

# Cooperative Connections



AgritourismSD seeks to attract visitors from far and near

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# Tree Trimming Improves Service for All



**Walker Witt**

CEO/General Manager  
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**All of us working together can help improve reliability, mitigate fire danger, and keep the public, our members, and our employees safe.**

Writing the monthly column is not one of my favorite tasks. In fact, of all of the cyclical things that I do in a month, coming up with topics and writing the column is near the bottom of the list of the things I enjoy. As long as I am being honest, sometimes I “borrow” ideas from other managers or bits and pieces of boilerplate columns that the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) provides to co-ops each month. This month’s NRECA Leadership Column is titled: Tree Trimming Improves Service for All.

I just finished looking at the weather forecast for Rapid City, and April 4th is predicted for a high of 79 degrees! So, with summer not too far in the distant future, and not being one to look a gift horse in the mouth, I think I will use NRECA’s Leadership Column and write about my least favorite topics: rights-of-way (ROW), trees, and fires.

Your co-op has over 2,400 miles of rights-of-way that are used to construct, maintain, repair, and replace both our overhead and underground powerlines. Our maintenance program incorporates proactive vegetative management to benefit the members in three ways.

## **Safety:**

First and foremost, we care about our members and put your safety and that of our line workers above all else. Overgrown vegetation and trees 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.

## **Fire Mitigation:**

Protecting cooperative assets and our members’ property from a catastrophic fire is a primary focus of our vegetative management program. All 2,400 miles of our rights-of-way are inspected annually. During these inspections, our crews are looking for hazardous trees that may strike the line and ignite a fire. Hazard trees are structurally unsound trees both within and outside of the rights-of-way and are within falling distance of the line. Whether within the ROW or not, hazard trees must be removed.

## **Reliability:**

Of course, one of the biggest benefits of smart vegetation management is reliability. Strategic tree trimming and cutting reduces the frequency of downed lines causing power outages. Generally speaking, healthy trees don’t fall on power lines, and clear lines don’t cause problems. Proactive trimming and tree cutting keep lines clear to promote reliability.

The success of our vegetative management program depends not only on our ROW crews, but also on all of our members. Cooperative crews cannot be everywhere all the time, and our co-op depends on our members to call in when they see a tree that is dead, dying, damaged, or leaning towards the power lines. All of us working together can help improve reliability, mitigate fire danger, and keep the public, our members, and our employees safe.

I hope you are all having a good spring, and please reserve June 3rd for your co-ops 76th Annual Meeting.

# Black Hills Electric

## Cooperative Connections

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Our office will be closed on  
 Monday, May 31st, in observance of Memorial Day.

## Do not fall victim to scams!

We have seen an increase of calls from our members that claim a representative from Black Hills Electric Cooperative had contacted them in an attempt to get a payment on their electric bill to avoid being disconnected. If you know that you're current on your electricity bill, please do NOT fall for it! If there is any question that it's a legitimate phone call, hang up and call us at 1-800-742-0085 to check your account status. We are here to serve you, our members, and find it disheartening that there are people out there looking to take advantage of you.

Thank you for your attention to this matter!

## Murphy



## Remodeling? Keep Efficiency in Mind

Sunny days are prime time for tackling remodeling projects, upgrades and repairs around your home. If you're planning a project, make a point of adding energy efficiency features along the way. Here are a few ideas:

- Add insulation around recessed lights so heated or conditioned air doesn't leak out of them and the weather can't sneak in.
- Install programmable thermostats when you add rooms to the house. While you're at it, have the thermostats in the rest of your home upgraded to programmable models.
- Your contractor will install more insulation in any new spaces you're adding than your builder did during the original construction of your home. Consider adding insulation to already-insulated areas, like the crawlspace and attic, to meet new energy efficiency standards.
- A new kitchen means shiny new appliances. Select those rated as energy efficient by ENERGY STAR®, which use less energy than unrated models.
- If your older home still has single-pane windows, consider an upgrade. Double-pane windows are more energy efficient because they better shield your home from the outdoors - and keep your conditioned air indoors.
- Replace old lightbulbs in your most-used rooms with LEDs. They last 10 years or longer and save considerable energy when compared to incandescent bulbs.
- Work with a contractor who understands how passive solar design can affect your energy bills. Rooftop solar panels, sunrooms and skylights are popular additions.
- Add or upgrade ventilation fans in bathrooms. This can improve air quality throughout the home - not just in the bathrooms - by removing moisture from the air.
- Consider having a home energy audit conducted. Audits can help you evaluate your home for energy wasters, suggest ways to remedy inefficiencies and recommend additions that will make your house more comfortable and cheaper to heat and cool.



## Generate Safely.

Never use a portable generator indoors.

Do not plug generators into standard electrical outlets.

Use heavy-duty extension cords to connect appliances into the generator.

Start the generator before connecting appliances.

## KIDS CORNER SAFETY POSTER



### Don't Grill Too Close to the House

Mia Phillips, 5 years old

Mia is the granddaughter of Jim and Hans Moore of Rapid City. They are members of Black Hills Electric.

