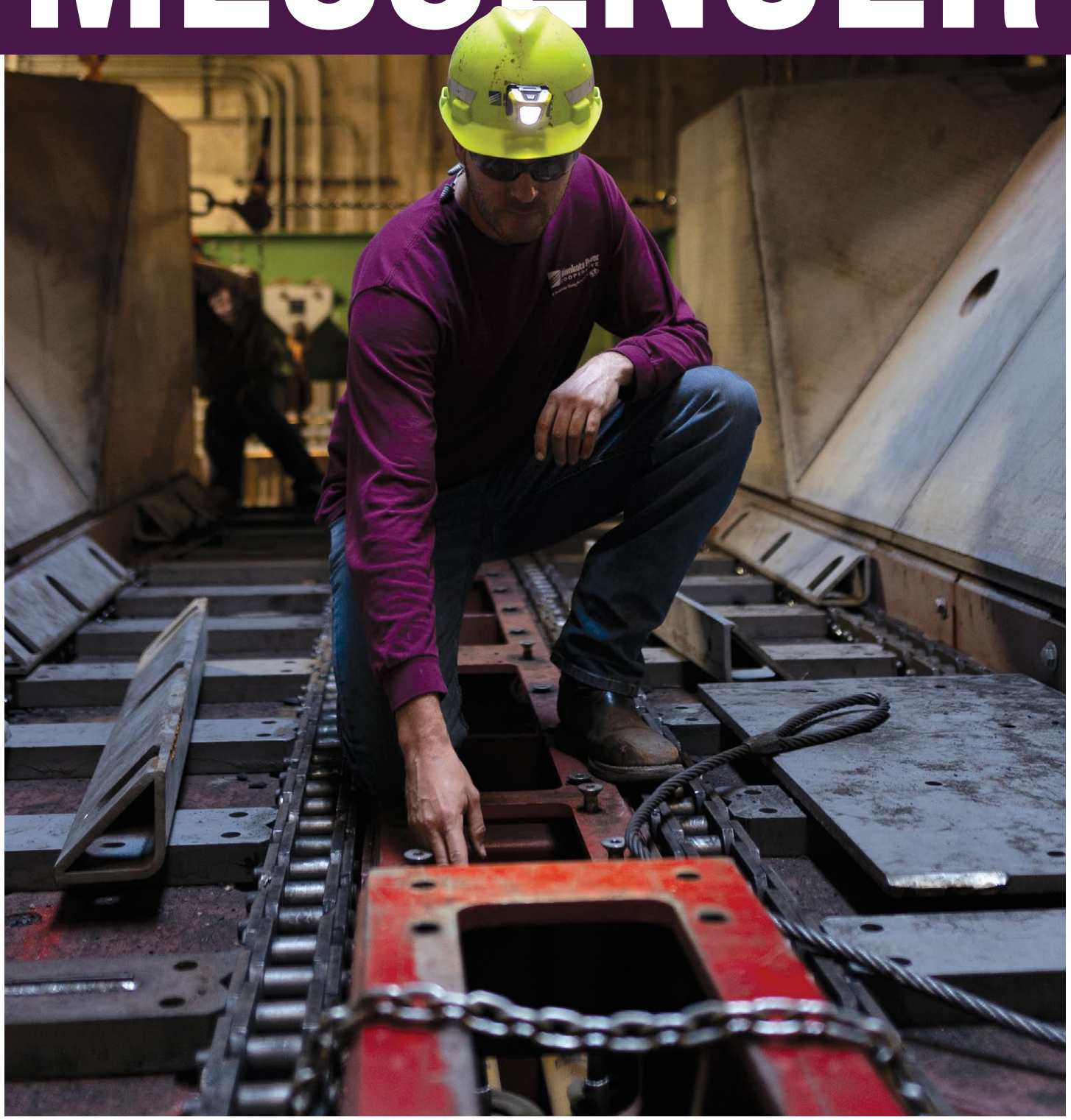
MINNKOTA

MESSENGER



NOVEMBER – DECEMBER 2025

4 FEELING THE CRUNCH

A planned maintenance outage happens once every three years on Milton R. Young 2. In 2025, it was anything but routine, with more than 500 people working against the clock to complete dozens of inspection and repair projects.

