

COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS



(left to right) Rosebud Electric Directors Dennis Purvis and Boyt Young and Butte Electric CEO Matt Sleep serve a homemade meal to legislators, state employees and Capitol visitors in South Dakota State Capitol.

Photo by Jacob Boyko

Co-ops at the Capitol

Every Voice Counts
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**Easements Bring Safety
and Reliability**
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The Board of Directors meet with FEM staff at the November meeting.

November Board Report

A regular meeting of the Board of Directors of FEM Electric was held in Ipswich, South Dakota at 8:30 a.m. on November 18, 2025, pursuant to due call and notice. It being determined that a quorum was present, President Gary Bachman called the meeting to order. Secretary Eric Odenbach kept the minutes of the meeting. The following directors were declared present by roll call: Gary Bachman, Paula Petersen, Eric Odenbach, Tom Thorpe, Kelly Melius. Operations Manager Sean Christiansen, Electrical Manager Ryan Holien, Director of Finance and Benefits Rhonda Tuscherer, and CEO Scott Moore.

Guest Employee: Josh Weigel

Changes to the agenda: none

Changes/Additions to Minutes from October 21, 2025, meeting: none

Next Meeting Date: After a review of the calendars, directors agreed that the next regular meeting of the board would be on Tuesday, December 16, 2025, at 8:30 a.m. to be held at FEM Electric Board Room in Ipswich, South Dakota.

Motion by Tom Thorpe, seconded by Paula Petersen and carried to approve administrative business.

The board and staff watched NRECA Governance Video titled "Keeping Bad Behavior Out of the Boardroom".

Motion by Kelly Melius was seconded by Eric Odenbach and carried to acknowledge the manager and staff reports along with East River Electric load management report.

Motion by Kelly Melius seconded by Eric Odenbach and carried to acknowledge October 2025 Cyber Security Report.

Resolutions and Contracts:

Motion by Kelly Melius was seconded by Eric Odenbach and carried to nominate Gary Bachman as voting delegate and Paul Petersen as alternate voting delegate for SDREA annual meeting.

Motion by Kelly Melius seconded by Paula Petersen to nominate Tom Thorpe for SDREA (South Dakota Rural Electric Association) board seat.

Motion by Tom Thorpe seconded by Paula Petersen to approve Star Energy Engineering to complete an Electric Rate Study in 2026.

Membership Business:

Board acknowledged membership business.

New Memberships, Member Cancellations and Contracts:

Disconnects: Jerome Mack Farms, LLC, Leola, SD, Commercial & Active Farm; Diamond C Cattle Co., Aberdeen, SD, Active Farm; Wendt Family, LLC, Brookings, SD, Active Farm

Reconnects: Pembroke Colony, Ipswich, SD, Commercial & Active Farm; Brenna & Logan Mielke, Mina, SD, Active Farm; Joel & Cassidy Green, Mina, SD, Active Farm

Contracts: Makayla & Nathaniel Collins, Ipswich, SD, Pasture Pump; Michael Tucker, Chester, SD, Shop

Retired Locations: None

Motion by Kelly Melius seconded by Eric Odenbach and carried to approve two Line Construction Contracts Makayla and Nathaniel Collins, Michael Tucker.

Capital Credits:

Estates – November 2025: Two = \$1,840.91

73 & Older – November 2025: None

Director of Finance and Benefits Rhonda Tuscherer presented and discussed the list of Unclaimed Property (Capital Credits) with the board.

Board acknowledged receipt of following financial business.

Financial Business: The board acknowledged reviewing the following financial information:

The check register for the month of October 2025 contained information on checks #35721 through #35799 and all automatic payments/withdrawals for October 2025 totaling \$462,298.42.

October 2025 financials were reviewed.

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COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS

FEM ELECTRIC ASSOCIATION

(USPS 189-720)

Board of Directors

Gary Bachman, President
Tom Thorpe, Vice President
Eric Odenbach, Secretary
Paula Petersen, Treasurer
Kelly Melius, Asst. Secretary/
Treasurer
Vaughn Beck, Attorney

CEO/General Manager

Scott Moore
info@femelectric.coop

Management Staff

Sean Christiansen
Operations Manager
Ryan Holien
Electrical Manager
Rhonda Tuscherer
*Director of Finance and
Benefits*

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FEM ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE CONNECTIONS is the monthly publication for the members of FEM Electric Association, Inc., 800 5th Ave., Ipswich, SD 57451. FEM Electric Cooperative Connections' purpose is to provide reliable, helpful information to members on electric cooperative matters and better living.