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.



# A Craving for Casseroles

## Chicken and Rice

- 1 bag Success Brown Rice
- 1/2 cup ricotta cheese
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 tbsp. chopped Italian parsley
- 1 tbsp. olive oil
- 1/3 cup chopped onions
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1/2 package (4 ounces) mushrooms, sliced
- 1/4 cup white wine
- 4 cups baby spinach leaves
- 2 cups shredded, cooked chicken breast
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1/2 tsp. black pepper

Prepare rice according to package directions. In small bowl, combine ricotta, Parmesan and parsley; reserve. In large skillet over medium heat, heat oil. Add onions and garlic; saute 2 minutes. Add mushrooms and wine to skillet. Continue cooking 3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add spinach and chicken. Stir until spinach is wilted and chicken is heated through, about 2 minutes. Stir in rice, salt and pepper. Serve casserole topped with dollops of reserved cheese mixture.

SuccessRice.com

## Meat Lovers Pizza Casserole

- 1 lb. ground beef
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 can (15 oz) pizza sauce
- 8 oz. elbow macaroni, cooked and drained
- 2 c. (8 oz) shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1 pkg (3 1/2 oz) sliced pepperoni, quartered
- 1/2 tsp. salt

In a large skillet, cook ground beef and onion over medium heat until meat is no longer pink; drain. Stir in remaining ingredients. Transfer to a greased 2-quart baking dish. Bake uncovered at 350 degrees for 40-45 minutes or until heated through. Yields 6 servings.

Gail Lee, Brookings

## Chicken Doritos Casserole

- 2 cups shredded cooked chicken
- 1 cup shredded cheese
- 1 can cream of chicken soup
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- 1 can Ro-tel tomatoes, drained (canned tomatoes with jalapenos-mild)
- 1/2 packet taco seasoning (or more, to taste)
- 1 bag of regular nacho cheese Doritos

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a mixing bowl, combine all ingredients except Doritos. In a greased 2 quart baking dish, put a layer of crushed Doritos (about 2 cups), then a layer of the chicken mixture. Top with more shredded cheese, cover, and bake 30-35 minutes until bubbling hot. Enjoy!

Alana Neville, Milesville, SD

## Garden Cafe Casserole

- 1 bag hash browns
- 1 onion
- 1 green pepper
- 1 box mushrooms
- 1 tomato
- 1/2 lb. deli turkey (cut in pieces)
- 1 lb. bacon (fried and cut in pieces)
- 2-3 cups cheese (Monterey Jack, Colby, Cheddar)

Place thawed hash browns in the bottom of a 9 x 13 pan. Saute onion, green pepper, and mushrooms. Place the meat and tomato on top of the potatoes. Then onion, green pepper and mushrooms. Top with cheese. Bake at 350 degrees for one hour.

Joanna Gum, Clear Lake, SD

Please send your favorite dairy 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 2021. All entries must include your name, mailing address, telephone number and cooperative name.

# Three Ways to Save Energy Outdoors



**Pat Keegan**

Collaborative Efficiency

**Whatever you choose, make sure it is rated for the size of the space you are cooling.**

Pat Keegan and Brad Thiessen of Collaborative Efficiency write on energy efficiency topics for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives. From growing suburbs to remote farming communities, electric co-ops serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56 percent of the nation's landscape. For additional energy tips and information on Collaborative Efficiency visit: [www.collaborativeefficiency.com/energytips](http://www.collaborativeefficiency.com/energytips).

**Dear Pat and Brad: During summertime, the deck becomes our kitchen, and my wife and I spend most of our free time in the backyard. We've invested a lot of time and effort making the interior of our home more energy efficient, but we're wondering if there are ways we can save energy outdoors as well. – Josh**

Dear Josh: The most common way to save energy during summer months is lowering your cooling costs indoors. Since you and your wife are spending a lot of time outdoors, you can certainly save energy and money by reducing your air conditioning use inside. Setting the thermostat just a few degrees higher can make quite a difference. But to answer your main question, yes - there are ways to save energy outdoors. Here are three:

## Pumps and Maintenance

Many of us have one or more pumps that service our yard or reside on our property. Pumps can supply water for a swimming pool, your lawn and garden, or your septic system or well. It's easy to let maintenance slip, which cuts the pump's efficiency and shortens its life.

Maintaining pumps involves cleaning the filters or checking oil and belts. If you have multiple pumps and need to hire a professional for assistance, try to do all the maintenance at once to reduce the overall cost. You may also want to consider replacing older pumps with energy efficient ENERGY STAR®-rated ones before they break down. While you're at it, check for leaks in the water lines, which make your pumps work harder and longer.

## Outdoor Lighting

If you have security lighting, there's a good chance you can save a little energy. Some security lights can be 500 to 1000 watts. That's the equivalent of 40 to 80 indoor LED bulbs - quite a lot of energy! Adding timers, motion sensors and light sensors can reduce your bulb energy use. Plus, when you use your lights less often, your neighbors may appreciate a little less light pollution!

Switching to LEDs is another great strategy. Solar lights are also a good way to light walkways, a water feature or your deck - without having to buy any electricity at all.