On the cover: Minnkota Plant Engineer Sam Schwanberg inspects the track of a new coal feeder system, one of many key upgrades completed during the Unit 2 maintenance outage.

***Minnkota Messenger** is published six times a year by Minnkota Power Cooperative. Its mission is to communicate Minnkota's perspectives and concerns to its members, elected officials, employees and other business audiences. For editorial inquiries, call (701) 795-4282 or email bfladhammer@minnkota.com.*

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Minnkota Power Cooperative is a generation and transmission cooperative headquartered in Grand Forks, North Dakota. It supplies wholesale electricity to 11 member-owner distribution cooperatives, three in eastern North Dakota and eight in northwestern Minnesota. Minnkota also serves as operating agent for the Northern Municipal Power Agency, an association of 12 municipal utilities in the same service region. Together, the Joint System serves more than 169,000 consumers.

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10 A HIGH-VOLTAGE HIGH-WIRE ACT

When work calls where bucket trucks dare not go, it's time to enlist aerial expertise. Minnkota partnered with airborne lineworkers this fall to enhance reliability on its largest line.

14 MINNKOTA BOARD APPROVES 2026 BUDGET AND RATES

With its 2026 budget and rates now approved, Minnkota is positioned with a solid roadmap for the year ahead. The cooperative is preparing for an eventful 2026 marked by major projects, new opportunities and significant milestones on the horizon.

16 MINNKOTA AND COBANK ARE SHARING SUCCESS

Minnkota and CoBank teamed up once again this year to donate $60,000 to local community organizations through the Sharing Success program.

20 CONTROLLED CHAOS

What happens when more than 100 utility professionals are thrown into a controlled grid crisis? Go behind the scenes of Minnkota's most intense and collaborative GridEx yet.

Mark Alton Thorson

1988 - 2025

Minnkota lost a member of the family this November. Area Lineworker Mark Thorson passed away in a non-work-related accident at his home near Edinburg, North Dakota. Our hearts are with his loved ones and friends; he will be dearly missed.

FEELING THE CRUNCH

Minnkota's Young Station team navigates complex project schedule during planned outage

By Kaylee Cusack
Photography Michael Hoeft

Hidden beneath the footprint of the Milton R. Young Station near Center, North Dakota, is a multi-ton piece of equipment that tour groups rarely see. Not because it's not important. In fact, the Unit 2 primary crusher is one of the most crucial elements of the coal-based power plant process of electric generation.

It's just a lot of stairs into the Earth to get to it – a journey Minnkota Plant Engineer Sam Schwanberg got used to as he facilitated the complicated work of replacing it.

"This has been my life for the last three months," he said at the base of multiple levels of steps. "Here is the new crusher. We still have a little bit of work to do on it, but at this point it's about 90% complete."

Schwanberg's primary crusher and feeder replacement project was one of several major undertakings on the docket for the Unit 2 planned maintenance outage, which occurs every three years at the Young Station. During the weekslong outage, the generating unit is taken offline for thorough inspection, maintenance and repairs, while its Unit 1 counterpart continues to provide power for the Minnkota membership. The triennial outage cycle ensures the plant remains reliable, efficient and up to date with the latest technology.

In the case of the primary crusher, Minnkota's engineers knew that an updated design would prevent a lot of repair headaches (and extra costs) down the road.