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Design assistance by SDREA

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employer.**



Scott Moore
General Manager/CEO

I hope everyone had a safe and happy Thanksgiving. Now off to the Christmas season and to the end of 2025, along with the beginning of 2026. At the November 2025 FEM Electric board meeting the board gave approval of hiring Star Energy Services to complete an electric rate study to be completed in 2026. The last rate study was completed in 2019 and has given the board of directors, management and employees direction in making sure all members are paying their fair share. This process started about twenty years ago when FEM employees were given the green light to clean up around six hundred idle services that weren't creating any revenue, only expenses.

In late summer we were informed that our power cost would increase by 18.7% in 2026. Through discussions with East River Electric, our transmission provider and Basin Power, our electric generating partner, it was decided to step the rate increase in over two or three years. The timeline is yet to be decided, but the first

step will be around 10% and will go into effect January 1, 2026. Final decision on FEM Electric's rates will be made at the December board meeting along with approving the 2026 budget.

I have been asked many times if the increase in electric rates is due to DATA Centers coming and I would say not in this region. Members of Basin have been serving electricity to small data centers for over fifteen years but not the mega data centers. The biggest concern within the electric cooperative family is protecting the cooperative legacy members: the member at the end of the line on a fixed income that helped create and build these local cooperatives. It has been decided that any future big/mega users will need to pay for the construction of generation up front. Most of these mega loads will be two to four years out before being built mostly due to permitting and availability of equipment. The rate increases we are seeing currently are mostly due to capital improvements, building new

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FOLLOW US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

@FEMEElectric on

@fem_electric on

@FEMEelectric on

We'll post outage updates, safety tips, news and more to keep our members informed on all the latest from FEM Electric.

Statement Mailing Dates

January 28, 2026 for January's energy
February 25, 2026 for February's energy

Regardless of the statement mail out date, payments are due in the office by the 9th of the following month.

Tree Trimming Safety

Trees are majestic, beautiful and good for the soul. But we also know that our members depend on us to deliver reliable power to their homes and businesses. South Dakota's electric cooperatives strive to balance maintaining the beautiful surroundings we all cherish with ensuring reliable electricity. You might not realize it, but there are several benefits to regular tree trimming.

Keeping power lines clear of overgrown vegetation improves service reliability. After all, we've seen the whims of Mother Nature during severe weather events with fallen tree limbs taking down power lines and utility poles. While many factors can impact power disruptions, about half of all outages nationally can be attributed to overgrown vegetation.

Overgrown vegetation and trees also pose a risk to power lines. For example, if trees are touching power lines in our members' yards, they can pose grave danger to families. If children can access those trees, they can potentially climb into a danger zone. Electricity can arc, or jump, from a power line to a nearby conductor like a tree. A proactive approach also diminishes the chances of fallen branches or trees during severe weather events that make it more complicated and dangerous for line workers to restore power.

If trees and other vegetation are left unchecked, they can be-

BENEFITS OF TREE TRIMMING

- ✓ Improves service reliability
- ✓ Speeds up restoration time
- ✓ Keeps crews & communities safe



come overgrown and expensive to correct. A strategic vegetation management program helps keep costs down for everyone.

When it comes to vegetation management, there are ways you can help too. When planting new trees, make sure they're planted a safe distance from overhead power lines. Medium-height trees (40 ft. or smaller) should be planted at least 25 ft. from power lines. Taller trees (over 40 ft.) should be planted at least 50 ft. from power lines. You can also practice safe planting near pad-mounted transformers. Plant shrubs at least 10 ft. from the transformer door and 4 ft. from the sides. If your neighborhood has underground lines, remember to contact 811 before you begin any project that requires digging.

Additionally, if you spot an overgrown tree or branch that's dangerously close to overhead lines, please contact your local electric cooperative.