## Grilling

Using your oven can raise your kitchen's temperature up to 10 degrees, increasing the need for running your air conditioner, so grilling outdoors is a great way to save energy. If you like to barbecue or grill most of your meals, you may want to consider the fuel you use. If natural gas is available, it's usually much less expensive than propane. Natural gas is also convenient because you don't have to refill any tanks like you would with propane. On the downside, if you don't already have gas lines running to your patio or deck, the cost of installing them can be prohibitive.

Other fuel types like charcoal briquettes or wood take more preparation and can be fussy to work with, and charcoal grills emit three times as much carbon as gas grills.

Whichever fuel type you choose for your grill, you can save energy by barbecuing (keeping the lid closed during cooking) rather than grilling (cooking with the lid off at higher heat).

Hopefully these ideas will help you enjoy your outdoor living space this summer - and help you save energy!



Grilling outdoors is an excellent way to save energy.

# Cole Sonne's YouTube Channel Makes Farm Life Look Like a Visit to Disneyland

**Billy Gibson**

billy.gibson@sdrea.coop

Every day on the farm is a new adventure for Cole Sonne. While many 20-somethings contemplate leaving their family homesteads in search of a more urbane and sophisticated lifestyle, Sonne has no intention of giving up the farming life.

His enthusiasm for agriculture is in his blood and in his soul. But it's also all over the internet.

There is perhaps no more effective web-based advocate for South Dakota agriculture than Sonne, as evidenced by his audience of more than 145,000 YouTube subscribers. Sonne's 250 video posts have received over 26 million views since he created his YouTube channel two years ago.

After earning a degree in agronomy from South Dakota State University, Sonne returned to the family farm near Mount



Cole and his father Brian exchange some friendly sniping on the channel.

Vernon and it wasn't long before he had a notion to let the world see how fun and adventurous farming can be.

He saw that some ag-based channels created by young farmers such as Minnesota Millennial Farmer and Farm Life SD were growing in popularity, so he figured he'd take a shot at posting videos of all the wild and sometimes wacky situations that can emerge during a typical day.

"It's really informational and entertaining at the same time," said Sonne, a fourth



Fourth generation farmer Cole Sonne has amassed more than 145,000 YouTube subscribers.

generation farmer. "I think it's important to teach people who have never done this what farm life is really like.

The genesis of the channel came after he bought a drone and started taking aerial shots of raking hay and feeding cattle, but he didn't know what to do with the footage. He started posting his videos and then thought about capturing some of

the dialogue that takes place between him and his father, Brian, and other family members. The animals, machinery, chores and weather conditions never fail to create intriguing scenarios that keep fans tuned in.

Sonne was surprised when the viewer count started to skyrocket.

"It just took off right away," he said. "I call it ag advocacy. We just show people what we do from day to day and try to make it as fun as possible.

Much of the witty repartee is exchanged between Sonne and his often exasperated father. As Sonne had his camera rolling and capturing a farm task that wasn't going well recently, Brian grumbled, "To me this is embarrassing. To you it's good footage."

The conversation in that episode ran the gamut from Halle Berry to woodpeckers to classic Saturday Night Live skits as the

duo went from gathering hay to scraping manure. Sonne says the near constant laughing, joking and friendly sniping keep things light-hearted as they take care of their business.

Asked which of his videos has received the greatest amount of attention, Sonne is quick with his response.

"A video we did last April got more than one million hits," he said. "There was an approach to a field that was holding back water and we had to dig it out and release the water and put in a culvert. When we pulled the last grab of dirt that was holding a year's worth of water, the water just came gushing through. People seemed to really like seeing that large volume of water. A lot of what's going to get the attention is the thumbnail picture. If you can get the perfect thumbnail, people will click on it."

Apparently, the video titles also help to attract eyeballs. Some recent titles include: "Cole got splattered with poo," "Watch out - angry calf hits Brian and Jeff," "We saved him - moments from the end."

As for the time and dedication it takes to keep content fresh for thousands of eager viewers, Sonne said he considers it just another item on a lengthy list of tasks that every farmer has.

"It usually takes a couple of hours to get the videos done," he said. "I'll farm all day, come home and start editing and work til late at night. That's what most farmers do anyway. You have to balance things out."



The AgritourismSD program blends the state's top two economic drivers: agriculture and tourism. Photos provided by SD Tourism.

# AGRITOURISM

## New Program Blends South Dakota's Top Two Economic Drivers

Billy Gibson

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Amy Kruse already had a baby before she actually became a mother. That baby was proudly named Circle View Guest Ranch. That's the bed and breakfast establishment in Interior run by Amy and her husband, Philip.

"Before I had three kids, this was my baby," Kruse said on a recent Thursday afternoon while taking a break from getting the nearly 3,000-acre ranch spiffed up for weekend visitors and the busy travel season. "I got out of college and we got married and we came here 18 years ago. It's a lot of work to operate the ranch and make things run to give our guests a memorable experience, but it's worth it to see them enjoy themselves and have a great time in South Dakota."