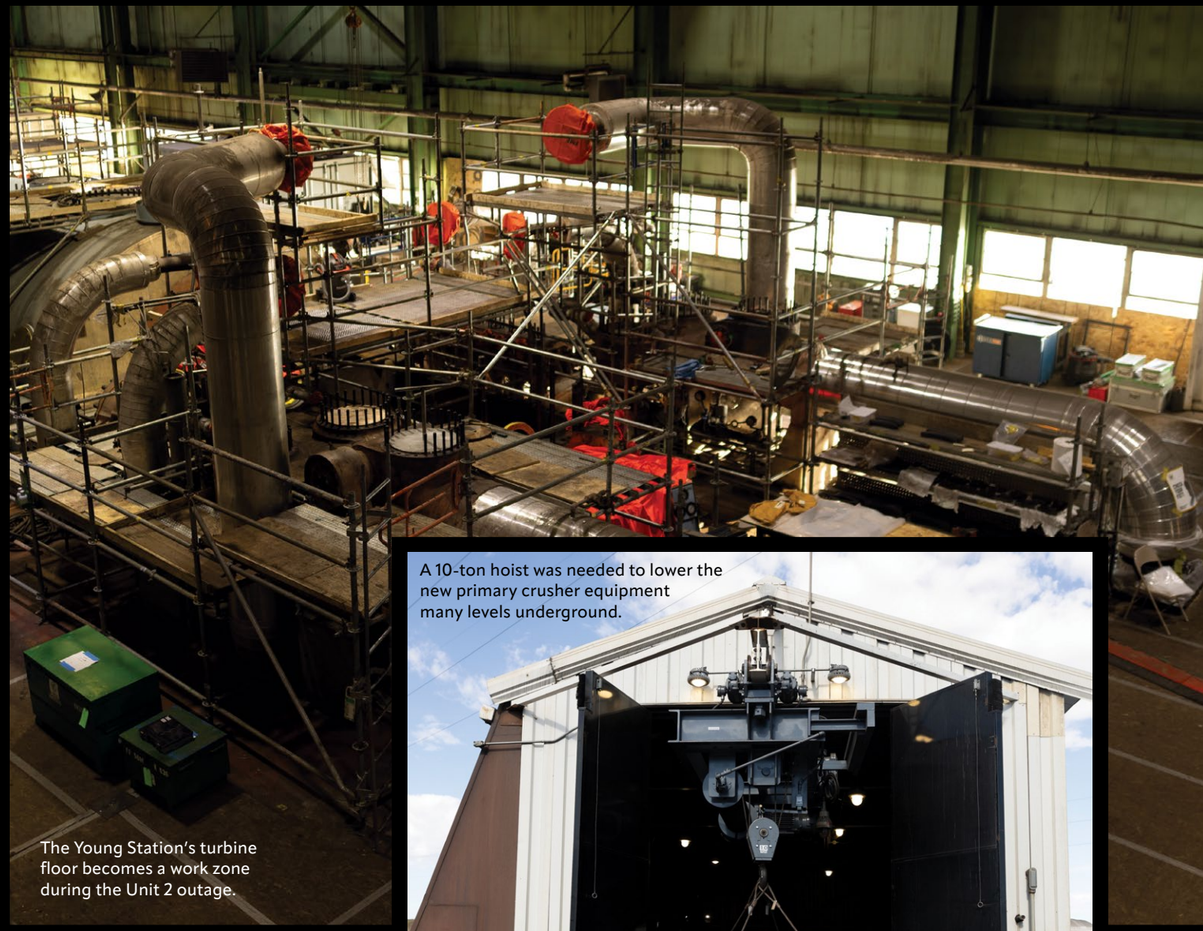
"The old crusher had a sharper tooth design to it. Those teeth would break off when you put rocks through it, and that was a ton of work for us to maintain," Schwanberg explained. "This new crusher is more of a blunt tooth design and is more equipped to handle rocks specifically. We don't want to crush the rocks, but we want to be able to pass them though and retrieve them before they reach our secondary crushers. The old crusher did not have that capability."

Outage-time hustle

As Schwanberg and his team focused on their below-ground goals, the rest of the plant hummed with the daily activity of nearly 400 contractors and 100 Minnkota employees, all working extended hours to finish dozens of projects within the outage timeframe. The timeline was driven by three large "critical path projects,"

Minnkota Plant Engineer Sam Schwanberg looks over the new primary coal crusher and feeder system installed during the Unit 2 outage.