We have deep roots in our community, and we love our beautiful surroundings. It takes a balanced approach, and our vegetation management program is a crucial tool in ensuring service reliability.



"Watch for overhead power lines."

Jacob Ymker, Age 10

Jacob reminds readers to watch out for overhead power lines. Great job, Jacob! Jacob's parents are Mark and Marion Ymker from Armour, 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.

Heart-Warming DESSERTS

APPLE BREAD

Ingredients:

1/2 cup brown sugar
1 1/2 tsps. cinnamon
Mix in small dish & set aside.

2 eggs (room temperature)
1/2 cup sugar
1 tsp. vanilla
1/2 cup melted butter or
margarine

Mix together in a bowl and add:
1 1/2 cups flour
1 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. baking soda
2 cups chopped apples

Method

Pour 1/2 of the batter into a greased and floured bread pan. Sprinkle 1/2 of the cinnamon and sugar mixture over it. Add remaining batter and top with remaining cinnamon sugar mixture.

Bake at 350° for 45-60 minutes.

Grace Klein
Sioux Valley Energy

PUMPKIN CHEESECAKE DESSERT

Ingredients:

1 cup heavy whipped cream
8 oz. cream cheese, whipped
1/3 cup sugar
1/2 cup brown sugar
1 can pumpkin puree
1 tbsp. pumpkin pie spice
1 tsp. vanilla
1 pkg. cheesecake pudding mix

Method

Beat 1 cup heavy whipped cream and set aside.

In a separate bowl, mix and beat the cream cheese, sugar, brown sugar, pumpkin puree, pumpkin pie spice, vanilla, and cheesecake pudding mix.

Fold the whip cream into this mixture and spread in a graham cracker crust

Refrigerate two hours before serving plus add a spray of whip cream and sprinkle cinnamon on top.

(Optional) add chopped pecans or walnuts.

Susan Forma
Union County Electric

CHERRY COCONUT BARS

Ingredients:

Crust

1 cup flour, sifted
1/2 cup butter
3 tbsps. powdered sugar

Mixture

2 eggs, slightly beaten
1 cup sugar
1/2 tsp. baking powder
1/4 cup flour
1/4 tsp. salt
1 tsp. vanilla
3/4 cup chopped nuts
1/2 cup coconut
1/2 cup red maraschino cherries,
quartered

Method

Mix together flour, butter and powdered sugar. Spread in 8" square pan. Bake at 350° for 20-25 minutes or until it is a delicate brown.

In a bowl, mix in the remaining ingredients in the order given: eggs, sugar, baking powder, flour, salt, vanilla, chopped nuts, coconut, maraschino cherries.

Spread this mixture over the crust and bake again for 25-30 minutes. cool and cut into squares.

Barbara Anderson
Lake Region Electric

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 2025. All entries must include your name, mailing address, phone number and cooperative name.

BOARD REPORT CONTINUED

Board Report Continued from page 2

RUS and CFC Quarterly Loan Reviews were discussed.

The 2026 budget was presented by staff where there was discussion on annual margins and the need for a rate increase due to increased operations and power cost. Staff will bring the 2026 budget and rate increase back to the December board meeting asking for final approval.

Motion by Paula Petersen was seconded by Kelly Melius and carried to approve board expense reports and attorney fees.

Legal Update: none

Meeting Report:

East River monthly board report was given by Gary Bachman, and monthly video was watched.

The safety meeting minutes from October 29, 2025, were acknowledged.

Employee meeting minutes from November 5, 2025, were acknowledged.

Adjourn: President Gary Bachman declared the meeting adjourned.

Manager's Article Continued from page 3

transmission lines, substations, and generation to serve our traditional and existing growing electrical loads. FEM Electric members have benefited from some of these projects with new and upgraded transmission lines and substations within our service territory.

This is a big topic in the nation, South Dakota, and the electric cooperative family. My suggestion is to stay informed on the topic. I was told several years ago that rural electric cooperatives are peanut butter and jelly businesses, and we should step back and let other utilities serve these large loads. I disagreed then, and now rural electrics can serve these loads. We just need to be cautious and make sure our existing members are protected.

As we move into 2026 if you are planning on adding any electrical load, please contact Sean Christiansen or Ryan Holien 605 426 6891.

Have a safe, happy, and prosperous 2026.