While Kruse has long been engaged in her own form of what's called agritourism, she's an enthusiastic supporter of a new initiative designed to promote the accelerated growth of more agritourism enterprises across the state.

In 2017, the South Dakota Agritourism Work Group was formed to create an intensive program aimed at providing education, training and various support services to agribusiness owners interested in expanding their operations to include recreational, entertainment, educational, hospitality, cultural, on-farm sales and other activities for the general public. As tourism and agriculture are the two most significant business sectors in the state, organizers felt it only made sense to combine the two.

Spearheaded by South Dakota State University Extension and the state Office of Tourism, other local, state and federal agencies and entities joined in the effort. A partial list of participating organizations includes the Bed and Breakfast Innkeepers of South

Dakota, Experience Sioux Falls, Southeast Technical Institute, the South Dakota Specialty Producers Association, the South Dakota Value Added Ag Development Center and others.

According to Program Coordinator Stacy Hadrick of SDSU, AgritourismSD kicks off this month and consists of eight two-day, in-person workshops taking place over the course of 24 months where instructors provide the basic skills and tools that have been demonstrated to help increase the chances of success. The curriculum includes field visits to venues that already have a sustained track record of running thriving agritourism businesses.

The Circle View Guest Ranch, a member of West River Electric Association, is one of those venues. During the program's second year, the facility is slated to serve as a case study on how to launch and grow an agritourism operation and participants can have direct personal conversations with operators who will offer solid advice on every aspect of their business. Kruse said she looks forward to sharing some of the approaches and strategies that she and Philip have used to keep visitors coming to the ranch. The program, which kicks off this month, is designed to educate and train those associated with the ag industry on how to start, manage and operate an agritourism enterprise.

"This is such an excellent time to do something like this because things are opening up and people are ready to travel and escape the cities, get off the interstate and explore the back roads and see the tremendous beauty of our state," Kruse said. "They're craving an authentic experience after being shut down for so long."

Kruse added that she is eager to coach and encourage the group, but she also plans to shoot straight. That means giving the partici-



pants a healthy dose of unvarnished reality so they'll have a clear understanding of the commitment required.

"I think it's a wonderful program for our state. We're going to show them how we make things work with the overnight facilities and with the animals and their interactions with our guests," she said. "The business pretty much runs our lives for seven to eight months out of the year, and if you do it right it's all-consuming. But it's also extremely rewarding to see families have a terrific time bonding with each other, bonding with the natural landscape and the animals. It can be extremely rewarding for our guests and for our family as we're always making new friends. But you have to be committed."

Amy and her husband operate 12 guest rooms and three cabins with an average of 30 guests at any given time from April through September. She explained the cattle ranch and the bed-and-breakfast are separate businesses all set on 2,800 acres of land that includes prairie terrain in addition to Badlands formations, a river valley, rock beds, rolling hills, grazing pastures and tree groves.

For more effective statewide coordination, the AgritourismSD program organizers have developed a hub system, selecting the communities of Wall, Faulkton and Timber Lake to serve as regional organization centers. Participating business owners work through these hubs and meet six times over two years to share ideas and

discuss strategies for attracting visitors to their communities.

Robin Bickel is the hub coach for the Timber Lake area. A member of Moreau-Grand Electric Cooperative, Bickel runs a Red Angus cattle ranch in Firesteel that has been in the family for four generations. She said her interest in getting involved was to pursue potential economic growth not only for her ranch but for the entire area as well. She also sees agritourism as an incentive to both keep and attract young families to rural communities.

"If working ranches can find ways to expand and diversify their businesses, it may present opportunities for those young people who have left to come back to the family farm and be able to generate enough revenue to sustain multiple families on one place," she said.

Aside from the potential for added revenue, Bickel said she is eager to share with the rest of the world the wonders of rural life and the rural lifestyle she experiences each day.

"I think there's an increased interest people have about where their food and fiber come from, and we need to find a way to make that connection between the producer and consumer," she said. "We have such a rich history and so many natural resources to share. It's insane how many people can't see the sky full of stars at night where they live and can't see the prairie grass waving in the wind and



rolling across a hillside. There are people interested in things we take for granted. There are people in Nebraska that have a prairie chicken dance tour where people actually pay to see the chickens. I think there are many opportunities for our state if we commit ourselves and do it right."

For more information on the program, contact Jacey Ellsworth, Industry Outreach and Development Representative, at 605-773-3301 or [Jacey.Ellsworth@TravelSouthDakota.com](mailto:Jacey.Ellsworth@TravelSouthDakota.com).

## Practice Safety When DIY-ing

These days many of us are spending more time at home and finding new, creative ways to enhance our living space. Tackling do-it-yourself (DIY) projects for the home can be fun and cost-effective, so why not roll up those sleeves and get started! Whether you're painting the front door with a fresh hue or finally upgrading those patio lights, successfully completing a DIY home project is incredibly satisfying. But many of these projects do not come without risks. Here are a few safety tips to keep in mind as you get to work.