A contractor completes welding work during the Unit 2 outage.



The Young Station's turbine floor becomes a work zone during the Unit 2 outage.

A 10-ton hoist was needed to lower the new primary crusher equipment many levels underground.

project management lingo used to describe the longest tasks within the outage. The primary crusher replacement was one such project, along with replacing Unit 2's protective relay system and several air heater modules.

"Those are probably the top three projects for this outage, but there's so much more going on," said Tim Michlitsch, Minnkota Plant Manager of Engineering & Reliability. "The other items just happen to be smaller in scale or perhaps won't delay a startup if we don't get it done by the end date. For example, we can't operate without the air heater, so we don't have the option to finish it later."

The 2025 outage was also an opportunity to open up the massive Unit 2 turbine. This centerpiece equipment, which is responsible for the generation of electricity, is inspected during major outages every three years, with its major components having nine-year inspection intervals. This year, the high- and intermediate-pressure

rotors were inspected. In three years, the low-pressure rotors will get a look, and the generator itself will be inspected three years later.

"We don't really know what we're going to find, because it's covered by several layers of casing," Michlitsch said of the rotors inspected this year, which showed some erosion on the blades that would need repair. "That's an example of a discoverable that there's really no way we could have had on the books as a repair without taking this time for the outage."

Minnkota's maintenance coordinators and project leaders ran into their share of typical challenges during the Unit 2 outage, managing newly discovered work and supply chain speedbumps. However, as happens with every Young Station outage, crews and contractors remained adaptable at every turn.

"Every day during the morning 9 a.m. meeting, I get to witness teamwork at its finest," said Neil Kramar, Minnkota Plant Manager of Operations & Maintenance. "On the project manager level, it's difficult to talk in front of a group of 40 others and have the courage to say your project is falling off pace and you may need help, or we will be looking at a schedule push. I observe true leadership when others step in and offer resources and time to help them understand their barriers and get back on track."

Ultimately, Unit 2 was delayed in coming back online due to unforeseen hurdles. But the teamwork Kramar spoke of helped to minimize the impacts of the outage extension.

Under pressure

Schwanberg has been an engineer at the Young Station for six years, and 2025 marked his fourth major planned outage. Although he's one of the younger engineers, he's already taken the helm of two major capital projects. This year's primary crusher and feeder project was not only the largest venture of the outage, it was the most involved, requiring the coordination of a team of scaffold builders, electricians, millwrights, pipe fitters and iron workers.

On top of that, Schwanberg took over the project from another engineer late in the nearly two-year planning process, so he had to work even harder to wrap his arms around the complexity of the job.

"It's kind of scary, to be honest, but I have a huge supporting team helping me," he said, contractors buzzing around him. "All the planners, electricians, foremen out here, the contractors, superintendents: We're all in it together. We all want the same thing."

"Sam has just moved right through the workload and stayed positive, and he's done a great job," Michlitsch said. "If you have a team member or a team leader that's staying positive, I think it really helps keep everybody else going in the right direction."

For the Young Station, a maintenance outage is an opportunity to observe and strengthen the many individual pieces of equipment that work together to supply power to the region. But more than that, outages are an opportunity to observe and strengthen the young leaders and teammates who will serve as the plant's keepers for years to come.

"My proudest moments are when I see the smiles return to the faces of the employees when we realize the unit is finally up and running again," Kramar said. "Each individual had their own unique circumstances where they contributed to the overall success."

Schwanberg led a large team of contractors and Minnkota colleagues through the primary crusher and feeder project.

Minnkota Plant Technician Josh Troyna assists with the primary crusher installation.

Minnkota Plant Mechanic Michael Grinsteiner installs a pressure relief valve on a feedwater heater.

A HIGH-VOLTAGE HIGH-WIRE ACT

Minnkota leverages airborne linework partner for transmission line reliability projects

By Kaylee Cusack
Photography Michael Hoeft

Wind and wheat.