KINDERGARTEN CLASS TOURS FEM ELECTRIC

IPSWICH SCHOOL KINDERGARTEN CLASS TAKES TOURS OF LOCAL BUSINESSES

It was a little chilly October 29th, but the Ipswich Kindergarten class braved the weather to take a quick tour of FEM's headquarters to learn about what linemen do and about electrical safety.

The class has been touring businesses all over the town of Ipswich to learn about community workers.

Sean Christensen, Line Superintendent, talked about the types of trucks FEM linemen use, what linemen do, and a bit about electrical safety.



Gregg had also prepped a scene of two types of trucks, a digger and a bucket truck, working together to set a power pole. He also had a bobcat holding the top of a power pole, and overhead power line on the ground, showing how difficult lines are to see when they're down. Gregg and Sean made sure to mention that if a power line is on the ground, students should stay far away.

Once the tour and safety demonstration were complete, the kindergartners were sent home with a goodie bag that was filled with a build-able bucket truck, a plastic hard hat, safety activity sheets, a coloring book and more.



Gregg Zwart, Journeyman Lineman, showed off a pair of rubber gloves that the class tried on. He also talked about transformer boxes and power lines. When one student asked if they could touch a sample

piece of underground line, and Gregg replied sternly, "This is the only time you're allowed to touch it", emphasizing how dangerous power lines are.





The South Dakota State Capitol
in Pierre, S.D.
Photo by Frank Turner

CO-OPS AT THE CAPITOL EVERY VOICE COUNTS

Frank Turner

frank.turner@sdrea.coop

Electric cooperatives carry a wide range of responsibilities to the members they serve. Beyond keeping the lights on, co-ops represent their communities, focus on member needs and help strengthen the places they call home. But behind the scenes, cooperatives also stay actively involved in legislative discussions to stay engaged in the decisions that shape how they serve their members.

According to Steve Barnett, general manager of the South Dakota Rural Electric Association, legislative efforts help protect reliable electricity, keep costs manageable and support rural communities across South Dakota.

“While it’s important that we stay involved in the topics that are relevant to our industry, it’s really about sharing our values and telling our story,” Barnett said. “Being involved means being engaged and aware of the challenges and issues coming up in the 2026 Legislative Session,”

In addition to SDREA’s internal

leadership, legislative efforts are supported by the association’s lobbying team in Pierre, led by Darla Pollman Rogers of Riter Rogers LLP. Rogers and her colleague, Ellie Bailey, have been involved with SDREA’s legislative work for more than two decades.

“A key component of this work involves relationship building with legislators to establish trust and credibility,” Rogers said.

Rogers noted that member engagement strengthens the cooperative voice during session and throughout the year. “The grassroots approach is huge for co-ops,” she said. “Hearing from members across the state and from different cooperatives helps strengthen our overall impact.” Rogers added that one of the best ways members can get involved is by getting to know their local legislators or attending Co-op Day at the Capitol to observe the process firsthand.

With the next session approaching, several topics are already drawing the attention of not only electric cooperatives but utilities across the

state. One of the proposals SDREA is following closely is Rep. Kent Roe’s data center bill, identified as Draft HB 31.

“We’re seeing an increase in interest from large data center developers looking to site facilities in cooperative service territory,” said Chris Studer, chief member and public relations officer at East River Electric Power Cooperative, a wholesale power supply cooperative which serves distribution co-ops in eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota. “We have been providing input on the data center bill to make sure the law would fit within our process and require data centers to invest in generation and transmission infrastructure to serve them, so we can protect our current cooperative consumers from the risk of building generation to serve these large consumers. At the end of the day, we’re not going to put our member-owners at risk, and engaging with lawmakers working on that issue is very important to our cooperative network.”

The association has also been working

with investor-owned utilities on wildfire mitigation legislation, which stands out as another priority for South Dakota cooperatives.

“Wildfire risk is a growing concern, and this proposal gives utilities a clear, consistent way to plan ahead. At its core, this legislation is about preparedness – making sure utilities have a plan and have reviewed it with their governing authority. By strengthening infrastructure, improving vegetation management, and coordinating closely with communities, the framework helps protect public safety while supporting the reliable service South Dakotans depend on,” Black Hills Electric General Manager Walker Witt said.