- Start by selecting a designated work area. The amount of space you'll need will depend on the size and scope of your project, but make sure you have adequate lighting and ventilation (if necessary). Required tools and equipment should be located in your workspace and organized for easy access.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE) is your friend. We know you're a pro but investing a few bucks in PPE is essential for most home projects. Stock up on safety goggles, dust masks, ear plugs (or noise reduction ear protectors), gloves and any other kind of protection you'll need for your project. Remember to wear appropriate clothing and shoes.
- Work slowly and clean as you go. When you rush through a DIY project, you'll likely end up with less desirable results than you intended, or worse, you could make a costly or dangerous mistake. Take your time and remember that you are in control of the project. You should also clean as you go to ensure a safer workspace. Pick up any scrap materials, tools that aren't in use and any tripping hazards.
- Be cautious with power tools. Annually, 8% of electrocutions in the U.S. are attributed to improper use of power tools.

The Electrical Safety Foundation International offers the following safety tips:

- ✓ Use ground fault circuit interrupters (GFCIs) with every power tool to protect against electrical shock.
- ✓ Never use power tools near live electrical wires or water pipes.
- ✓ Use extreme caution when cutting or drilling into walls where electrical wires or water pipes could be accidentally touched or penetrated.
- ✓ If a power tool trips a safety device while in use, take the tool to a manufacturer-authorized repair center for service.
- ✓ Do not use power tools without the proper guards.
- ✓ When using a wet-dry vacuum cleaner or a pressure washer, be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions to avoid electrical shock.

Remember, you should only tackle DIY home projects within your skill and comfort level. For projects that require extensive electrical work, we strongly recommend you hire a licensed, qualified electrician for assistance.

## Energy Efficiency Tip of the Month

Avoid placing items like lamps and televisions near your thermostat.

The thermostat senses heat from these appliances, which can cause your air conditioner to run longer than necessary.

Source:  
[www.energy.gov](http://www.energy.gov)





Join Us

**Connect Con**  
 ★ A Youth Leadership  
 Experience  
 Spearfish, S.D.

July 26-29  
 2021

## Summer Fun

Attention high school students! If your parent or guardian is an active member-owner of Black Hills Electric Cooperative, you have a chance to take an all-expenses-paid trip to the beautiful Black Hills this summer for a youth leadership event. If chosen, you will travel with other students from electric cooperatives throughout the state and take part in South Dakota's Connect Con: A Youth Leadership Experience. Participants will stay on campus at Black Hills State University in Spearfish, S.D., on July 26-29, and have the opportunity to sightsee, meet new friends and gain valuable leadership skills while taking part in our youth leadership activities. They will also be able to tour a local electric co-op and learn about "The Story Behind the Switch" and see how electricity is directed into their homes.

### 2021 Connect Con: A Youth Leadership Experience

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent/Guardian's Names: \_\_\_\_\_  
 School: \_\_\_\_\_ School Grade in Fall of 2021: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Male or Female: \_\_\_\_\_ T-Shirt Size: \_\_\_\_\_

### Essay Question:

Please submit a 300-500 word essay on the following topic: **The Bylaws of Black Hills Electric Cooperative state that the organization must hold an Annual Meeting each year. Over the years, the cooperative has had a tough time getting younger members to attend. Why do you think this is, and what ideas would you incorporate to get younger members to attend?**

**BLACK HILLS ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE**  
 c/o MICHELLE FISCHER  
 PO BOX 792  
 CUSTER, SD 57730

Please submit ALL  
 paperwork by Friday, May 7th.

Questions? Contact Michelle Fischer: michellef@bhec.coop

# Rural POWER

## Leadership Program Aimed at Boosting Co-op Leadership

Intentional listening is a skill Billie Sutton has honed over the course of his adult life. And as he leaned into recent conversations with electric cooperative leaders across the state, the former legislator from Burke started noticing a trend.

He picked up on a common refrain: cooperatives are having a hard time finding qualified candidates to run for positions on their governing boards.

As not-for-profit organizations, electric cooperatives don't have pockets deep enough to dangle large compensation packages in front of potential board candidates. This reality tends to narrow the field of interested parties.

After hearing this a few too many times, Sutton decided to take action and do something about it. He began working to develop a leadership program through his non-profit Billie Sutton Leadership Institute to encourage and inspire rural co-op members to consider campaigning for a board position.

The new year-long leadership development program is called "Rural POWER: Powering Opportunities While Energizing Rural." It will be held alongside the third leadership class offered by the Institute. The first program in 2019 attracted more than 100 applicants to fill 12 spots. Last year's class drew roughly 70 applicants but was hampered by the impact of the pandemic.

Sutton surmised that the high interest level in the Institute's first two programs stems from a desire to return to a more community-focused style of leadership and steer away from a brand of politics that appears to be growing more openly hostile.

His supposition comes from the comments he heard not only during his six years serving in the state senate but also from voters during his gubernatorial campaign three years ago in which he received more than 167,000 votes while losing the race to Gov. Kristi Noem.



Billie Sutton and his wife, Kelsea (foreground) are shown with the Institute's inaugural class of rural leaders.

