PAGE COOPERATIVE ICONTERES

The official publication of





Meeker Co-op is an Equal Opportunity
Provider and Employer

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2023

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Small Change Makes A Big Impact

Meeker Cooperative's Operation Round Up® Program Reaches \$1 Million Dollar Milestone In 1998, Meeker Cooperative launched the Operation Round Up® program, marking the beginning of a remarkable journey in community-driven philanthropy. This year, the Cooperative proudly marked a significant achievement by distributing \$1 million in charitable funds to diverse organizations and projects in its service territory and educational scholarships, showcasing the program's enduring impact.

"Through Operation Round Up®, the Cooperative gives members and subscribers the opportunity to give back by rounding up their monthly bill to the nearest dollar," Luke Johnson, Meeker Cooperative CEO explained. "The rounded-up funds, which are between 1¢ and 99¢ per member or subscriber, per month, are placed in a Trust Fund and used to provide grants, to fund local organizations and scholarships."

Funds have been utilized for a diverse array of projects, from supporting community libraries and preserving local history to assisting senior

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CONTINUED: Operation Round Up Milestone



citizens, funding fire departments, and enhancing environmental conservation efforts. The impact has been profound, facilitating social networking opportunities, community celebrations, and education programs that bring people together.

The Meeker Cooperative Electric Trust Board selects grant recipients through a thorough process. Non-profit organizations submit applications, which are researched by assigned Trustees. During Trust Board meetings, applications are discussed and funding decisions are made based on available funds and Trust guidelines. The selection process prioritizes new funding requests and focuses on dispersing contributions to multiple organizations in the Cooperative's service territory. Major



funding categories include Community Service, Economic Development, Education and Youth, Environment, Emergency Energy Assistance, and Disaster Relief.

"One of the program's most outstanding aspects is how it fosters a sense of community and engagement. The average member contribution in 2022 was just \$5.78, emphasizing that when small contributions come together, they can make a substantial impact," shared Johnson. The Trust Board gave out a total of \$57,865 in grants and scholarships in 2022."

As Meeker Cooperative continues to grow and engage more participants, the future of Operation Round Up® looks promising. The Cooperative remains committed to supporting a wide variety of community projects

Your support of our Operation Round Up® (ORU) program has made a remarkable impact on our communities. Thanks to your generosity, we've been able to provide crucial funding for various projects, enhancing the well-being of our residents. This collective effort, enabled by your small yet meaningful donations, is a testament to the strength of our community. We extend our heartfelt thanks to you, our valued members and subscribers, for making a significant difference in the lives of those we serve.

and initiatives that enhance the well-being of their service territory. This program serves as a win-win opportunity for members, subscribers, and the wider community, epitomizing the power of collective giving.

In the spirit of gratitude, Meeker Cooperative extends heartfelt thanks to its members, subscribers, employees, and past management who laid the foundation for this remarkable initiative. The \$1 million milestone is not just a number; it is a testament to the Cooperative's unwavering dedication to its communities.



Join us for "Coffee on the Co-op" in December! Sip on coffee and savor treats from 9-11 am. On December 8, join us to also celebrate our \$1 Million Dollar Operation Round Up milestone. **TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5** Shady's 55 – Paynesville

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6 Keek's – Watkins

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7 The Handle Bar, Atwater

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8 Meeker Co-op



ENTER THE 2023 COLORING CONTEST

Choose from two coloring pages available at www.meeker.coop/color23 or pick them up at our office. Members can submit entries for the Coloring Contest by December 2. Three winners from each age group will be selected via voting at Coffee on the Co-op. Winners receive a \$10 Walmart Gift Card and their art will be featured in the Pioneer magazine and on our website.

Entries can be dropped off at our office or mailed to Coloring Contest - Meeker Cooperative, 1725 U.S. Hwy. 12 E., Suite 100, Litchfield, MN 55355.







