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Fire safety begins with being proactive, but all McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) service trucks are equipped with items necessary to help extinguish or contain small fires. Each one carries a fire extinguisher, water canister and fire flaps, such as the one held by MEC Engineering Manager Lucas Schaaf.

Fire planning and preparedness

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL

Wildfires have struck fear in the heart of humankind for thousands of years. In today's world, wildfires seem to be in the news regularly. They can occur almost anywhere, any time of the year.

They're deadly. And expensive.

Even today, wildfires strike a spark of fear.

A wildfire could extend even beyond its devastating human and environmental impacts. For electric utilities, it could mean the inability to provide critical electric service to first responders and the infrastructure providing the ability to save lives, homes and livelihoods.

In some ways, McLean Electric Cooperative's (MEC)

location in the heart of the Northern Plains helps lessen the potential impact of wildfires. Eight fire districts manned by well-trained volunteers from throughout McLean County, as well as neighboring fire districts in adjacent counties, can respond to wildfires, MEC General Manager/CEO Mark Doyle described.

The county has an extensive system of paved and gravel township and county roads, making access more readily available compared to other parts of North Dakota or western states.

The topography also benefits first responders and MEC lineworkers throughout many areas of McLean County. There aren't miles of steep mountains and

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rocky terrain to navigate.

While the county has some less populated areas, it's not as remote and rugged as some parts of the state.

But that doesn't mean MEC is taking the potential for wildfires lightly.

On the contrary.

MEC adopted a wildfire mitigation plan in 2025, even prior to the state of North Dakota enacting legislation advising electric utilities to develop such plans and directing how they're to be implemented and reported.

Perhaps better described as a wildfire prevention and preparedness plan, it addresses public safety, workforce and member-owner safety, and reduces the cooperative's liability in the event its infrastructure is involved in a fire, Doyle described.

A major step in helping prevent wildfires is the cooperative's long-standing effort to convert its overhead power lines to underground electric cable, MEC Engineering Manager Lucas Schaaf added.

MEC has identified priority areas where converting to underground line is important for service upgrades and maintenance when economically feasible. Each year, the cooperative strives to upgrade portions of its system through underground installation.

"It's probably our best and most efficient solution (to wildfires) possible. That's our best defense," Schaaf described.

Underground cable reduces the amount of overhead power poles and lines exposed to wind, ice and lightning, while reducing the potential for trees falling into lines or breaking poles and falling lines.

In addition, underground cable isn't susceptible to being struck by equipment or vehicles, which can also cause fires.

MEC has about 1,200 miles of overhead power lines and about 500 miles of underground line. Those numbers are narrowing, though, as the cooperative continues working toward the goal of fewer exposed overhead lines and poles. The cost of converting to underground is the largest limiting factor, Schaaf explained, which is why priority areas are identified and completed first.

However, those same geological factors that make MEC's service area less susceptible to wildfire also make installing underground cable more affordable and easier. While there are wetlands and rocks, the terrain is generally conducive to burying underground.

Technology is also playing a new role in reducing fire potential. MEC is working toward converting to modern dielectric reclosures on its breakers, Schaaf described.

The new electronic technology is programmable and responsive, he continued, and there is no physical electrical spark when opened, unlike older breakers. The reclosures can also be controlled remotely, potentially

Members can help reduce fire risk

McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) member-owners, both landowners or homeowners, can play a significant role in helping reduce the potential for electrical-related fires.

It begins with proper vegetation management, MEC General Manager/CEO Mark Doyle and Operations Manager Keith Thelen stressed.

"Overall, it's vegetation management around your property," Doyle added.

The simple measures do more than improve the aesthetics of one's yard and property or make it easier to work:

- Keep grass trimmed around power poles and electrical cabinets in the yard.
- Keep any trees located near power poles trimmed. Better yet, don't plant trees that can grow to the height of power poles and lines in the vicinity. "Be very cognizant of where you plant and how big it can get," Thelen advised. MEC has guidelines for proper planting distances of shrubs and trees based on height. North Dakota State University Extension Service also has information regarding mature height of trees and shrubs grown in North Dakota. Check with retail greenhouses, informational tags on trees,

and soil conservation districts when considering trees or shrubs for planting if near power lines and poles.