Cooperative members also have an important role in legislative advocacy. Their engagement helps ensure that rural needs and perspectives reach decision makers. Barnett encouraged members to stay active by reaching out to local lawmakers in their districts and attending local legislative forums and cracker barrels. These are formal town hall style gatherings where legislators answer questions and update the community.

“Members can contact legislators in their respective districts via email or by telephone,” Barnett said. “Attending cracker barrels is also a good way to stay engaged. These opportunities give members a chance to hear updates, ask questions, and share how policy decisions affect their communities.”

Barnett also noted the importance of staying alert during the legislative process, particularly when a bill is significantly amended. He explained that when a bill gets “hog housed,” it means it has been changed so much that the original version is no longer recognizable. “A hog housed bill is changed or amended significantly, to the point where a person may change their position on the bill,” he said. “Tracking these changes is essential to understanding the real impact a proposal may have if it becomes law.”

Barnett said SDREA will continue to represent the interests of both cooperatives and rural communities across the state. At the end of the day, it’s all about providing dependable electricity and keeping the lights on.



Gov. Larry Rhoden takes a picture with members of the electric cooperative network at Co-op Day at the Capitol last February.

Photo by Jocelyn Johnson

STAYING INVOLVED

Co-op Day at the Capitol

Electric cooperatives’ efforts to engage local legislators extend far beyond traditional lobbying. Every February, cooperatives from across the state gather for a light-hearted dinner at the South Dakota State Capitol to break bread with lawmakers, provide attendees industry updates and sit in on legislative committee meetings.

Last year, South Dakota cooperatives continued their time-honored tradition of serving pulled pork sandwiches and cowboy beans prepared by Ken Gillaspie, who formerly served as a director for East River Electric and as board president for Oahe Electric, and Roger Crom, a former loss control manager at SDREA.

The next Co-op Day at the Capitol is scheduled for Feb. 17, 2026.

Legislative Banquets

In addition to Co-op Day at the Capitol, select electric cooperatives across the state host legislative banquets as a means of communicating the latest legislative environment with both their members and local lawmakers. Many times, these events provide a free meal to attendees and include updates on both the successes and challenges for the co-op.

Reach out to your local cooperative to learn more about local Legislative Banquets, Co-op Day at the Capitol or the latest legislative news affecting cooperatives. The co-op network is more than happy to engage.



SAVE MONEY WITH A DIY HOME ENERGY AUDIT

CUT COSTS AND MAKE YOUR HOME MORE COMFORTABLE WITH A “DIY” ENERGY AUDIT

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP EFFICIENCY GUIDE

Before you dive in, grab a few basic tools: flashlight, dust mask, tape measure and something to take notes (your phone works great!). We'll start with simple, no-cost changes you can do right away, then move on to tasks that take a little more effort.

Step 1: Adjust your thermostat

- Revisit your thermostat settings each season. Lowering the temperature at night or when no one is home is a simple way to cut costs.
- Use a smart thermostat for even greater savings. It automatically adjusts based on your schedule.

Step 2: Lower water heater temperature

- Lower your water heater temperature to save money and reduce the risk of scalding burns. Some water heaters are factory-set to 140 F, but most households only need 120 F.

Step 3: Find and fix energy vampires

- Shut off energy vampires — devices that draw electricity even when turned off. This idle load can account for 23% of your home's energy use.
- Unplug appliances when not in use and fully power down devices like computers or gaming consoles.
- Use a smart power strip to shut off multiple electronics at once — it's an easy way to stop energy waste at the source.

Step 4: Check your lighting

- Swap out older bulbs, like incandescent or CFLs, for LEDs. They use less energy and last longer. Lighting can account for about 10% of your electric bill.
- Add dimmers or timers to cut down on wasted electricity.

- Don't overlook outdoor fixtures. Choose LEDs with features like daylight shut-off or motion sensors for even more savings.

Step 5: Review major appliances

- Look for the ENERGY STAR label when buying new. If your refrigerator, washer, dryer or heat pump is more than 10 years old, it may be worth replacing rather than repairing. Newer appliances are more energy-efficient and can often pay for themselves in savings within a few years.
- Check your heating and cooling systems. Their lifespan can range from 10-30 years depending on the type and maintenance. If yours is older, start planning ahead for an upgrade.
- Replace air filters to keep your system running efficiently.

