

MEEKER COOPERATIVE PIONEER

The official publication of

**Meeker
Cooperative**
Light and Power Association

VIBRANT
Broadband™

Meeker Co-op is an Equal Opportunity
Provider and Employer

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2023

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Ken Renner's Story: Connecting Energy and Technology at Meeker Cooperative

From climbing power poles to overseeing cutting-edge technology, Ken Renner's career has come full circle in a remarkable journey of growth and innovation. As the Director of Technology at STAR Energy, partially owned by Meeker Cooperative, Ken's story serves as an inspiring testament to the symbiotic relationship between the energy industry and technological advancements.

Ken's journey began in 1988 when he joined Meeker Cooperative as an apprentice lineman. Drawn by the allure of outdoor work and the physical challenges of electrical linework, Ken quickly established himself in the field. However, his fascination with technology started to take root around 1999. Recognizing the need for a more technical role within the electrical industry to save his body from the physically demanding work of a lineman, Ken embarked on a path of continuous learning. Balancing his lineman duties with night school, he focused on information technology and software development.

In 2005, armed with a software development degree, Renner took a leap into the world of programming as STAR Energy's first software developer. Leveraging his linework experience, he addressed the industry's needs with practical software solutions. One such solution was the development of PYXIS, an outage notification system.

Continued on page 2.

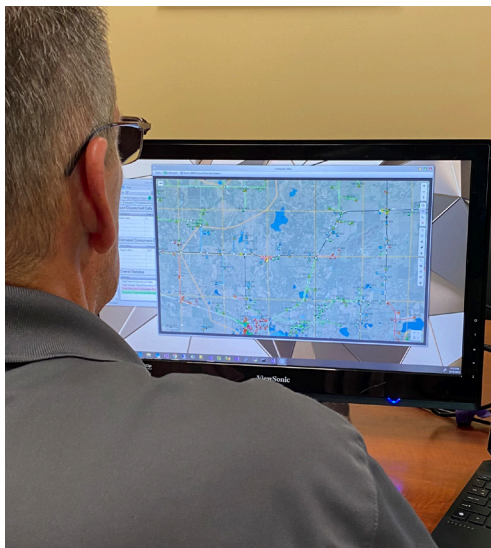


"ENERGIZING AND CONNECTING...ENHANCING YOUR LIFE."

CONTINUED: Connecting Energy and Technology

Driven by his firsthand knowledge of outage restoration and the intricate workings of electrical distribution systems, Renner built a system that not only helps utilities manage outages but provides a platform for exceptional customer service. PYXIS stands apart for its agility and adaptability. Unlike one-size-fits-all solutions, it offers customization, reflecting Renner's commitment to creating user-friendly solutions that benefit everyone, from lineworkers to office personnel.

The seamless adoption of PYXIS at Meeker Cooperative was a natural progression facilitated by Renner's insider perspective and his understanding of the Co-op's operational intricacies, providing the Cooperative with an invaluable tool for streamlined outage management and improved service delivery.



As STAR Energy expanded, so did Renner's role. He managed GIS and software development before rising to the position of Director of Technology. His background in both energy and technology uniquely positioned him to navigate the ever-evolving landscape of cooperative utilities.

But the story doesn't end there. In a full circle moment, as Meeker Cooperative's broadband services began to transform the lives of those

in underserved rural areas, Renner himself reaped the benefits.

Prior to the availability of Meeker Cooperative's services, Renner's experience with wireless internet was marked by limitations. Starting with dial-up service and transitioning to wireless providers, he found connectivity lacking and unreliable. The turning point came with the introduction of VIBRANT Broadband. The wireless service, originating from a tower at his home, offered unparalleled quality. 25-21-207 The progress didn't stop there - this summer, VIBRANT further elevated Renner's experience by providing Fiber to the Home. This enhancement has significantly boosted Renner's connection and work-from-home capabilities, enabling efficient after-hours tasks for his clients while maintaining their seamless operations, especially during outages when his assistance may be critical to restoring power.