CEO MESSAGE
COOPERATIVE
FINANCIAL
PLANNING AND
ANNUAL BUDGET

As we approach the end of the year, I want to provide you with an update regarding Meeker Cooperative's financial planning and annual budgeting process. To ensure the quality and integrity of our services, our management team and board of directors carefully assess the Cooperative's financial landscape each year. This includes analyzing operating costs and comparing them to projected income.

The Cooperative has felt many of the same financial pressures as the businesses and families we serve including inflation, increased interest rates, and supply chain disruptions. These challenges, combined with the rising costs of wholesale power, have put a strain on our budget.

As part of our commitment to responsible financial management, we have taken an additional proactive step this year. We are collaborating with a respected engineering firm to conduct a comprehensive Cost-of-Service study. This study aims to identify ways to manage increased costs while minimizing the impact on our members and it also identifies a variety of rate configurations to do so.

Despite our best efforts to control costs without compromising reliability, it *may* become necessary for us to adjust our rates in 2024. We want to assure you that this decision will only be made after a methodical examination of our financial structure and all identifiable associated costs. Our aim is to ensure reliable service in a robust and financially stable manner.

There are several primary drivers behind the need to thoroughly review our rate structures:

- 1. Wholesale Power: Meeker Cooperative purchases wholesale electricity from multiple wholesale power providers who own generation and transmission resources or can purchase from the wholesale market. In 2024, our demand rate is increasing by 6.8%, and transmission costs are increasing by 12.3%. At Meeker Cooperative, wholesale power costs account for 53% of our budget, so it's easy to see the net effect of these factors on our bottom line.
- 2. Material Costs: Over the past two years, we have experienced significant increases in material prices. For example, the cost of a 15 kVA transformer, widely used throughout our system, has increased by 121%

from 2020 to 2023. 200-amp meter sockets have risen by 38% and our most frequently used utility pole has surged by 91%. Similar increases have been observed for other essential materials. Additionally, we've historically maintained lean inventory levels due to our suppliers' capability of providing "just-in-time delivery." However, we no longer enjoy this convenience and to ensure a reliable supply we have had to order material well in advance or in larger quantities when product is available, increasing our carrying costs.

- **3. Rising Interest Rates:** The impact of rising interest rates on our operations and financial planning cannot be ignored either. These rates directly affect our borrowing costs for capital improvement projects like upgrading the distribution system.
- 4. General Inflation: Like many other industries, we are facing the effects of general inflation which has driven up the cost of everything. The same price increases that members see on everyday items such as gas and groceries also affect our operational costs.

Ultimately, an increase in rates may be necessary to cover the increased cost of doing business while maintaining the quality, reliability, and integrity of the services we provide and that you have come to expect from us. The board will review budgetary needs and will determine the appropriate path to take. We understand that a rate increase is never a popular choice, but as a member-owned utility, it's vital that we speak honestly and openly about these things. Times are tough as the cost of everything continues to rise. All of us here at Meeker Cooperative are living this reality, too. However, it is crucial to ensure that the lights stay on and that we can continue to maintain and upgrade the electric system.

In the meantime, we are doing everything we can internally to manage costs. We have already made several adjustments to cover rising expenses across all areas of our operations and we remain committed to minimizing the impact on your daily lives. We appreciate your understanding and support as we navigate these financial hurdles. Our goal is to continue providing you with the reliable electricity you need at the most affordable cost possible. We will keep you updated throughout the process and are available to address any questions or concerns you may have. Thank you for being a valued member of Meeker Cooperative.

Dedicated to keeping the lights on and the data flowing,

Luke Johnson CEO, Meeker Cooperative

MEEKER CO-OP WILL RETIRE \$1,162,383 IN CAPITAL CREDITS

The Meeker Cooperative Board of Directors recently approved the general retirement of \$1,162,383 in capital credits. This includes the amounts paid to estates and former members in 2023 and members who received electricity from the Co-op in 1995, along with power supplier capital credits from 1995. In the past 20 years, Meeker Co-op has retired nearly \$17 million of capital credits.