North Dakotans are accustomed to an abundance of both in the late summer season. The combination creates a visual effect that early American patriots wrote songs about – amber waves of grain, and all.

But when you're hovering a helicopter within spitting distance of an energized 345-kilovolt (kV) transmission line, with your teammate actively adding equipment to the hot conductor, a wave through the amber grains means a wind gust. And wind gusts are bad news for chopper blades.

It's a good thing George Denton is a seasoned utility pilot for HLH Aviation, the company Minnkota Power Cooperative contracted to assist with a July through October maintenance and outage mitigation project on one of its largest transmission lines. Denton flies for jobs like this all over the country, but the Red River Valley proved to be a challenge.

"Minnkota has been good to us, but North Dakota has not been good. It's flat and windy," he joked after pulling off his flight helmet for a break. The pilot and his crewmate had just set down in a rural landing zone near Aneta, North Dakota. They had to change their flight plan for the day due to a change in wind direction. "We'd be fighting a crosswind, and the aircraft doesn't like it."

An HLH Aviation crew hovers beside a 345-kilovolt transmission line near Aneta, North Dakota.

HLH Aviation's precision, experience and airborne equipment made them a perfect collaborator for the first phase of Minnkota's four-year project to improve reliability on the 250-mile transmission line that runs from Center to Grand Forks, North Dakota. The initial phase focuses on the 80-mile span from Binford to Grand Forks and will continue to the west in the years to come.

Power over the wind

In the first months of the project, HLH performed "hot work," floating more than 100 feet off the ground to add airflow spoilers to the energized 345-kV line. The airflow spoilers, 16-foot plastic spirals, wrap around the conductor at 15-foot intervals. This creates a profile that makes it difficult for ice to form on the line.

Airflow spoilers were added by hand while the line was still energized.

"When ice forms, it can create an airflow like an airplane wing. And that's one of the main mechanisms for galloping lines in the wind," explained Brenden LaHaise, Minnkota transmission engineer. "That's what gives it the lift to start to move, and that motion can get violent and cause outages."

In addition to 20 miles of airflow spoiler placement, HLH took advantage of a multiweek planned maintenance outage at Minnkota's Milton R. Young Station to perform additional work on the line while it was de-energized. During that time, three helicopter crews installed new phase vibration dampers to mitigate aeolian vibrations. This kind of vibration occurs as wind flows over the phases and, over time, can cause damage to the arms or other structural components. Finally, the crews took care of some general maintenance while aloft, such as changing out broken glass insulators.

An aerial lineworker twists an airflow spoiler around the conductor.

Pilot George Denton readies for takeoff after reloading equipment.

Helicopters carried both equipment and crews from site to site, returning to a designated landing zone to regroup.

Two lineworkers strap into an air chair to install new phase vibration dampers.

Over just four months, the helicopters completed work that would have taken Minnkota much longer from the ground.

"For the airflow spoilers alone, we would have to drive, put one or two on, and then drive another 30-40 feet, put more on, and keep going," LaHaise said. "That would get excessively monotonous, and we'd be burning up a lot of time doing it. These helicopter crews can just float and put them on as they go."

Damage to land would also become a consideration, as larger equipment would be needed to reach the 100- to 150-foot-tall lines.

"Some of this 345-kV line is in less-than-ideal terrain," said Minnkota's Jake Beckel, the project's construction coordinator. "It doesn't run right along a road like a lot of our 69-kV system does. It's very cross country."

"The helicopter doesn't care about that," LaHaise added.

'Copter kinship

HLH Superintendent of Line Operations Caden Callaway has been flying with pilot George Denton for several years, executing airborne power line projects across the country. They've built a mutual confidence that strips away any fear of heights.

"I mean, I'm aware of it," said Callaway in his slight Southern drawl. "But you just make sure you're tied off and you trust in your equipment. One of the biggest things is trusting the pilot, and once you have that down, you're fine."