Looking beyond personal gains, Renner envisions the installation of fiber in his neighborhood as a catalyst for communal advancement. The upgraded infrastructure doesn't just empower individuals with a flexible work schedule but also positions rural areas as viable hubs for businesses requiring high-speed internet.

Today Renner passionately champions fiber expansion and remains committed to bridging the energy and technology industries for the betterment of rural areas.

Renner's story is a testament to the power of collaboration and the potential for shared growth and mutual benefit that underscores the cooperative spirit.



Receive Outage Text Notifications!

Sign up to receive texts when an outage occurs in your area.
www.meeker.coop/outagetext

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I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including multiple damages and civil penalties).

“Everyone from the contractors installing fiber along the roadways to the office personnel scheduling the work, and those behind the scenes that just plain make everything work have done an impressive job. You are giving the residents of Meeker County the best of both worlds, being able to live in the country with internet speeds of those living in the city. Thank you for your dedication.”

-Ken Renner



CEO MESSAGE

EXPANDING BROADBAND ACCESS

MEEKER COOPERATIVE'S COMMITMENT TO CONNECTIVITY

As we celebrate National Cooperative Month, I wanted to share some exciting updates with you about how Meeker Cooperative is making strides to improve broadband access in our rural Minnesota communities. At the heart of our efforts lies the Cooperative Principles of Concern for Community and Member Involvement. It's my pleasure to provide you with some insight into the recent grants we have received and the significant impact they will have on our region.

We were thrilled to receive a \$19 million grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. This grant, aptly named USDA ReConnect, will enable us to install and connect approximately 700 homes, businesses, and farms with over 200 miles of fiber optic cable. This expansion will provide high-speed internet and VoIP phone service, positioning our rural communities to thrive in the modern digital age.

In today's world, high-speed internet is no longer a luxury; it's a necessity. The ability to maintain family connections, access telehealth services, engage in remote work, enable precision agriculture, facilitate business operations, and support education all hinge on dependable broadband access to fulfill everyday demands. This expansion not only addresses these critical needs but also nurtures our local economy by attracting businesses and residents, fostering rural development and stability.

When I received news of this grant, I felt a great sense of pride and enthusiasm. Meeker Cooperative has been dedicated to bringing quality broadband to our region since 2018 and this grant allows us to expedite our efforts and fulfill our commitment to our members.

As we look forward to the commencement of the USDA ReConnect project in the summer of 2024, and its anticipated completion by 2026, it's essential to acknowledge the substantial amount of work ahead of us.

The process starts with finalizing the design of the fiber route, which is essential for obtaining the required permits and conducting environmental reviews. Subsequently, the engineering phase ensures the seamless functionality of the entire fiber network once it's interconnected. Upon

reaching this stage, the construction of the primary fiber infrastructure commences. This includes a combination of buried fiber lines and above-ground installation on existing powerlines. Following the installation of the mainline fiber, splicing procedures take place the fiber is extended from the road into homes and businesses. Once this is accomplished, our Installers coordinate with subscribers to establish the connection within their premises.

We are equally as excited to receive a total of \$4.5 million in grant funds through the Border-to-Border program. This grant program through the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) and administered by the Office of Broadband Development (OBD) combines funds from a variety of sources including County and Township ARPA funds.

These grants will bring fiber to the townships of French Lake in Wright County, and Lake Elizabeth, Lake Lillian, and Harrison, all in Kandiyohi County passing 932 homes and businesses. Construction will begin this fall and continue into 2024.

Both the USDA ReConnect and Border-to-Border projects align with our cooperative values of Concern for Community and Member Involvement. These grants focus on underserved areas, where quality broadband is currently lacking. Without the financial support from these grants, it would be challenging for us to bring fiber to these regions.