A defining feature of your Co-op membership and a principle that guides us is your economic participation. The partnership we have with you, as memberowners of Meeker Cooperative, rests on our commitment to prudently use the resources you provide. Capital Credits are quantifiable proof that as a member of Meeker Cooperative, you are an owner of a successful, effective organization.

As a not-for-profit electric cooperative, Meeker Cooperative is not like other utilities— you, as a member and consumer, own a portion of the business. One benefit of that ownership involves the allocation of excess revenue, called margins, based on how much power (total kilowatt hours) you purchase each year. Margins are initially used by the Co-op as capital to operate the business giving us the means to create a reliable system and invest in our infrastructure without taking out large, high-interest loans. When the organization's financial position permits, Meeker Cooperative retires, or pays, a portion of these Capital Credits back to its members.

CURRENT MEMBERS

If you are a current member and qualify to receive capital credits, you will see a credit on your electric bill in December.

FORMER MEMBERS

Former members will receive a check for their share of capital credits in December as well. Checks are issued once a member's capital credit retired amount totals a minimum of \$25. If a former member's capital credits do not reach the minimum amount of \$25, the Co-op retains them until a future year when the minimum is reached and then they are paid out.

UNCLAIMED CAPITAL CREDITS

Every year we have members who have moved off our lines and left no forwarding address with the Co-op. When it's time to return capital credits to these members, we often have trouble locating them.

To check to see if you or someone you may know is on our unclaimed list visit www.meeker.coop/capital/credits. Click "Unclaimed Capital Credits" to download the complete PDF list.

We continue to try to locate these members for seven years, after which the law allows us to donate their capital credits to the Operation Round Up® program to provide scholarships for educational purposes.

If you are entitled to a payout for the current retirement of capital credits or if you are no longer a member in 2023, you also have the option of donating these funds to Operation Round Up.

If you recognize any of the names on the "Unclaimed Capital Credits" list and can provide us with a current address, or if you would like to donate all or a portion of your capital credit payout to Operation Round Up, please contact Jammie at 320-693-3231.

Receiving capital credits is just one of the many advantages of being a rural electric cooperative member/owner.

HOW CAPITAL CREDITS WORK



STEP ONE

Money to cover operating costs comes directly from members paying their monthly electric bills.



STEP TWO

Operating expenses are subtracted from the money collected and the margin is allocated to members based on your energy purchases.



STEP THREE

The margin is used by the Cooperative for operating capital, necessary reserves, storm damage and other contingencies.



STEP FOUR

When the Cooperative's financial condition permits, the Board decides to retire Capital Credits. Credits are then converted into money and sent to you in the form of a check.

INTRODUCING OUR NEW DISTRICT 5 BOARD MEMBER: DAVID LEONHARDI

We are delighted to introduce the newest addition to the Meeker Cooperative Board of Directors, Mr. David Leonhardi.

David, who currently works as the Sales and Marketing Manager at Nasonville Dairy, brings a wealth of knowledge and skills to our cooperative. With a bachelor's degree focused on marketing from Metropolitan State University, his career has primarily revolved around creating marketing programs for consumer products. His strong communication skills have enabled him to effectively deliver products that meet customer needs.

David's community involvement and leadership experience are equally impressive. He previously managed a number of youth sports programs and has also served on the Cooperative's Electric Trust Board, Cooperative 101 Member Group, and the Qualification and Election Committee demonstrating his dedication to community service and organizational leadership.

In a recent interview, David shared his motivations and vision for his role on Meeker Cooperative's Board. He emphasized the importance of listening to our members' needs and fostering open-minded discussions. He also highlighted his broad-based experiences and his past role as a board chairman for a nonprofit, which have prepared him for this position.

David sees the critical challenges facing the Cooperative as retaining



exceptional employees and expanding our services. He intends to contribute to these challenges by focusing on employee satisfaction and exploring opportunities for growth, such as broadband expansion.

For David, the key to a strong relationship between the Cooperative and its members is effective communication, which includes not only delivering quality products and services but also encouraging members to voice their opinions and ideas.

