MANAGER'S MOMENT:
Rate pressure creates challenges

BY MARK DOYLE, GENERAL MANAGER

Mark Doyle

I would appreciate a moment of your time…

Well, fall is here. Harvest is underway, hunting season is starting and people are preparing for winter.

McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) is trying to wrap up another busy construction season. It started a bit slowly, but more projects came forward as the year progressed. As always, we are seeing development along Lake Sakakawea, in the White Shield area, and with our agricultural and industrial members. Our growth rate is still around 4%, which is fantastic, as other electric cooperatives are around 1% to 2%.

The biggest issue we are addressing is rate pressure from our wholesale power provider, Central Power Electric Cooperative (CPEC). CPEC purchases power from the Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) and Basin Electric Power Cooperative. Both have been dealing with rate pressures.

WAPA has increased rates primarily due to drought conditions impacting its hydropower plants over the past year or two, while Basin Electric has seen pressure for the need for new infrastructure, including power production. Both are also seeing inflationary pressure over the past several years, as we all have.

Power production costs have gone from $800 per megawatt to $2,700 per megawatt over the past decade. Transmission infrastructure costs have also increased significantly. Here are some of the national cost increase projections:

- Poles: 25%-40%
- Conductor: 30%-50%
- Transformers: 70%-100%
- Meters: 20%-35%
- Equipment: 25%-50%

All of this creates rate pressure that needs to be passed along through electric rates. The proposed wholesale power cost rate increase to MEC is projected to be 10%.

With that pressure, MEC has been working diligently to assess the impact on you. We have been reviewing our rate structure over the past several years and have made some rate changes. Through this assessment, we want to make sure the rates are fair and equitable for all our members and that Peter is not paying for Paul. We did commission an in-depth cost-of-service study and will take the findings into consideration when proposing rate design changes or increases. Any changes will be for 2026.

MEC is a member-owned, not-for-profit cooperative, and we have and always will operate as such. We will be fully transparent with any proposed rate changes and do our best to inform you of the changes coming.

Otherwise, things are going great at your cooperative! I wish you all a safe harvest and fall!

As always, feel free to reach out to me with any questions or comments. My door is always open. ◼

OPERATION ROUND UP
GIVE A LITTLE, HELP A LOT

Even the smallest gifts can make a big difference.

McLean Electric Cooperative'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.

OPERATION ROUND UP

mcleanelectric.com/operation-roundup-program

LET'S TALK:
Communicating in today's high-tech world

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL

Communications have changed since the party phone lines of the past.

Here's a quiz: Raise your hand if you remember a party phone line.

A fairer question probably would be: How many people know how a party phone line functioned?

Answer: Back in the day, multiple residences often shared one telephone service line. Several families who were miles apart could hear someone's telephone conversation, and one call could dominate a single telephone line that served multiple residences.

Communication in today's world has rapidly evolved, although a communications company in Michigan still had party lines as late as 2002, according to Wikipedia.

Yet, McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC), like many businesses with multiple phones in several offices, still has what might be considered a landline telephone system. The system uses a data link and is hosted on the cloud. It's available through an app rather than a dedicated line to an office. A desk phone can be moved to another location and retain the same capabilities and number, which assists with business continuity if issues need to be addressed at the office, explained Mark Doyle, MEC general manger/CEO.

And print media isn't dead. About 2,900 of MEC's approximately 4,000 accounts receive the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives statewide publication, *North Dakota Living*, in print format.

How the cooperative communicates with its member-owners and within its day-to-day operations has changed with technology and the times. Those changes not only keep up with technology, but also benefit MEC's member-owners.

Not too many years ago, when MEC had a planned maintenance outage during business hours, office staff directly called members in the affected area with advance notice, sometimes requiring a great deal of time and staff.

Nowadays, Office Manager Tonya Graeber uses a multi-channel messenger system to notify members of planned outages. Member-owners receive a phone call through the system, either to their landline or cellphone, whichever they list for contact information.

The call will show a caller ID from MEC, she added.

With a wide array of communication options, including phone calls, emails and texts, MEC can also communicate directly with member-owners in a timelier manner for other purposes.

MEC, like many North Dakota electric and telecommunications cooperatives, uses SmartHub web and mobile applications through Mandan-based National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC). SmartHub is available on a member-owner's computer, laptop and mobile device.

NISC also provides software for electric and telecommunications cooperatives throughout the United States.

SmartHub is a game-changer for how member-owners communicate with MEC and vice versa. Additionally, members can directly see how and when they use electricity, which helps identify ways to conserve and ultimately save money, along with other helpful information.