"I think people were excited about a new style of leadership I brought to the table that's focused on service, finding common ground, overcoming adversity and getting things done on behalf of the people. I think people are tired of politics as usual," he said.

For the Institute's inaugural class, applicants ranged in age from 18 to 60 and represented a plethora of professional backgrounds: health care, teaching, education administration, local elected officials, ranchers and more. Sutton said he hopes the new program will also attract interest from a diverse set of applicants.

Rural POWER will kick off this summer and is sponsored by the South Dakota Farmers Union. Participants will engage in educational leadership training opportunities emphasizing community building and

**Participants will engage in educational leadership training opportunities emphasizing community building and serving neighbors, while learning from cooperative leaders.**

serving neighbors, while learning from cooperative leaders who have demonstrated their commitment to rural development. They will gain the knowledge and enthusiasm to re-imagine and re-energize rural South Dakota, Sutton said.



Rural POWER aims to provide leadership training that will help re-invent and re-energize rural South Dakota.

The program has an advocate in Melissa Maher, general manager at Moreau-Grand Electric based in Timber Lake. Maher notes that while most of the state's electric co-ops qualify as "rural," that doesn't mean they are merely small-time mom-and-pop operations. For instance, Moreau-Grand Electric is a member-owned business with more than \$47 million in assets.

Maher said it's important that electric co-ops be run by managers and board members dedicated to the task at hand. Board directors are democratically elected by the members in their respective districts and charged with the responsibility of developing the policies that guide the future of the co-op. They also have certain legal, fiduciary and industry-related issues they must deal with during the course of carrying out their duties.

"These are positions of responsibility and leadership, and you need qualified people because they're making big decisions," Maher said, adding that serving on a co-op board requires considerable time and attention. "If someone is interested in being nominated, you have to be up front and honest about that fact. That's one of the first things people ask, and the honest answer is that it's a commitment."

Those who succeed in meeting their board responsibilities recognize and appreciate the fact they're contributing to the advancement of their entire service area by providing an essential commodity. Maher said it also takes a certain type of personality and temperament to be a successful board member.

"They have to learn protocol and there can be situations like dealing with personnel issues where they have to be discreet. They have to be the type of person who can agree to disagree and walk away and not let it get to them," Maher said. "They have to study up on the issues. We send out information a week ahead of time so that the board members can brush up on things and we can have a productive conversation. They need to care enough to be engaged and prepared."

Suzie Jones Pranger serves as executive director of the Institute. Today, Jones Pranger is an attorney living in rural Hartford, but she grew up on her family's farm in Burke and remembers her grandfather's involvement in her local co-op, Rosebud Electric.

"Even as a kid, I knew our power came from the local co-op, and I knew my family had a legacy of service to the co-op and our neighbors through my Grandpa's longtime position on the board," she said. "But what I never considered growing up is the need for subsequent generations to become active and continue to power our rural communities and our South Dakota way of life. Rural POWER will help build a pipeline of rural leaders ready to step up and take on leadership positions."

Kevin Mikkelsen, general manager of Rosebud Electric, is also supportive of the program and believes there is a lot of potential in the leadership program, especially when it comes to drawing some younger participants.

"I'm hoping the program sheds some light



on how cooperatives function and how they work on behalf of all the member-owners," he said. "All around the state, we really need to see some younger folks get involved and provide a new perspective and help us discover new and more effective ways to carry out our mission as co-ops, whether it's electric co-ops or ag-based co-ops."

Visit [suttonleadership.org/rural-power](http://suttonleadership.org/rural-power) to learn more about the program or to apply.

# South Dakota Families Struggle to Stay Connected in Post-Pandemic Times

**Billy Gibson**

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Some people can pinpoint the positive in just about any predicament...even a global pandemic. Lynell Rice Brinkworth considers herself the sort of person who places a premium on optimism.

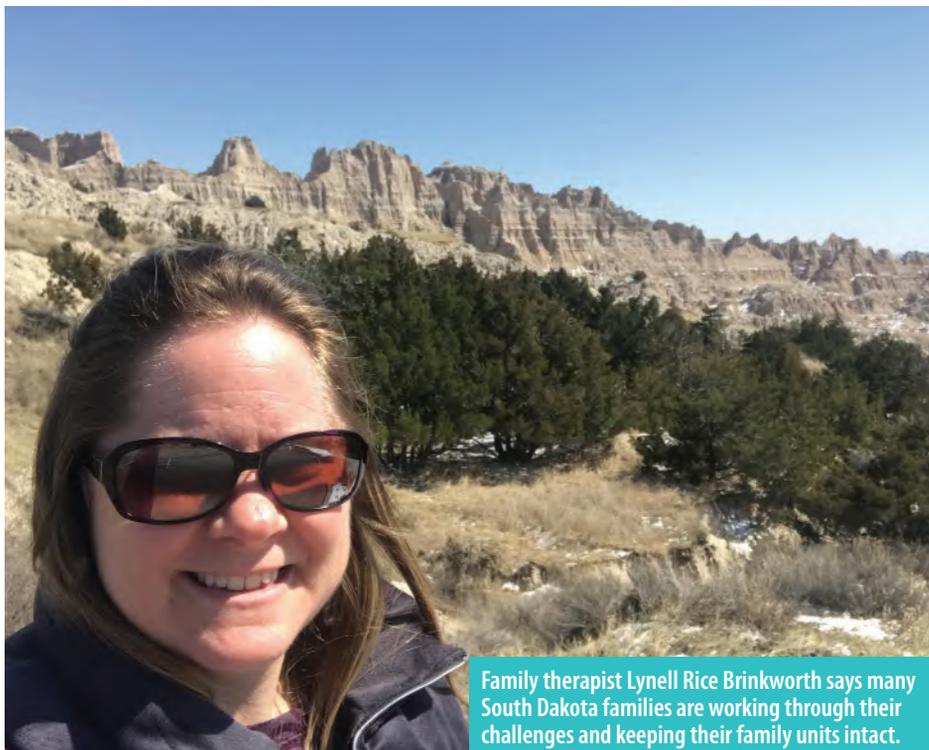
While social scientists continue to crunch the numbers, analyze the data and draw conclusions about the pandemic's impact on families across the country, Brinkworth has witnessed the struggles families have faced but also sees signs of hope.

