEEPING THE GRID SECURE

Michael Leitman
NRECA

The electric grid is the backbone of modern life. It powers homes, businesses and institutions, including hospitals and other critical infrastructure. As the grid becomes more interconnected and digitized, it also faces growing threats ranging from cyberattacks to extreme weather events and wildfires.

Keeping the grid reliable and resilient is essential, and electric cooperatives are actively involved in national efforts to secure the electric grid.

Electric cooperatives, other utilities and grid operators follow standards set by organizations like the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC), which mandate protections for critical infrastructure, including:

- **Cybersecurity Measures:** Firewalls, encryption and multi-factor authentication help prevent unauthorized access to control systems. Regular software updates and vulnerability scans reduce the risk of exploitation.
- **Physical Security:** Electric substations and control centers are protected with fencing, surveillance and restricted access. Physical breaches or attacks can be just as damaging as cyberattacks.
- **Redundancy and Resilience:** Backup systems and redundant lines ensure power can be rerouted

during outages caused by natural events or deliberate attacks. This minimizes disruption and speeds recovery.

Each of these standards creates layers of defense, making it harder for any single failure to compromise the entire grid.

As threats evolve, so do the tools to combat them. New tools including drones, remote sensors and advanced controls allow cooperatives to be more effective in monitoring and responding to a variety of grid threats.

Automated sensors and controls allow real-time visibility across the grid and enable rapid response to emergency conditions, either by a human operator or automated settings. Artificial intelligence (AI) can be a powerful technology to enhance these other tools, especially in sifting through large amounts of data or imagery to detect irregularities or patterns. But to be effective, AI tools must be well designed, properly trained and incorporated into cybersecurity protections.

Electric co-ops are also making investments to harden their local systems against the growing threat of wildfires, extreme weather events and other natural hazards. These investments include identifying vulnerable parts of the grid, replacing wooden poles with metal or cement poles, burying lines underground or adding enhanced technologies that allow greater visibility and control to anticipate and respond to emergency conditions.

Planning for the unexpected is critical.

Utilities and government agencies conduct large-scale exercises to test their readiness for emergencies. One example is GridEx, a biennial event organized by NERC that simulates cyber and physical attacks on the electric grid. Thousands of participants, from utilities to law enforcement, work together to identify weaknesses and improve coordination.

These drills serve two purposes. They expose vulnerabilities before real crises occur, and they build relationships among key stakeholders. In an actual emergency, rapid communication and collaboration can make the difference between a minor disruption and a widespread outage.

Beyond planning exercises like GridEx, electric co-ops also create plans and conduct trainings to practice their responses to cyber and physical attacks and natural hazards. For example, as wildfires have become more intense and more common over a larger portion of the U.S., many co-ops are adopting wildfire mitigation plans in conjunction with grid hardening efforts.

So, why does all this matter? A secure electric grid isn't just about keeping the lights on; it's about protecting public health, economic stability and national security in the co-op communities we serve.

By combining robust industry standards, rigorous training and cutting-edge technology, electric co-ops are helping to build a grid that is not only reliable but resilient today and in the future.



LINEMAN APPRECIATION



Jeff Birkeland
CEO

As Manager of West Central Electric, I have the unique privilege of seeing firsthand what it truly takes to keep the lights on for our members. In April, we take time to pause and recognize the brave men who make that possible every single day – our linemen.

When storms impact our communities and outages occur, many people experience the inconvenience, but our linemen see a call to action. Our crews are always ready when it matters most – leaving family dinners, working through the night and heading into challenging conditions to restore power as safely and quickly as possible. That readiness is not accidental. It comes from rigorous training, deep experience and a shared commitment to serving others.

What makes linemen especially remarkable is that they aren't just restoring power to a

system – they're restoring power to their own communities. They live here. They raise their families here. They understand that electricity is more than a convenience; it's essential to daily life, to local businesses, to schools, farms and emergency services. Powering the places we call home is personal to linemen.

Electric cooperatives like West Central were built on the principle of neighbors helping neighbors, and our linemen embody that spirit every day. They are the first to respond and the last to leave, often working long hours behind the scenes. At times, serving our neighbors means going beyond our own service territory through a process known as mutual aid. During major outage events, West Central crews stand ready to assist neighboring co-ops – sometimes close to home, and sometimes across state lines – to

help restore power. This spirit of mutual aid strengthens all cooperatives and ultimately benefits the members we serve.

We understand any time the lights go out can be frustrating, bringing everyday life to a halt. We are incredibly grateful to our members for your patience and encouragement during these times. Linework is demanding, physical, and at times, it can be dangerous. Our crews approach each job with a focus on safety and teamwork. They take pride in their craft and in the trust our members place in them.

On **April 13, 2026**, we will celebrate Linemen Appreciation Day, but one day is hardly enough. Every day, we thank linemen for their service and dedication, which are the backbone of our cooperative.

To our linemen: Thank You for your hard work, your readiness and your unwavering commitment to the members we serve. We are proud to stand behind you and grateful for all that you do.

ON THE LOOKOUT FOR ENERGY SCAMS

Photo by Frank Turner

Frank Turner

frank.turner@sdrea.coop

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

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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

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 27-APRIL 4
The Passion and the Cross
 Orpheum Theatre
 Sioux Falls, SD
 605-367-6000
 www.ThePassionMusical.com

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

APRIL 5
Easter Sunrise Service
 7 a.m.
 Mount Rushmore

APRIL 9
**McCrossan Wildest Banquet
 Auction in the Midwest**
 Jimmy Buffett Tribute
 Polynesian Paradise Dancers
 Sioux Falls, SD
 www.mccrossan.org

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

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 11
**Minnehaha County Pheasants
 Forever Annual Banquet**
 5:30 p.m.-10 p.m.
 Blue Haven Atrium
 46594 268th St.
 Sioux Falls, SD
 605-214-1415

APRIL 11-12
The Black Market
 Sat. 9 a.m.-5 p.m.
 Sun. 10 a.m.-3 p.m.
 W.H. Lyon Fairgrounds Expo Bldg.
 Sioux Falls, SD
 605-332-6004

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

APRIL 18
**Tri-Valley Chorus
 75th Annual Show**
 4 p.m.
 Centerville, SD
 605-201-9398

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

APRIL 25
**Screams by Night
 Halfway to Halloween Con**
 11 a.m.-5 p.m.
 The Social
 Sioux Falls, SD

APRIL 28
American Legion Bingo
 5-6 p.m. Social
 6-6:30 p.m. Meal
 6:45 p.m. Bingo
 American Legion Post 15
 1600 W. Russell
 Sioux Falls, SD
 605-682-1222

MAY 2-10
**Rustic Designs & More Spring
 Show, Flea Market**
 41450 264th St.
 Ethan, SD
 605-770-2411

MAY 2
Cinco de Mayo Fiesta
 2-8 p.m.
 Milbank, SD
 605-432-6656

JUNE 13
Journey Into Historic Pickstown
 9 a.m.-5 p.m.
 Ft. Randall Town & Museum
 Pickstown, SD
 605-487-7299

JUNE 26-27
Buckhorn Rodeo
 Britton, SD
 605-880-5077

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.