SmartHub allows member-owners to set up their preferred payment method, such as online or automatic payments.

It allows potential member-owners to complete a new service application online. And billing statements are generated online. Member-owners who use SmartHub are notified at 6 p.m. when their bill is available, providing early access.

Almost half of MEC's member-owners use SmartHub, Graeber described, and almost half of those are paperless. Graeber attributes the increased interest in SmartHub to the number of new members using it, member-owners appreciating its convenience and no postal service issues. It reduces costs for both MEC and participating member-owners by eliminating paper, postage and check expenses.

Communications Manager Sonja Moe also contributes to the evolution of how MEC communicates with its member-owners today, compared to a few years ago.

She posts on social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as its website at mcleanelectric.com. The content is linked, so she can send it to all three platforms at once. A presence on those public platforms allows the cooperative to connect not just with its member-owners, but also with the public, she described.

The frequency of Moe's news and updates varies, but people following the MEC account can find a range of content, including outage updates, energy-saving tips, details on student scholarships, community events, electric safety reminders and news related to MEC. Moe has even received comments from member-owners appreciating features such as the outage updates.

The social media presence is a way for member-owners to get real-time updates and quick access to information, she added. Additionally, it provides member-owners with a platform to engage with the cooperative, to ask questions and stay informed. Both platforms are public, she explained, which helps reach potential members, the public, organizations and agencies, as well as member-owners.

However, outages must still be reported to MEC by calling the office, not posted on social media.

Member-owners participating in SmartHub will receive a monthly email newsletter called "MEC Connections," with a link to *North Dakota Living*, which helps keep member-owners abreast of state and regional issues, stories and more. About 1,500 member-owners receive MEC's monthly e-newsletter, Moe added.

The old-fashioned party phone line is gone. But with today's technology, MEC and its member-owners are more connected than ever before. ■

Lineworkers use communications technology, too

Changing communications technology also benefits McLean Electric Cooperative's (MEC) line crews and improves safety. However, just as landline telephones are still used, the cooperative continues to utilize its radio system, which connects its field vehicles, office and Operations Manager Keith Thelen to the crews.

Radios were used back when MEC was a fledgling cooperative in the late 1940s.

Nowadays, radio communications have become a significant safety benefit, with crews typically communicating with each other – often during major outages – to ensure all lineworkers know their locations when performing tasks such as energizing a downed line, Thelen described.

Wireless communications have taken over how lineworkers communicate with the office and Thelen when they're in the field, he added. Every morning, he calls Turtle Lake Foreman Travis Voth to go over the day's plans, for example.

Wireless reception has improved throughout MEC's service area, so there are limited areas without wireless reception.

"But for the most part, cellphones work well," Thelen said.

While Thelen and Voth may talk every morning, the usual daily communications of sending and receiving service orders and other paperwork is now done online. Lineworkers receive information on their iPads, which they carry with them in the office, shop and field, Thelen described.

A major change in lineworker communication occurred when MEC and many other electric cooperatives in North Dakota joined an after-hours communications system, Security and Response Services (SRS), available through the regional generation and transmission cooperative, Basin Electric Power Cooperative.

Calls made after business hours to MEC are directed to SRS. When an outage occurs, MEC member-owners can go through the menu options, select the outage option and provide information, including their account number if possible.

"Once they have that information, they'll dispatch a crew," Thelen described. The large SRS staff takes about 450,000 calls annually and communicates via radio with each line crew on an outage, Thelen added.

Lineworker safety is a major focus with the SRS system. Line crews check in with SRS when they leave for an outage and again when they return to their Garrison or Turtle Lake facilities after service is restored.

"And when they're out there, (SRS will) contact them to verify they're OK," Thelen added.

Member-owners are encouraged to report any power outage promptly. First, check the electrical panel breakers to ensure none have tripped, Thelen described, then call, even if neighbors have electricity or if you know someone else has reported the outage. The information SRS receives then helps lineworkers better pinpoint the extent of an outage.

Additionally, member-owners can request a callback from SRS to verify electricity has been restored. However, in the case of major outages across a broad area, the call-back service might not be available, Thelen added, because SRS staff is monitoring the outage.

Technology rarely stands still, and that holds true for communications. If Thelen could look into a crystal ball, he might see things such as satellite phones in the future.

"Then you can get a phone call anywhere," he added.

But that might be the future.

For now, MEC utilizes the latest and safest communication methods to keep the lights on and ensure crews work safely. ■

Keeping co-op cyber-secure

BY PATRICIA STOCKDILL

It's a never-ending challenge.