Brinkworth is a licensed family therapist practicing in the Rapid City area and also serves as president of the state's Board of Examiners for Counselor and Marriage and Family Therapists. Though she acknowledges there was a lot of negative consequences caused by the coronavirus that swept across the globe last year, Brinkworth is quick to emphasize many South Dakota families emerged stronger, more resilient and more committed than before.

Amid the chaos that ensued when it became clear the coronavirus would be more than a two-week span of minor inconvenience, experts began reporting a higher incidence of family dysfunction brought on by the stress of job loss, financial difficulties, online learning, disruption of daily routines, restricted travel, isolation from extended family members and other pressures.

Across the continents, there were reports of increases in child abuse, spousal abuse and domestic violence as families were forced to lock down for the long term and curtail their in-person social interactions. Consequently, experts predicted an enormous upturn in the divorce rate, which would seem to be an inevitable outcome of such a difficult predicament.

While there are some limited studies that indicate the number of couples seeking divorce did actually increase, a study of



Family therapist Lynell Rice Brinkworth says many South Dakota families are working through their challenges and keeping their family units intact.

five states by Bowling Green State University showed divorces actually decreased by 35 percent through the first half of 2020 compared to the previous year. That study also indicated that the marriage rate in those states continued to drop by about 30 percent, which researchers noted continued a pre-pandemic trend among Millennials who have taken a more cautious approach to the institution of matrimony and also reflected the fact that lockdowns limited the number of wedding ceremonies taking place.

For her part, Brinkworth reports that during the pandemic she saw more couples succeed in saving their marriages than failing to hold their relationships together.

"By the time couples come to me there's usually something boiling under the surface, not just over the past three months but maybe for the past three years," she said. "During the stress of the pandemic we saw all of that coming up to the surface and a lot of people reached their boiling point. But the majority of

the couples I've seen were able to work through their problems."

Similar to medical workers who have been overwhelmed addressing the physical needs of COVID-19 patients for more than a year, Brinkworth and her colleagues have been busy helping to restore relationships and working with individuals to sort through issues related to anxiety, grief, financial struggles and more.

But in keeping with her sunny demeanor, Brinkworth brings out the bright spots. She explains that being confined in close quarters with other family members presented an opportunity for individuals to put down their electronic devices and interact on a more intimate level with loved ones. She said families were able to slow the frenetic pace of their daily lives and "step back from the rat race."

"I heard parents say that they haven't had a family dinner together in years because of their busy lives with work and school and sports and other activities that happen every day," she said. "Others had the

opportunity to get out and do things they don't normally do, such as get outdoors and exercise. I drive past a trail head on my way in to the office and I saw more people there than I ever had before."

In working with her patients to achieve favorable outcomes, Brinkworth said she didn't want to minimize or ignore the real difficulties families have experienced over the past 12 to 14 months. The stress, she said, resulted in a variety of problems for people such as less quality sleep, changes in dietary habits, drug and alcohol consumption, grief from the loss of loved ones, depression, internal family conflict and other challenges.

Brinkworth declined to express an opinion as to whether the state should have locked down in response to the coronavirus, but she believes the citizens of South Dakota will benefit from a gradual return

to normalcy. One particular group that should see a tremendous benefit, she said, is students. Even as nearly 2,000 South Dakotans lost their lives to the disease, many teenagers not only had to deal with the loss of a loved one but also had to miss traditional rites of passage such as graduation ceremonies, religious ceremonies, birthday parties, weddings, family vacations and other milestone events.

"It has been really hard on children and students. For a lot of kids, not being able to go to school was hard on both the parents and students. For many of them, school is their safety zone where teachers and instructors can keep their eyes on them," she said.

"There's been a big concern over children. Some kids have done well with the on-line learning and the isolation but most that I've talked to said it just wasn't their thing.