These grants also offer benefits to our electric system as we move to incorporate additional smart grid technologies, for example electronic system controls to sectionalize lines when a fault occurs. The incorporation of smart devices brings the need to communicate with the devices. Having fiber connected to the devices allows for a stable and efficient means of communication. 30-13-436 The addition of fiber in the electric grid will aid in reducing costs and increase efficiencies.

In closing, these grant-funded projects exemplify the Cooperative Difference and the spirit of National Cooperative Month. We are proud to invest in our communities, elevating lives and local economies through enhanced connectivity. Meeker Cooperative remains committed to serving you, our valued members, and creating a brighter digital future for all.

Dedicated to keeping the lights on and the data flowing,

Luke Johnson
CEO, Meeker Cooperative

CONCERN FOR COMMUNITY: A CO-OP PRINCIPLE

As a cooperative, Meeker Cooperative Power thrives on the understanding that our achievements are inseparable from the well-being of our community. Our priority is meeting the needs of our members. We take an engaged role in advancing community development, endorsing local initiatives, and channeling investments into education, healthcare, and essential infrastructure. By embracing the cooperative principle of community concern, we elevate quality of life.



**JOIN US
SEPTEMBER 28
4 P.M. TO 7 P.M.**

at Louis Industries
222 Industrial Loop Street W,
Paynesville, MN 56362

VIBRANT Broadband would like to **THANK YOU** for the opportunity to be your neighbor with Rip Snort'n FAST fiber-optic Internet.

Swing on in for a pound of AMPI butter and two cartons of Sparboe eggs as our thank you from Meeker Cooperative and VIBRANT Broadband.

Meeker Cooperative Trust Distributes \$13,800

Through the contributions of Meeker Cooperative's participating members and VIBRANT Subscribers, the Meeker Cooperative Electric Trust Board recently approved \$13,800 to assist local community organizations.

The Trust meets three times per year to review applications and award grants. The remaining application deadline for 2023 is November 2. The application and guidelines can be found on Meeker Cooperative's website. www.meeker.coop.

\$1 million! A milestone worth noting and celebrating.

One Million dollars – that is a 'chunk of change' as the saying goes – but that is how much Meeker Cooperative's Electric Trust has now put back into the service territory through grants and scholarships since its inception in 1998.

Members and VIBRANT subscribers and Meeker's employees have made that happen simply by rounding up their bills to the nearest dollar; employees have the option of rounding down their pay checks. Lumped together this pocket change adds up quickly!

Watch future issues of the *Pioneer* for more information about this milestone for the Trust!

August 2023 Recipient List

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Advocates 4 Health.....	\$1,000
Ambulance Service, Cokato Volunteer.....	\$1,000
Crow River Trail Guards.....	\$700
Darwin Tourism & Promotions Committee.....	\$500
Fire Department, Cosmos.....	\$1,000
Forest City Threshers.....	\$500
Historical Society, Paynesville.....	\$500
Kimball Days.....	\$500
Living at Home/BN Prog., Paynesville - Rose Center.....	\$1,000
Ness Church Preservation Foundation.....	\$1,000
Rotary Club, Litchfield.....	\$1,000
Songs of Summer Festival.....	\$500

EDUCATION AND YOUTH

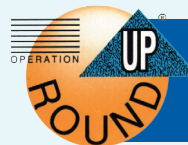
FFA, Paynesville.....	\$1,000
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K-12 TEACHERS WORKING COOPERATIVELY WITH OTHERS GRANT

Hutchinson Elementary (Tiger & West).....	\$1,800
Litchfield Public Schools.....	\$1,800

TOTAL

\$13,800



LEARN MORE ABOUT OPERATION ROUND UP AT
www.meeker.coop/operationroundup

HUNTING ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT IS NEVER IN SEASON



Whether you are a veteran hunter or trying it for the first time, you must be familiar with hunting safety rules: wearing a bright orange vest, keeping your finger off the trigger until you're ready to shoot, and only pointing at your target.