Plus, it's increasingly important to stay ahead of that challenge.

It's the challenge of staying ahead of the electric industry's need for cybersecurity.

Many people think of cybersecurity as protecting one's vital credit card information and personal identity from cyber hackers who are intent on getting one's money. There's no doubt that's extremely important.

Yet, state-of-the-art cybersecurity is so much more, especially in the crucial electric industry, as everyone throughout the United States and much of the world becomes increasingly dependent on electricity.

McLean Electric Cooperative (MEC) makes cybersecurity a priority.

That includes the more common concerns of identity and credit card theft.

However, it extends far beyond that. State-of-the-art cybersecurity for MEC starts at its physical buildings and stretches throughout its entire system.

It begins in the Garrison headquarters, explained MEC Engineering Manager Lucas Schaaf. All of its computer and electronic servers are backed up offsite through the "cloud," as well as with Mandan-based National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC). MEC strives to store data offsite as much as possible, Schaaf explained.

In the event of a power outage or other natural disaster, MEC also has propane automatic-start generators to provide electricity to all offices and other facilities.

In addition, NISC provides software electric and telecommunications cooperatives use for billing and other services, such as SmartHub. That's also protected with state-of-the-art cybersecurity.

RTC Networks and West River Telecommunications (WRT) serve MEC and its service area. Both provide state-of-the-art telecommunications, including a Virtual Local Area Network (VLAN).

That's critical for MEC, because it's a fiber system with cybersecurity already integrated, so only specific devices have access. Basically, it isolates data from

the general public, so it's less susceptible to hackers, Schaaf described.

MEC has worked with RTC Networks and WRT in recent years to integrate VLAN throughout MEC's entire system.

Prior to VLAN, MEC – like a majority of the public, businesses and government agencies on all levels – used firewalls to provide security, Schaaf added.

Working to protect not only member-owner data, but the integrity of MEC's infrastructure and the electric grid, doesn't stop there.

Over the last decade, the cooperative has been installing supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) technology. Completion throughout the system is tentatively planned for late 2025, Schaaf continued.

SCADA monitors data and can control equipment at substations, transmitting information that can be especially beneficial when trying to identify the source of a power outage, Schaaf described. In addition, SCADA data can help track and manage load usage.

"It helps us be more proactive about upgrades and maintenance," Schaaf added.

Central Power Electric Cooperative (CPEC), MEC's wholesale electric provider, is assisting MEC and its other member cooperatives to implement SCADA throughout CPEC's service area, which helps reduce MEC's cost.

The more load usage data CPEC has, the more it helps Basin Electric Power Cooperative meet its electrical usage demand. Basin Electric is the regional electric generation and transmission cooperative serving much of the nine-state rural region.

Plus, SCADA has state-of-the-art cybersecurity through MEC's collaboration with the VLAN fiber system.

"SCADA is on a different system, so it's isolated and is private data completely separate from general business practices," Schaaf said.

The electric cooperative as a whole is extremely proactive in cybersecurity as it relates to the "big picture" of the nation's electric grid supply chain, generation and transmission. Ultimately, protecting the electric industry helps protect national security.

Dealing with hackers and keeping an electric cooperative secure in today's world reaches all levels, including employees and members. All of MEC's staff and board members receive cybersecurity training, including how to identify suspicious correspondence – especially emails.

MEC's insurance provider also has a checklist updated annually for its customers that helps to keep MEC up to date on cybersecurity, Schaaf added.

Plus, MEC incorporates two cybersecurity models to detect hackers and other issues before it gets into the cooperative's system, with a private IT company available as a consulting resource, if necessary.

"It's (cybersecurity concerns) becoming more of an issue every year," Schaaf said.

MEC is committed to not only keeping its member-owners' personal data safe and secure, but protecting the integrity of its system, infrastructure and its share of the nation's electric grid. ■

Electric cooperatives provide power with purpose.

NATIONAL CO-OP MONTH

YOUR co-ops power YOUR life

From internet service to agricultural products to the electricity that powers your home, cooperatives play a role in your everyday life. As we celebrate Co-op Month in October, electric cooperative members should be proud of the success of the cooperative business model and the spirit of cooperation these organizations promote. Cooperatives are a true example of grassroots involvement, because cooperatives are owned and controlled by the people they serve.

North Dakota is home to over 500 cooperatives that include sectors such as electricity, broadband, credit unions, finance, agriculture and even child care.