They couldn't wait to get back to school and get back into their social circles and be with their classmates. When the sports seasons were canceled, that was a big thing for kids who get a lot of satisfaction and have a lot of their self-esteem, confidence and identity tied into their participation in sports."

The impact of COVID-19 on family relationships will take a while to fully resolve, but Brinkworth is hopeful that the pandemic has brought some clarity in our interactions with, and appreciation for, our family members and friends.

"We get swept up in technology and social media and the internet," she said. "But I really think the trauma we've all experienced through this event will cause us to think about putting down our devices and spending more time really getting to know one another better."

*Sensible Solutions for Our Energy Future*

South Dakota's electric cooperatives support reasonable strategies for our energy future that make sense for our members:

- Renewable energy solutions that are both productive and practical
- Rate structures that take affordability into account
- Balanced strategies centered on the best interests of co-op consumers
- Technology-based policies that promote economic development

## DOE Announces \$24.5 M Investment in Grid

America's economy, national security and even the health and safety of our citizens depend on the reliable delivery of electricity. The U.S. power grid is an engineering marvel with 9,200 generating units and more than 1 million megawatts of generating capacity connected to 600,000 miles of transmission lines.

The grid is an ecosystem of asset owners, manufacturers, service providers, and officials at federal, state and local levels, all working together to run one of the most reliable systems in the world.

The U.S. Department of Energy recently announced \$24.5 million for manufacturing innovation to build a clean and resilient grid. The Office of Electricity (OE) is currently working to strengthen, transform, and improve energy infrastructure to ensure access to reliable, secure, and clean sources of energy.

The country's grid is aging and is being pushed to do more than it was originally designed to do. Modernizing the grid to make it "smarter" and stronger through the use of cutting-edge technologies, equipment, and controls that communicate and work together to deliver electricity more reliably and efficiently can reduce the frequency and duration of power outages, reduce storm impacts, and restore service faster when outages occur.

Consumers can better manage their own energy consumption and costs because they have easier access to their own data. Utilities also benefit from a modernized grid, including improved security, reduced peak loads, increased integration of renewables and lower operational costs.

**Note:** Please make sure to call ahead to verify the event is still being held.

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**April 22-May 2**

Beauty & the Beast, Sioux Empire Community Theatre, Sioux Falls, SD  
605-367-6000

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**April 23-24**

Junkin' Market Days, W.H. Lyon Fairgrounds Expo Building, Sioux Falls, SD  
605-941-4958

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**April 24**

Party for the Planet, Great Plains Zoo, Sioux Falls, SD  
605-367-7003

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**April 30-May 2, May 6-8**

Radium Girls, Pierre Players Community Theatre, Pierre, SD  
605-224-7826

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**May 8**

Davis Flea Market & Artisan Fair, Main Street, Davis, SD  
605-940-0069

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**May 8**

Wells Fargo Cinco de Mayo Fiesta, Falls Park, Sioux Falls, SD  
605-271-0468

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**May 8 NEW DATE**

Winefest Renaissance, Boys & Girls Club of Aberdeen Area, Aberdeen, SD  
605-225-8714

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**May 9**

Mother's Day Tours, Historic Adams House & Days of '76 Museum, Deadwood, SD  
605-578-37241

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**May 13**

Vermilion-Area Farmers Market - Plant Sale, High & Cherry Streets, Vermilion, SD  
605-659-3399

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State Parks Open House & Free Fishing Weekend, May 21-23, 2021

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**May 15**

Red Dirt Music Festival featuring Casey Donahew, Ian Munsick and Randy Burghardt Mountain Grand, Deadwood, SD  
605-559-0386

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**May 21-23**

Annual Sound of Silence Tesla Rally, Downtown, Custer, SD  
605-673-2244

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**May 21-23**

State Parks Open House & Free Fishing Weekend, All State Parks & Recreation Areas, SD  
605-773-3391

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**May 22**

Frühlingsfest & Spring Market, Main Street, Rapid City, SD  
605-716-7979

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**May 22**

La Framboise Island Bike Race, Steamboat Park, Pierre, SD  
605-224-7054

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**May 31**

PPQG 25th Annual Quilt Show, Harding County REC Center, Buffalo, SD  
605-641-5591

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**June 3-6**

Wheel Jam, South Dakota State Fairgrounds, Huron, SD  
605-353-7340

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**June 4-5**

State BBQ Championships, South Dakota State Fairgrounds, Huron, SD  
605-353-7354

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**June 4-6**

Black Hills Blues Stomp & Swamp Romp, Rush No More RV Resort & Campground, Sturgis, SD  
605-347-2916

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**June 4-6**

Lake Andes Fish Days, City-wide, Lake Andes, SD  
605-487-7694

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**June 5-6**

18th Annual Wessington Springs Foothills Rodeo, Wessington Springs Rodeo Grounds, Wessington Springs, SD  
605-770-5720

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**June 19-20**

13th Annual Sculpture in the Hills Show & Sale Event, Main Street, Hill City, SD  
605-574-2810

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**June 25-27**

Main Street Arts & Crafts Festival, Centennial Park, Hot Springs, SD  
605-440-1834

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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.