- Use caution with campfires, when using farm burn pits and when conducting any controlled burn. Have water and equipment available when burning and never leave a smoldering fire. Check any fire frequently, even if it's believed to have been extinguished.
- Keep outside ground covers to an electrical service covered and in place. Any outside outlets should be waterproof, covered and rated for outdoor use.
- Use caution when operating any equipment near power lines, power poles and electrical cabinets. "Be aware of overhead line clearance,"

Doyle suggested.

Even a smoldering spark from a piece of metal contacting a line can cause a fire and it can go unnoticed at the time of the incident. For example, a small grass fire in MEC's service area started when a piece of farm equipment snagged a power pole in the spring of 2026. It caused a spark and resulted in a small fire. It was quickly extinguished, but the cooperative lost two poles in the incident. ■

reducing lineworker risk.

Historically, MEC hasn't dealt with many wildfires impacting its infrastructure or any major infrastructure wildfire-related damages. Typically, wildfires involving electric lines in the MEC service area have involved situations where equipment or vehicles struck poles or became entangled in power lines when equipment height interferes with lines, Schaaf described.

"So far, McLean Electric hasn't had major line losses from wild or grass fires, other than non-electrical causes," Schaaf concluded.

Yet that doesn't mean fire isn't on the radar for MEC.

"Wildfires have always been a concern," Doyle stressed. And line crews are prepared if a fire starts while they're afield or if they come across a small fire.

"We have always been cognizant of preventing a

fire," he added. For example, line crews avoid driving or parking in tall grass when accessing power lines and other infrastructure.

MEC is also proactive in its tree-trimming program, identifying areas where trees could potentially cause problems and working with contracting specialists to trim problematic trees, Operations Manager Keith Thelen described.

Lineworkers also conduct routine line maintenance inspections for potential problems, patrol line and conduct pole testing and change-outs if necessary, Thelen added.

Each MEC field truck is equipped with fire extinguishers, a water tank and fire flap to fight a small fire, as well. ■

Developing a wildfire plan

Here is a look at Senate Bill 2339, the 2025 legislation addressing electric utilities and wildfire mitigation plans.

While the law, which became effective Aug. 1, 2025, doesn't require qualifying utilities (public and municipal utilities, electric cooperatives, joint agencies and transmission providers) to establish wildfire mitigation plans, it limits the liability for those with plans in place in the event of a wildfire. It also established wildfire plan criteria.

Wildfire plans must identify:

- Areas within the utility's service territory that may have heightened fire risks.
- Procedures, standards and timeframes the utility will use to operate and inspect infrastructure affected by hazardous vegetation.
- Procedures and standards to be used to conduct vegetation management.
- Necessary modifications or upgrades to reduce wildfire risk and the risk to its electric facilities.
- Procedures to restore electricity in the event of a fire.
- Procedures for disconnecting lines in the event of a fire, factoring in access and safety to the impacted line, potential fire risk balanced with need for continued electrical supply, and impact to public safety, first responders, and health and communication infrastructure.
- How the utility will conduct community outreach and public wildfire awareness.

In addition, other requirements include:

- Cost estimate of wildfire plan implementation.
- Electric cooperative board of directors can review the plan and when approved, must publish it on their website within 30 days.
- Plans must be updated and approved every two years with annual reports submitted to its board of directors and published on its website.

The core of the law is that a utility's wildfire mitigation plan "constitutes a rebuttable presumption that the qualified utility exercised a reasonable standard of care."

Wildfires have been a longstanding concern, not just for the public, but for electric utilities, McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) General Manager/CEO Mark Doyle explained. The industry recognizes its role in the importance of providing electric energy, yet rising costs associated with wildfires to infrastructure as well as liability concerns continue elevating the issue. Having wildfire plans in place help protect the public and utility workers while protecting infrastructure and limiting liability.

MEC's wildfire mitigation plan is available on its website, mcleanelectric.com, clicking "My Cooperative" on the homepage and scrolling down to "Wildfire Mitigation Plan."

The six-page plan, working with guidelines and recommendations provided through the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, details how MEC addresses wildfire issues and concerns:

- Objectives
- Roles and responsibilities
- Risks and driving factors relating to design, construction, operation and maintenance
- Preventative strategies
- Workforce training
- Electric grid resiliency
- De-generation
- Community outreach and public awareness

MEC was proactive in developing its wildfire mitigation plan, Doyle described. Its plan was finalized and approved by MEC's board of directors in March 2025, prior to SB2339 becoming law.