Step 6: Seal leaks

Air leaks can waste 10-20% of your home's energy each year, but they're often simple to fix. Here's where to look and how to seal them.

- Check baseboards, floor edges and wall-to-ceiling joints indoors.
- Focus on where different materials meet outdoors.
- Pay special attention to windows, doors, light fixtures, plumbing and outlets.
- Use caulk for gaps around windows, doors and baseboards.
- Add weatherstripping to doors and operable windows.

Step 7: Inspect insulation

Check attic insulation:

- Grab your dust mask and tape measure to check the depth of the insulation. It should be at least 12 inches deep, but you may need more depending on the type and your climate. Check [EnergyStar.gov](https://www.energy.gov) for recommended R-values.
- Spread insulation evenly. Loose-fill or blown-in insulation should be fluffy with even coverage, while rolled batt insulation should fit snugly with no gaps.

Inspect exterior walls:

- Check insulation by turning off the power, removing an outlet cover or switch plate and shining a flashlight into the cavity. Many homes built before the 1960s have little to no insulation, and houses from the 1960s-70s often need more.
- Call a professional to blow in insulation (from the outside or inside) if wall insulation is missing.

Don't forget the basement:

- Ensure rim joists (the area between the top of the foundation and the underside of the first floor) are well insulated in unfinished basements.
- Insulate the underside of the floor between the joists in crawl spaces.
- Add insulation to pipes and ductwork for an extra efficiency boost.

For renters: You may not be able to make major upgrades, but you can ask your landlord to seal leaks or start small with temporary fixes.

Enjoy your energy savings

Congratulations — you've taken important first steps toward lowering your energy bills and boosting comfort.

Efficiency Tip

Drafty room? Check your home's energy efficiency. Seal air leaks; add insulation where it matters, such as in the attic; use programmable thermostats and have your furnace serviced regularly.

Safe Electricity.org®

Article courtesy of safeelectricity.org

***New* Scholarship Available!**

Submit your application for a chance at one of FOUR scholarships:

- 1 - \$1500 Basin Scholarship* New in 2026
- 1 - \$1000 Basin Scholarship
- 2 - \$500 FEM Scholarships

DEADLINE TO APPLY:
February 13th, 2026

Applications available at femelectric.coop/scholarships



South Dakota law allows electric cooperatives to place poles along public rights-of-way without needing an easement. Shown here, East River Electric's transmission lines north of Pierre are built within the right-of-way. In cases where the rights-of-way are crowded, have obstacles, or are otherwise not suitable for poles or line work, a co-op may seek an easement outside of the right-of-way.

Photo by Jacob Boyko

EASEMENTS BRING SAFETY, RELIABILITY

Why More Room Makes Sense for Co-ops, Line Crews & Members

Jacob Boyko

jacob.boyko@sdrea.coop

Serving rural members means maintaining thousands of miles of power line – and finding the space to safely build and access it. At your local electric cooperative, building, maintaining and repairing thousands of miles of infrastructure is a logistical challenge, but each and every piece of the system has its role in a functioning and reliable electric grid.

That's why easements, or agreements to use and access private land, are essential for co-ops and their members. At East River Electric Power

Cooperative, the generation and transmission co-op serving 25 member distribution systems in South Dakota and Minnesota, Engineering and Planning Services Manager Jon Aus works directly with co-op members to get easements for power lines.

In 2025, most cooperatives prioritize building lines along the public right of way – the area between the road and fence lines along roadways – instead of along quarter lines like they have historically, back when rights-of-way were cluttered with telephone and other overhead lines.

“That’s where we like it from an access and maintenance perspective,”

Aus said of rights-of-way. “Nowadays, when we develop a route for a line, we pick the roads we want to zigzag down to get from Point A to Point B.”

Placing infrastructure along roads improves accessibility for crews and speeds up outage response time, especially when mud or snow are a factor, Aus added. But the trade offs are a workspace limited to the shoulder and ditch and overall limited access to the infrastructure.