Along with those safety requirements, be sure to add these electrical safety tips to your list:

- Familiarize yourself with the location of power lines and equipment on land where you shoot.
- Be especially careful in wooded areas where power lines may not be as visible.
- Take notice of warning signs and keep clear of electrical equipment.
- Do not place deer stands on utility poles or climb poles. Energized lines and equipment can conduct electricity to anyone who comes in contact with them.

- Do not place decoys on power lines or other utility equipment. Anything attached to a pole, except for utility equipment, is an obstruction and poses a serious hazard to line crews.
- Never shoot near or toward power lines, power poles, transformers or substations. 23-31-109 A stray bullet could not only damage equipment, potentially interrupting electric service, but could be deadly to the shooter. Damage to the conductor could drop the line to the ground, causing a possibility of electrocution to those nearby.
- Don't make line workers hunt for problems caused in a hunting area; if you cause or simply notice a problem with lines, poles or equipment, let the Co-op know. Sometimes damage isn't noticed for several weeks or months, or unless an outage occurs.

TIPS FOR A SAFE HARVEST



Every year, we see collisions where tractors and other farming equipment accidentally collide with utility poles and power lines, causing injuries and power outages. These dangerous accidents can be avoided by looking up and around your surroundings when operating large farm machinery. If you're preparing for harvest season, please keep the following safety tips in mind:

- Always use a spotter when operating large machinery near power lines.
- Use care when raising augers or the bed of grain trucks.
- Keep equipment at least 10 feet from lines — at all times, in all directions.
- Inspect the height of the farm equipment to determine clearance.
- Always lower extensions to the lowest setting when moving loads.
- If a power line is sagging or low, call us right away.
- Never attempt to move a power line out of the way or raise it for clearance.
- If your equipment does hit a power line, do not leave the cab. Immediately call 9-1-1, warn others to stay away, and wait for the utility crew to cut the power.

Although harvest season is a time filled with tight deadlines and heightened work stress, take the time to consider electrical safety.



FIND YOUR LOCATION NUMBER

Four location numbers are hidden within this Pioneer and four more in articles published on our website between now and the next Pioneer mailing. If you find your number and claim it by calling Meeker Cooperative before October 31, you will have \$10 credit to your account. When you call and verify your information is correct in our system, you will also receive an additional bill credit equal to one month's output from a Member Solar Panel.

MEMBER NOTICE: MINNESOTA COLD WEATHER RULE



The Cold Weather Rule, Section 216B.097 of the Public Utilities Act, in effect from October 1 through April 30 in Minnesota, governs how we handle disconnects; it does not prohibit them. Electric cooperatives cannot disconnect a residential consumer for nonpayment if the disconnection would affect the primary heat source, **and all of the following conditions are met:**

1. You declare the inability to pay by completing the Inability to Pay Form. Household income must include proof of one-month gross total household income or be verified on a form provided either by Meeker Cooperative or by a local energy assistance provider.
2. Your household income is at or below 50% of the state median household income and/or you are a recipient of energy assistance for this heating season.
3. You must have entered into a payment agreement and remain current under that agreement.

We want to ensure that you are well-informed about your energy payments and the protection offered by the Cold Weather Rule during the winter months. 13-08-432 It's essential to be aware that Meeker Cooperative will be conducting disconnects as per legal requirements, even during the cold weather period.

To ensure transparency and assist you in navigating this process, Meeker Cooperative will provide the following information:

Advance Notice of Disconnection: You will receive a notice of disconnection at least 30 days before any action is taken.

Member Rights and Responsibilities Statement: A document outlining your rights and responsibilities as a member will be provided to you.

Local Energy Assistance Providers: You will be given a list of local energy assistance providers who can offer support in times of financial difficulty.

Cold Weather Rule Protection Request Forms: Forms enabling you to request protection will be available.

Payment Plan Options and Alternatives: Information

about available payment plans and alternative options to maintain uninterrupted service will be presented.

It is crucial for you to take proactive steps to avoid disconnection. We strongly encourage you to act promptly. The sooner you reach out to us, the better your chances of retaining electricity service throughout the winter season.