David Leonhardi's skills, experiences, and commitment to open dialogue make him an exceptional addition to our Board, and we look forward to his contributions.

STATEMENT OF NON-DISCRIMINATION

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs).

Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident. Person with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ad-3027.pdf and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by:

- (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights 1400 Independence, Ave, SW, STOP 9410 Washington, DC 20250-9410; or
- (2) fax: (833) 256-1665 or (202) 690-7442; or
- (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.
- USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.



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.

EMPOWERING CONNECTIONS: VIBRANT HIGH-SPEED BROADBAND UNLOCKS POSSIBILITY

High-speed broadband internet has become an indispensable tool in today's digital age, offering a variety of benefits to businesses and residential users alike.

For businesses, fast and reliable internet connectivity is the backbone of operations. It enables seamless communication, swift data transfer, and efficient collaboration, fostering productivity and innovation. With high-speed broadband, businesses can engage in video conferences, share large files instantaneously, and access cloud-based services, enhancing their competitiveness.



"VIBRANT Broadband has been a game-changer for Litchfield Chrysler. We initially opted for their fixed wireless, a significant improvement over our previous service. When VIBRANT introduced fiber in Litchfield, we upgraded and were impressed by the speed and their exceptional service department. From signing up to installation, their staff was friendly and prompt. In today's fast-paced business world, their reliability is invaluable. We recommend VIBRANT to any business in need of top-notch internet and telecom services." - Litchfield Chrysler

On the residential front, high-speed broadband transforms the way people access information, entertainment, and education. It allows for buffer-free streaming of movies, online gaming, and virtual learning experiences. Home-based professionals can work efficiently, students can access educational resources seamlessly, and families can connect with loved ones through video calls without disruptions.



"Before VIBRANT brought fiber optics to my neighborhood, gaming was nearly impossible. Now, multiple gaming systems and media devices run seamlessly at once. Since installation, the service speed increased three times and we haven't had any disruptions. I recommended VIBRANT to friends, and they've experienced the same excellent service."

- William Brynteson

Whether you run a business needing seamless online operations or you're a passionate gamer craving uninterrupted service at home, VIBRANT Broadband offers a fast and reliable package that fits YOU!



LEARN MORE AT vibrantbb.net



2024 SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

BASIN EPC \$1,000 COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP AVAILABLE FOR DEPENDENTS OF COOPERATIVE MEMBERS & VIBRANT CUSTOMERS

Meeker Cooperative is pleased to make available a \$1,000 college scholarship funded by Basin Electric Power Cooperative, one Meeker's power suppliers.

To be eligible a student must:

- be a dependent child (including adopted or step-children) of a Meeker Cooperative member or VIBRANT customer;
- be enrolled or planning to enroll in a full-time undergraduate course of study at an accredited, two-year or four-year college, university or vocational/technical school; enter college in the fall of the same year the scholarship is given;
- not have previously received this award;
- be a US citizen; and
- complete and submit all required materials and the scholarship application form by the application deadline.

Completed applications must reach Meeker Cooperative by close of business on Wednesday, January 31, 2024. The application is available on Meeker's website under Member Services (www. meeker.coop/ download-forms). The form may be completed online, but must be printed to submit with the supporting materials. Applications are also available at the Cooperative or by calling Mary Alice Holm at 320-693-3231.

All decisions by the Scholarship Selection Committee will be final.

\$1,000 MEEKER COOPERATIVE ELECTRIC TRUST NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP

A \$1,000 scholarship is being offered to a student five or more years beyond high school graduation who is working toward a degree, certificate or licenser in some area of expertise. Applicants must be a Meeker Cooperative member or employee, or VIBRANT customer. Eligible candidate must:

- have an educational plan,
- have been enrolled for at least one quarter or semester in the chosen program, and
- be a member or employee of Meeker Cooperative or a VIBRANT customer.

Application is available on Meeker's website under Member Services (meeker.coop/download-forms), at the Cooperative, or by calling 320-693-3231. Application deadline: Close of business (4:30 p.m.) February 1, 2024.