That’s where easements make all the difference. When a co-op member allows an easement, the co-op will set poles back just several more feet away from the road right-of-way onto private land, and crews can cross behind the fence when they need to access the poles. The impact on private land is minimal, but it’s a massive benefit for the line crews.

“Having an easement allows crews to work on the backside of the structures,” Aus said. “If you don’t get an easement and you don’t have any access rights, they’re stuck working everything from the ditch and the roadside.”

Engineers are meticulous when mapping routes for new lines, Aus added, noting the lengthy process for engineers as they consider pole placement, obstacles, hazards and community impact.

“At the onset of any project, we’re evaluating the impact of our routing,” Aus continued. “Public impact is right up there on our priorities along with reliability and maintenance. We don’t go down routes we foresee to have challenges with public impact.”

Distribution cooperatives see similar challenges on the ground. In southwest South Dakota, Black Hills Electric Cooperative System Coordinator Jesse Sorensen aims to manage a system that’s not only reliable and affordable, but also built on cooperation with members.

“Very rarely do we have someone reject giving an easement,” he said. “We’ve had very good luck sitting down with members and explaining everything to them that there are hundreds – if not thousands – of landowners that allowed easements so we could get electricity to this property.”

He continued, “The biggest concerns from landowners are about losing their trees or the aesthetic value of their property, and we’ll work with landowners by rerouting lines to prevent cutting prize trees or installing lines in prime views.”

At East River Electric, Aus’ team fields similar questions from landowners, usually concerning specific pole placement and whether poles will interfere with field access, an approach or operation of large machinery. He says it’s usually something the engineers can accommodate because ultimately, co-ops want to leave members’ land as good or better than they found it.

“We’ll even work with landowners to pay to replace any trees we have to remove if we obtain an easement from them,” Aus said.

As the co-op steadily grows and expands its transmission system, East River Electric General Counsel Danny Brown stresses that the co-op relies on voluntary easements, and in its 75-year history has never used eminent domain to obtain an easement.

“Eminent domain is not something we ever want to use,” Brown explained. “We try to educate and work with the property owners the best we can. At the end of the day, an easement is voluntary, and if we can’t make it work from the right of way, we have to start thinking about changing our route.”

But opting for alternate, less-efficient routes is a concession that can severely impact system reliability and leads to a higher price tag for co-op members to pay. Fortunately, Aus and Sorensen said most landowners understand the value of working with their cooperative for themselves and their community.

“There have been several times when landowners have said, ‘Absolutely, bring that line through here,’” Aus recalled. “They want to improve their reliability, or they know that they just need more electricity in that area for whatever they might be doing on their property. Most of the time we’re welcomed with open arms.”

That willingness helps keep cooperative power moving across the countryside.



When a co-op obtains an easement to build a line along a road right-of-way, the line is placed several feet away from the right-of-way border. In this photo, the right of way border is about at the fence line, with the poles placed several feet behind the fence.

On this route, East River Electric has an easement for 30 feet behind the fence line for when line crews need to maintain or repair the line, giving crews more room to work and better access to the structures.

Photo submitted by East River Electric.



GET A JUMP START ON YOUR BILL

To help members avoid mail delays, we're publishing the dates we'll mail statements for 2026. Members can call in and request their bill total on any of the dates below. Your statement will still be mailed, but you can get a head start by sending your payment in the same day it's printed.



2026 FEM STATEMENT DATES	
January 28th	July 28th
February 25th	August 27th
March 26th	September 30th
April 28th	October 28th
May 27th	November 25th
June 26th	December 30th

We also want to remind members that signing up for SmartHub means you can monitor your usage, pay your bill, and set up "bill available" notifications. You can also set up automatic payments, either by ACH or credit card.

If SmartHub isn't for you, we can set up ACH payments for you. You will still receive a statement in the mail, but we'll handle processing your payment. No more mail delays or late fees.

Here are some other convenient ways to pay:

- **Pay By Phone:** 844-965-1321
- **Drop Box:** located in the FEM parking lot 24/7/365
- **Pay Now:** available at femelectric.coop at the top of any webpage. You need your account number and last name or business name to make a payment
- **In Person:** FEM's office is open Monday through Friday, 8:00 am to 4:30 pm

We're trying to give members every opportunity to make their payments on time, especially with rates going up in 2026. While a rate increase is not ideal, especially when the cost of everything else in our lives is increasing, we have also evaluated our budget to limit unnecessary bloat.