It was re-approved without changes in January, Doyle added. ■

Welcoming new District 2 director



Hunter Andes

Hunter Andes, a Makoti native, grew up on his family farm in southeastern Mountrail County. His family has been involved with agriculture and the building of rural America since the 1730s. He now lives north of Emmet.

Andes attended Bismarck State College, where he earned an associate of applied science in engineering technology to be a land surveyor. Although he

will forever hold a love for land surveying, Andes felt the call to become an English teacher, so he extended his higher education.

"As time went on, everything seemed to fall into place," Andes said. "My wife and I are very thankful for the opportunities and good timing we've been blessed with along the way."

In 2024, Andes graduated from the University of North Dakota with a master's degree in teaching and leadership with the goal of someday becoming a principal. He started teaching English in Garrison in 2022. Prior to Garrison, he taught in White Shield and New Town, which he credits with giving him the experience he needed in the quest of becoming an effective educator.

Andes has been a director on the Makoti Threshers Association for nearly a decade and is also the president of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, rural Makoti. He is an avid J.I. Case collector and Studebaker/Packard fanatic. Much to his surprise, after conducting family research, he recently discovered he is a second cousin with the founder of Studebaker Corporation.

His greatest passion, however, is being chairman and founder of Friends of Wabek, a nonprofit he started to fully restore a rare country schoolhouse

in the ghost town of Wabek. He successfully raised nearly \$500,000 for its restoration and was able to prevent a data center from being built within a half mile of the state and national historic site. Andes is also a board member on the BLCG Foundation, an active volunteer at the Manitoba Threshermen's Reunion, and was the lead role in the 2025 Dickens Festival play. As of July 4, he is also a member of the Sons of the American Revolution, having proven five ancestors helped secure independence from Great Britain in the Revolutionary War.

From a young age, Andes said he has been fascinated by electric cooperatives and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who his grandfather was named after. Andes said he is extremely excited to serve on the board of McLean Electric Cooperative and carry on his family's century's long legacy of public service. ■



OPERATION ROUND UP GIVE A LITTLE, HELP A LOT

Even the smallest gifts can make a big difference.



McLean Electric's Operation Round Up program gives members a chance to round up their bill to the nearest dollar and turn pennies into powerful support for their community and local nonprofits. Join your neighbors in giving back, because when we come together, our change truly changes lives.



HOW TO VOTE

No matter how you choose to vote, North Dakota's voting process ensures you can cast your ballot.

North Dakotans have three options for casting their vote.

ABSENTEE VOTING

Voters are never mailed a ballot without first requesting one through an absentee ballot application.

Vote-by-mail counties mail voting-age residents absentee ballot applications.

In all other counties, the voter requests an absentee ballot application.

EARLY VOTING

Some communities offer early voting at certain dates and times prior to Election Day, so you can cast your vote in person when it is convenient. Once you vote at an early voting site, your voter record is updated.

When voting in person, the poll worker at the polling location will review your ID and will ask three questions as an acknowledgement you are eligible to vote in North Dakota.

1. Are you at least 18 years of age?
2. Are you a U.S. citizen?
3. Have you lived in North Dakota for the last 30 days?

ELECTION DAY AT THE POLLS

Vote on Election Day at a polling location in your precinct. Once you check in at a polling location, your voter record is updated to show you have voted.

When voting in person, the poll worker at the polling location will review your ID and will ask those three questions to ensure you are eligible to vote in North Dakota. ■

Source: N.D. secretary of state



The most important part of an electric cooperative is YOU! And just like upcoming elections across the country, your cooperative holds elections, too.

Electric cooperatives exist to meet the needs of their members. And members are the owners, too! That means electric cooperatives are owned and democratically controlled by their members – the people who use the electricity. So, attending your cooperative’s annual meeting and casting your vote matters!

Cooperatives operate on the principle of “one member, one vote.” So, each member of a cooperative has the same voting power. And as a member, you have a voice in how your co-op operates, by electing directors to represent you and making other important decisions during an annual meeting.

This local, member-driven structure is one reason why cooperatives have the highest consumer-satisfaction scores within the electric industry. Electric cooperatives, on average, outscore all other energy providers, according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index.

Electric cooperatives are built by and belong to the communities they serve. They are led by members from the community and are uniquely suited to meet local needs.