Should you require assistance or wish to discuss options for shut-off protection or payment arrangements, please do not hesitate to contact us at 320-693-3231. You can also access the Cold Weather Rule & Shut-Off Protection form on our website's download forms page: meeker.coop/download-forms.

ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS

KANDIYOHI, MCLEOD & MEEKER COUNTIES UNITED COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP

P.O. Box 1359, 200 4th Street SW, Willmar, MN 56201
320-235-0850 | 800-992-1710

218 Main Street S, Suite 108, Hutchinson, MN 55350
320-587-5244 | 800-992-1710

MCLEOD COUNTY AREA MCLEOD COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICE CENTER

1805 Ford Avenue N, Glencoe, MN 55336
320-864-3144 | 320-484-4330 | 800-247-1756

RENVILLE COUNTY AREA UNITED COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP

500 E DePue Avenue, Olivia, MN 56277
320-523-1842 | 800-363-2533

WRIGHT COUNTY AREA WRIGHT COUNTY COMMUNITY ACTION

130 West Division Street, Maple Lake, MN 55358
320-963-6500

STEARNS COUNTY AREA STEARNS TRI-COUNTY ACTION PROGRAMS

1210 23rd Avenue S, P.O. Box 683, Waite Park, MN 56387
320-251-1612 | 888-765-5597

WILLIE WIREDHAND'S ELECTRICITY FUN FACT

Electric vehicles actually date back as far as the 1800s.

Between 1828 and 1835,

Hungarian and American innovators were the first to experiment with small-scale electric cars. The first crude electric vehicle was developed in 1832; however, it wasn't until the 1870s that the car became 'driveable' and able to transport passengers from A to B.



THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS: SWITCH TO AN AIR SOURCE HEAT PUMP AND SAVE

You may already be thinking about tuning up the snowblower or getting your shovels handy for winter. But if your air conditioner didn't keep you as cool as you'd like this summer, then replacing that old tired, inefficient unit now with an air source heat pump (ASHP) is the way to go. Not only will you be ready for next summer but you'll save on your heating bill too.

You see, while in cooling mode ASHPs function the same as a standard AC, but when temperatures drop they extract outdoor heat for indoor warmth, reducing reliance on costly fuels. Plus, **Meeker Cooperative offers rebates from \$650-\$1200** (based on efficiency) when installed on our energy management program.

Energy Management members allow Meeker Cooperative to control their energy use during peak demand times in exchange for lower rates. By **combining your current forced-air furnace with the efficient heating of an ASHP on our Energy Management program - you'll only pay 5.7¢/kWh**, its value per BTU rivals propane at 73¢ per gallon or natural gas at 79¢ per therm.

See complete program information and requirements online at www.meeker.coop/programs/ or call our office during business hours at 320-693-3231.

FEATURED RECIPE Quick and Easy Fruit Pizza

Congratulations to **Jammie McCarney** for submitting this issue's winning recipe.



INGREDIENTS:

COOKIE CRUST:

- Pillsbury or Betty Crocker Sugar Cookie mixture (17.5 oz size)

FROSTING:

- 1 (8 ounce) package of low-fat cream cheese
- 2-3 tablespoons of maple syrup or honey
- 1 tsp of vanilla extract
- Pinch of salt

TOPPINGS:

- Fresh strawberries, blueberries, kiwi, and/or raspberries

DIRECTIONS:

Heat oven to 350 degrees F. Grease either a quarter sheet pan, 9x13 inch baking dish or 12-inch round pizza pan with cooking spray. Mix the Pillsbury or Betty Crocker Sugar cookie mix based on the instructions on the back of the package. Press the mixture evenly onto the pan. Bake for 10-15 minutes or until the dough is starting to turn golden brown. Let the cookie crust cool completely. Mix together the softened cream cheese, maple syrup or honey, vanilla and salt. Then spread the frosting evenly on the baked cookie crust. Top with your favorite sliced fruit.