We understand that this affects real people, so we wanted to share the cause of a rate increase. First, we're seeing increases to generating and purchasing electricity. FEM does not generate its own power, but purchases it through our generation and transmission cooperatives. The cost of new generation, new transmission and labor have all contributed to this increase. In addition to power costs, we're also seeing longer lead times and shortages for material, which is driving up costs. Finally, existing generation and transmission lines are aging. Maintenance needs to be done more frequently, and in other cases infrastructure needs to be replaced, all done at a higher cost than ever before.

In the previous edition of our Cooperative Connections, we shared information about state programs to help with your power bill. If you're facing any difficulties paying your bill, do not hesitate to reach out to the Department of Social Services at 1-800-233-8503.

Remember, if you mail in your payment it is always due to the office by the **9th** of every month, regardless of post mark date.

If you have questions about your bill, payment, or any of our payment options, call our office at 605-426-6891 or 800-587-5880.

FEM ELECTRIC'S ANNUAL PANCAKE & SAUSAGE BREAKFAST

FREE

**FEB 13, 2026
NORTH SHOP
7 AM - 10 AM**



★ Accepting free will donations of paper products
and cleaning supplies for our local food pantries. ★

REGISTER TO WIN!

Bring this coupon and mailing label to the Touchstone Energy® Cooperatives booth at the Black Hills Stock Show & Rodeo to win a prize!

Your Phone Number: _____

Your E-mail Address: _____



UNTIL JAN. 6

Garden Glow

5-9 p.m. (Closed Dec. 24-25, Jan. 1)

SDSU McCrory Gardens

Brookings, SD

www.sdstate.edu/mccrory-gardens

Photo Courtesy of Travel South Dakota

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.

UNTIL DEC. 26

Christmas at the Capitol

8 a.m.-10 p.m. (Holidays Included)

South Dakota State Capitol

Pierre, SD

605-773-3178

christmasatthecapitol.sd.gov

DEC. 20-21, 23-24, 27-28

1880 Train Holiday Express

Hot Chocolate, Santa

Hill City, SD

www.1880train.com

605-574-2222

DEC. 31

New Year's Eve Bash

Doors Open at 5:30 p.m.

American Legion

Sioux Falls, SD

Tickets: 605-336-3470

JAN. 10

Knights of Columbus Coats for Kids Bowling Tournament

1 p.m.

Meadowood Lanes

3809 Sturgis Rd.

Rapid City, SD

JAN. 20

Prohibition & the Pig

Lake Cty. Museum Fundraiser;

Prohibition-Era Bootlegging

6 p.m.-7:30 p.m.

\$60 per ticket

The Office Bar & Grill

Madison, SD

605-256-5308

JAN. 22

Gentleman's Quartet: Instrumental

7 p.m.

Johnson Fine Arts Center

Aberdeen, SD

JAN. 23-24

Pro Snocross Races

Deadwood, SD

605-578-1876

JAN. 30

Box Elder Ball

6 p.m.-8 p.m.

Box Elder Events Center

Box Elder, SD

605-390-9341

JAN. 30-FEB. 7

Annual Black Hills Stock Show

Central States Fairgrounds

Rapid City, SD

www.centralstatesfairinc.com

605-355-3861

FEB. 1

The Great Lake County Hotdish Competition

11:30-1:30 p.m.

St. Thomas School Gym

Madison, SD

605-256-5308

FEB. 7-8

The Black Market/Formerly Benson's Flea Market

Sioux Falls, SD

605-332-6004

FEB. 13-16

12th Annual Frost Fest

Brookings, SD

605-692-7444

FEB. 20-22

Winterfest

Fireworks, Parade of Lights,

Bonfire, Snowshoeing

Lead, SD

www.leadmethere.com/winterfest

605-584-1100

FEB. 21

Bellator Titans

Casino Night Fundraiser

6-11 p.m.

City Lights Bar & Event Center

Aberdeen, SD

FEB. 22

C Street Brass

4 p.m.

Johnson Fine Arts Center

Aberdeen, SD

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.