Cooperatives have strong ties to North Dakota’s history – and the state’s future. Rural electrification was born in the spirit of cooperation, and electric cooperatives play a vital role in developing the state today. ■

COOPERATIVES FOLLOW SEVEN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED PRINCIPLES:

Cooperatives around the world operate according to the same set of core principles and values, adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance.

These principles are a key reason why America’s electric cooperatives operate differently from other electric utilities, putting the needs of our members first.



VOLUNTARY AND OPEN MEMBERSHIP



DEMOCRATIC MEMBER CONTROL



MEMBERS' ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION



AUTONOMY AND INDEPENDENCE



EDUCATION, TRAINING AND INFORMATION



COOPERATION AMONG COOPERATIVES



CONCERN FOR COMMUNITY



Get your camera ready

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL

It's time to plan for the glorious days of summer and the coming year. Spending time at one's favorite McLean County lake. Family gatherings and the wonders of the outdoors. Softball, baseball and T-ball. Swimming and kayaking or just playing in the yard with the dog. Feeding chickens, fishing, farming, football and fall hunting seasons. Watching wildlife or sunrises and sunsets or simply living life as rural McLean County residents.

It's also time to think about entering McLean Electric Cooperative's (MEC) second annual photo contest.

From babies to families, critters of an array of sizes and shapes, and time on the water, MEC member-owners can put our life in rural McLean County on grand display and win prizes in the process.

The photographer of our grand prize-winning photo will receive a \$50 MEC bill credit and \$50 Visa gift card (\$100 total value).

First-place winners in each category receive a \$25 MEC bill credit and \$25 Visa gift card (\$50 total value).

The grand prize winner, along with first place and honorable mention winners, will also have their photos published in upcoming 2027 MEC local pages of *North Dakota Living*.

CATEGORIES:

- **Family and Friends Make Life Great:** Celebrate McLean County residents through portraiture or play in McLean County.
- **Hats off to Work:** MEC member-owners or family members at work, whether in the agriculture or energy industry, business world or self-employed.
- **Our Great Outdoors – Furry, Feathered, Flora and Fauna:** Let's celebrate what makes McLean County an outdoor destination – its lakes of all sizes, Missouri River, wildlife of all shapes and sizes, flora, fauna and

its natural scenic beauty.

CONTEST RULES:

- Photos must be taken by MEC member-owners or a parent/guardian must be a MEC member-owner for photographers 18 years of age and younger.
- Original digital photos only.
- No AI or Photoshopping, although photos can be adjusted for color, exposure and cropping. Remember color and exposure vary depending on computer monitor settings.
- One entry per category per person.
- File type: high-resolution JPG, JPEG or PNG.
- All photos must be taken in 2026.
- Winners will be announced in the February 2027 issue of MEC's Local Pages of *North Dakota Living*.

ENTRY SUBMISSIONS:

- Include name, contact number and email address along with photo location and date it was taken.
- **Deadline: Dec. 1.**
- Submit all entries to MECphotocontest@mcleanelectric.com. ■

Questions:

**Contact MEC Communications Manager
Sonja Moe at**

**701-463-6700 or 800-263-4922 or email
MECphotocontest@mcleanelectric.com.**

McLean County community calendar: Events and activities to see and do

McLean County area food pantry August distribution and donation thrift store dates, times and locations:

- **Garrison – Garrison Area Resource Center & Food Pantry:** Noon-2 p.m. and 5-7 p.m. Aug. 27.
- **Makoti, Parshall, Plaza, Roseglen, Ryder, White Shield and others in need – Community Food Pantry:** 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Aug. 22, 181 Ellsworth St., Makoti. Community Thrift Store hours: 3-6 p.m. Tuesday, 4-7 p.m. Thursday and 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday, except holidays, 181 Ellsworth St., Makoti.
- **Max – Our Savior Lord's Food Pantry:** Noon-3 p.m. and 5-7 p.m. Aug. 17, Max City Hall, 215 Main St.
- **Turtle Lake – The Lord's Pantry:** 2-4 p.m. Aug. 13 and 10 a.m.-noon Aug. 22, Trinity Lutheran Church, 515 Kundert St.
- **Turtle Lake – Free Community Clothing Share & Exchange Store:** Noon-6 p.m. every Thursday, 221 Main St.
- **Underwood – Community Cupboard of Underwood food distribution:** 10 a.m.-noon Aug. 13, 208 Lincoln Ave. Like on Facebook (Community Cupboard of Underwood) for distribution dates and thrift store updates.
- **Underwood – Community Cupboard of Underwood Thrift Store:** 1-5 p.m. every Tuesday.
- **Washburn – McLean Family Resource Center:** McLean County residents can contact the center, 701-462-8643, for an appointment to pick up baskets along with more information or assistance through the center's services, 205 Seventh St.
- **Washburn – McLean Family Resource Center Clothing Outlet:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, 205 Seventh St.
- **Wilton – Wilton Food Pantry mini distributions:** 11:30 a.m. until gone every Friday. Full food distribution 4-6 p.m. Aug. 20, Wilton Senior Citizens Center, 42 Dakota Ave.
- **Wilton – The (free) Clothes Closet:** 3-5 p.m. Aug. 20, First Presbyterian Church, 401 Dakota Ave.