The scholarship is made available by the Meeker Cooperative Electric Trust and funded by Operation Round Up®.

TEN WINTER ENERGY SAVING TIPS



- **1. MAINTAIN HEATING SYSTEMS:** Regularly service your furnace or heat pump; clean or replace filters to ensure they operate at peak efficiency.
- **2. SEAL THE GAPS:** Check windows and doors for drafts; seal gaps with weatherstripping or caulk to prevent heat loss.
- **3. INVEST IN INSULATION:** Insulate your attic, walls, and floors; proper insulation significantly reduces heat loss and keeps your home warm.
- **4. PROGRAMMABLE THERMOSTAT:** Invest in a programmable thermostat to regulate your home's temperature efficiently, lowering it when you're away or asleep.
- **5. CEILING FAN HACK:** Reverse ceiling fan direction to clockwise; this circulates warm air trapped near the ceiling back into the room.
- **6. ENERGY-EFFICIENT HOLIDAY DECOR:**Use LED lights for your winter holiday decorations; they are energy-efficient

and last longer, reducing the overall energy consumption during the festive season.

7. WARM BEDDING: Invest in warm, cozy bedding such as flannel sheets, thick blankets, and down comforters, allowing you to lower the thermostat at night while staying comfortably warm.

8. WINTER COOKING EFFICIENCY:

Plan meals that require baking or stove top cooking, which naturally warms your home while providing nourishing, hot meals for your family.

- **9. FIREPLACE EFFICIENCY:** If you have a fireplace, close the damper when it's not in use to prevent warm indoor air from escaping.
- **10. USE DRAFT STOPPERS:** Place draft stoppers at the bottom of doors to prevent cold drafts from entering your home, helping maintain a warmer indoor temperature.

FEATURED RECIPE

FREEZER CORN

Congratulations to Jan Johnson for submitting this issue's winning recipe.



INGREDIENTS:

- 14 cups of corn cut off the ear (approximately 2 dozen)
- 1 pint of 1/2 & 1/2 cream
- 1 cup butter
- 1/2 cup sugar

DIRECTIONS:

Mix corn, cream, butter and sugar in a large roaster. Bake at 300 degrees for 45 minutes, stirring about every 15 minutes. Quickly cool completely in ice water, freeze in freezer bags or containers.

Submit your favorite Sweet Potato 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: December 15, 2023.
Email to: szeppelin@meeker.coop | Mail to: Meeker Coop, ATTN: Shane 1725 US Hwy 12 E, Ste 100, Litchfield, MN 55355

WILLIE WIREDHAND'S ELECTRICITY FUN FACT

The first electric Christmas lights were used in 1882. Edward H. Johnson, a close

associate of inventor
Thomas Edison, is
credited with the
idea of using electric
lights for Christmas
tree decoration. He
hand-wired 80 red,
white, and blue electric
incandescent light bulbs
and wound them around
his Christmas tree.

MEMBER NEWS

HOLIDAY HOURS

The Meeker Cooperative office will be closed November 23-24, December 25-26, and January 1 for the Holidays.

SALES-TAX EXEMPTION

You may be exempt from state and local sales tax for your electricity during the heating season if your primary residential heat source is electricity. If more than 50% of the main heat source for a residence comes from purchased electricity, you are exempt from Minnesota and local sales tax during the months of November through April. All electricity used through the same meter, whether for heating purposes or not, is also exempt throughout this six-month period. The sales tax exemption form can be found online at meeker.coop/ download-forms, or call 320-693-3231 to have a paper copy sent to you. We are updating our records so please submit a form even if you had previously done so. If you have changed your method of heating since filling out the form, please let us know.

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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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.









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FARMFEST WINNER!

Members of Meeker Cooperative stopped by the Co-op Booth during the August 2023 Farmfest.

We're thrilled to announce that Wayne and Yvonne Johnson were the lucky winners of an Ego 530 CFM Cordless Leaf Blower. Congratulations to them!





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