Decades ago, rural residents joined together to bring the convenience of electricity to their communities. The cooperatives they formed are as strong and relevant today as they were then.

But co-ops are not just products of a proud past. Today, folks across the country recognize the cooperative approach works to achieve price and service benefits, just as effectively as it delivers affordable power to rural North Dakotans. As locally owned businesses, cooperatives are part of the community. Neighbors helping neighbors. That's the cooperative difference.

And all these cooperatives operate under the same principles of member ownership. The power of the people is exemplified in the seven principles that guide all cooperatives:

1. **Voluntary and open membership** – Cooperatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.
2. **Democratic member control** – Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting policies and making decisions. The elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary cooperatives, members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and cooperatives at other levels are organized in a democratic manner.
3. **Members' economic participation** – Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the cooperative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing the cooperative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.
4. **Autonomy and independence** – Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.
5. **Education, training and information** – Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperatives. They inform the general public about the nature and benefits of cooperation.
6. **Cooperation among cooperatives** – Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.
7. **Concern for community** – While focusing on member needs, cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies accepted by their members. ■

FAST FACTS ABOUT NORTH DAKOTA'S ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES

155,498
members
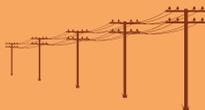
66,946
miles of distribution line

3,038
full-time jobs

Unplug energy vampires

Our homes are filled with an alphabet of electronics: DVD, PC, TV, Xbox. Americans own approximately 24 electronic products per household, according to the Consumer Electronics Association, so considerable energy goes toward powering those products.

And some of these products consume power even when they are not in use. To control these "energy vampires," McLean Electric Cooperative offers some suggestions.

Use power strips

No matter what types of electronics you use, those glowing lights at night prove power is still being consumed, even while everyone is sleeping. Those TVs, game consoles, cable boxes and other electronics all draw small amounts of power, even when not in use, wasting energy in the form of "vampire loads."

There is a convenient and low-cost solution. A power strip makes it easy to turn them all off with one click.

Advanced models offer options like timers, remote control or the ability to set a "master device" to shut down everything else when it's turned off.

Replacing your conventional power strips with advanced power strips (APS) can help reduce the electricity wasted when these devices are idle.

APS are designed primarily for home entertainment centers and home office areas where there are typically many consumer electronics plugged into a power strip, and they work by preventing electronics from drawing power when they are off or not being used.

Unplug

When a laptop or smartphone is fully charged, unplug it.

Turn off computers, game consoles and other devices when they are not in use. Powering down your computer completely every night uses 50% less energy than sleep mode. ■

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

McLean County area food pantry October 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. Oct. 23.

- **Makoti, Parshall, Plaza, Roseglen, Ryder, White Shield and others in need – Community Food Pantry:** 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Oct. 25, 181 Ellsworth St., Makoti. Community Thrift Store: 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. Oct. 20, Max City Hall, 215 Main St.

- **Turtle Lake – The Lord's Pantry:** 2-4 p.m. Oct. 9 and 10 a.m.-noon Oct. 25, 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:** 10 a.m.-noon Oct. 4, and 4-6 p.m. Oct. 23, 208 Lincoln Ave. Like us 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. Oct. 16, Wilton Senior Citizens Center, 42 Dakota Ave.

- **Wilton – The (free) Clothes Closet:** 3-5 p.m. Oct. 16, 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.

October and early November events:

- **Oct. 4:** Our Savior's Lutheran Church Annual Fall Bazaar with bake and rummage sales, raffle and delicious lunch, 10 a.m.-1 p.m., 105 W. Max St., Mercer.

- **Oct. 12:** Sacred Heart Church Annual October Fest, Wilton Memorial Hall.

- **Oct. 18:** Sakakawea Pheasants Forever Fall Flush banquet and fundraiser, 5:30 p.m., Garrison City Auditorium.

- **Oct. 25:** Halloween Bash, 4-7 p.m., sponsored by McLean Family Resource Center in support of Domestic Violence Awareness Month, Washburn Memorial Hall, Main St.

- **Oct. 31:** Halloween party for children 2 years of age to sixth-graders, 3:30-5 p.m., Max Library.

- **Oct. 31:** Annual Trunk or Treat sponsored by Riverdale-Pick City Women's Club, Coffee House Room, Riverdale Plaza. Visit the *Riverdale Times* Facebook page for more details as Halloween approaches.

- **Oct. 31:** Trunk or Treat, 3:30-5 p.m., Turtle Lake.

- **Oct. 31**: Wilton's Annual Halloween Trunk or Treat, Main St.

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