Submit your favorite **Corn Recipe** for our next issue! Please include a photo if you are able.

The chosen winner will receive a \$10 credit to their account. DEADLINE: October 15, 2023.

Email to: szeppelin@meeker.coop | Mail to: Meeker Coop, ATTN: Shane 1725 US Hwy 12 E, Ste 100, Litchfield, MN 55355

MEMBER NEWS

RATE REMINDER

Non-summer rates go into effect on September 1, 2023. The residential rate will return to the fall/winter rate of 10.3¢/kWh and the energy management rate to 5.7¢/kWh and remain in place until May 31, 2024. Your September usage will be reflected on your October bill.

For more information on Meeker Cooperative electric rates visit www.meeker.coop/rates or contact us at 320-693-3231.

KEEP YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION UPDATED

Updating all your contact information is helpful because it allows the Cooperative to contact you regarding your account if there is a need and it speeds up the power restoration process.

Please take a moment to update your information. Visit our website: www.meeker.coop/update-my-info or call us at 320-693-3231.

CONTACT US

320-693-3231 | Fax: 320-693-2980
1725 U.S. Hwy. 12, Suite 100, Litchfield, MN 55355
www.meeker.coop | www.vibrantbroadband.com

CEO/General Manager: Luke Johnson
Contract Editor: Fuller Creative, LLC



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BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Brad Donnay, President — District 3
Luxemburg, Maine Prairie,
South Maine Prairie in Stearns;
Forest Prairie in Meeker

Larry Huhn, Vice President — District 8
Darwin, Ellsworth in Meeker

Karen Becker, Treasurer — District 2
Eden Lake in Stearns;
Harvey, Manannah in Meeker

Paul Bugbee, Secretary — District 1
Roseville, Irving in Kandiyohi;
Paynesville in Stearns;
Union Grove in Meeker

Open Seat — District 4
Litchfield, Greenleaf in Meeker

Open Seat — District 5
Fairhaven in Stearns; Cokato, Southside,
French Lake in Wright; Dassel in Meeker

Neil Pearson — District 6
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Lake Elizabeth, E. Lake Lillian in Kandiyohi;
Cosmos, Acton, Danielson, Swede Grove
in Meeker; Brookfield, Boon Lake in Renville

Randy Bryant — District 7
Collinwood, Cedar Mills in Meeker;
Stockholm in Wright;
Acoma, Hutchinson in McLeod

Jesse Turck — District 9
North Kingston, Kingston,
Forest City in Meeker

Chad Felstul, Attorney



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Send Attention: Editor at the address above.

DISTRICT 4 DIRECTOR POSITION VACATED APPLICATIONS NOW BEING ACCEPTED

The District 4 seat on Meeker Cooperative's board of directors is now open. District 4 includes the following townships: Litchfield and Greenleaf in Meeker.

Meeker Cooperative's bylaws specify that the Board of Directors may appoint a member to fill any open board seat. Once appointed, the Director will serve until the next Annual Meeting, at which time the seat will be up for election by the membership of the district to fill the unexpired term.

If you are interested in applying for the District 4 Director position, the Director Qualifications and the Application Form may be found on Meeker Cooperative's website at www.meeker.coop. Select Member Services at the upper left and then Download Forms from the dropdown menu. Click on the Director Application packet to download the materials. You can also call Mary Alice Holm at 320-693-3231 to request a packet.

The application deadline is close of business (4:30 p.m.) on November 10. Selected applicants will be notified and will be interviewed in person by the Board of Directors on Monday, November 27.

REMINDER: Applications for the director seat in District 5 (Fairhaven in Stearns, Cokato, Southside, French Lake in Wright, and Dassel in Meeker) are due by the close of business (4:30 p.m.) on September 8.

MORE NEWS & CLASSIFIEDS ONLINE

Keep up-to-date with your Cooperative in-between issues of the Pioneer and browse our classifieds online at:
www.meeker.coop/news.