Area food pantries often experience high needs for the following items: baked beans, pork and beans, canned fruit, tuna, chicken, vegetables, cereal, oatmeal, granola and breakfast bars, juice, macaroni and cheese, hamburger and tuna helper, pancake mix, syrup, pasta, spaghetti, Alfredo and pasta sauce, peanut butter, jelly, rice side dishes, soups and chili, and household items, such as body wash and soap, dish soap, laundry detergent, shampoo and conditioner, toilet paper, toothpaste and toothbrushes. Contact local food pantries for drop-off locations, information or a list of additional needs in your community.

- **Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Free Monthly Victim Support Group meetings:** 11 a.m.-noon Aug. 6, McLean Family Resource Center, 205 Seventh St., Washburn, 5:30-6:30 p.m. Aug. 12, Northland Health Center, 55 First Ave. E., Turtle Lake.

August and early September events:

Be sure to check out area special events celebrating the 250th anniversary of the United States.

- **Every Tuesday Aug. 4-25:** Harvest Market on Main, Main Street, Garrison.
- **Aug. 8:** Aw Shucks! Corn Fest and Party in the Park, Garrison City Park, beginning at noon with free corn feed, watermelon eating and corn shucking contests, live entertainment, vendor show and Sakakawea Classic Car Show. Party in the Park begins at 4 p.m. with music, community fellowship and family activities.
- **Aug. 15:** EMS Kid Strong and Lighted Boat Parade, featuring area public service entities providing family games and tours of emergency services equipment, 4 p.m. Live music beginning at 6 p.m. followed by a lighted boat parade, Fort Stevenson State Park, Garrison. Contact the park at 701-337-5576 for details. Daily entrance or annual pass admission fee.
- **Aug. 22:** Evening Hike Series, Sensory Hike with hikers engaging their senses to understand the nuances of nocturnal animals navigating the night, 9:15 p.m., Fort Stevenson State Park, Garrison. Contact the park at 701-337-5576 for details. Daily entrance or annual pass admission fee.
- **Aug. 27:** National Walleye Tour Championship Fishing Tournament, Fort Stevenson State Park, Garrison. Contact the park at 701-337-5576 for details. Daily entrance or annual pass admission fee.
- **Sept. 5:** Evening Hike Series, Lantern Hike. Enjoy a paper lantern-lit hike along Fort Stevenson State Park's Perimeter Trail, Garrison, beginning at 8:30 p.m. Contact the park at 701-337-5576 for details. Daily entrance or annual pass admission fee.
- **Sept. 7:** McLean Electric Cooperative closed in observance of Labor Day.
- **Sept. 30:** Operation Round Up grant application deadline. Go to McLean Electric's website, mcleanelectric.com, and click "Grants & Scholarships" on the homepage for details or contact MEC Communications Manager Sonja Moe at 701-463-6700 or 800-263-4922.

Nonprofit organizations and communities throughout McLean County can contact Patricia Stockdill at stockdill.patricia@gmail.com or 701-337-5462 to submit community events. ■

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

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701-743-4415
District 1, Parshall

Darcy Klain, vice president
701-448-2408
District 4, Ruso

Rod Stockdill, secretary-treasurer
701-337-6252
District 3, Garrison

Karen Hanson
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701-448-2636
District 6, Turtle Lake

Troy Presser, director
701-447-2855
District 5, Turtle Lake

Hunter Andes, director
701-743-4999
District 2, Makoti

Larry Gessele, director
701-447-2461
District 7, Mercer

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Keith Thelen, Operations Manager
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