Aerial linework isn't for the anxious. Lineworkers often dangle from benches or harnessed chairs as they fly to a site, relying fully on the pilot's steady hand to maintain balance as they perform intricate tasks on the line. On top of the daredevil work itself, the HLH Aviation crew is constantly on the move from one state to the next to help utilities like Minnkota with their toughest jobs.

"I'm around these guys more than my wife and kid. Which is hard," said Callaway, who just welcomed a baby boy this year. "But the main thing that keeps me going, especially in my position, is just getting the next guys up and ready to go and making sure everybody's safe."

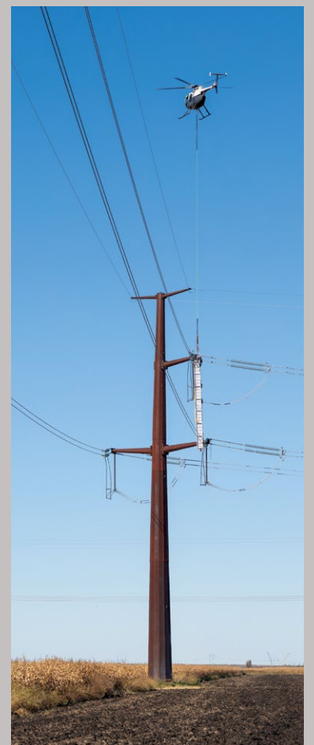
As much as the North Dakota wind proved to be troublesome for his crews, there were some qualities of the area that worked in their favor. For example, Callaway personally experienced North Dakota Nice several times while finding on-the-fly permission for landing zones.

"I just pulled into a driveway and started talking to somebody, and you would've thought I was their neighbor for the last 20 years," he laughed. "I ended up having to tell him, 'Hey, I gotta go to work, but it's been great talking to you.'"

The HLH team concluded their work before the start of November but will likely be back for future phases of the 345-kV project. And now it won't just be the wind and wheat welcoming them.

"That's a great thing about North Dakota," Callaway said. "There are plenty of wide-open places, a lot of options. Especially with everybody being so friendly."

The HLH helicopter lowers and balances a catwalk for crews to replace glass insulators.



MINNKOTA BOARD APPROVES 2026 BUDGET AND RATES

By Ben Fladhammer
Photography Michael Hoeft

This fall, the Minnkota Board of Directors approved the cooperative's 2026 capital and operating budgets, along with an average 4.1% rate increase for Class A member cooperatives effective April 1, 2026.

Minnkota President and CEO Mac McLennan said the cooperative continues to feel the effects of supply chain constraints and inflationary pressures. "Everything from transformers to transmission poles to basic hardware now comes with a much higher price tag," McLennan said. "We're constantly evaluating how to best allocate resources so we can protect reliability for our members while keeping the cooperative on solid financial footing."

As a not-for-profit cooperative, Minnkota collects revenue only to cover the cost of providing service and to meet required financial margins. For 2026, the cooperative projects operating revenues of $514.4 million and expenses of $496.5 million, resulting in a planned net margin of $17.9 million.

Minnkota's 2026 capital budget totals $179.4 million for projects, tools and equipment. Roughly $33 million of that amount will be reimbursed by other entities. The budget reflects the cooperative's commitment to modernizing aging infrastructure, improving system resilience and preparing for the future.

Approximately half of the capital budget is focused on power delivery investments, including high-voltage infrastructure development, programmatic substation and transmission line rebuilds and continued modernization of grid visibility through automation technologies. About 43% of the capital budget supports power production needs, most of which are dedicated to new generation development. The remainder invests in security, reliability and administrative projects.

"These investments come at a time when costs continue to rise, but they are essential," McLennan said. "Our employees will be tackling a major slate of projects in 2026 to address aging infrastructure, improve reliability, accommodate load growth and continue to meet the evolving needs of our membership."

Navigating an era of rapid industry change

Minnkota continues to operate in a period of rapid industry change. Shifts in generation technology, market dynamics and regulatory requirements are adding complexity. The cooperative's financial health, strengthened by years of disciplined operations and thoughtful planning, remains a crucial asset.

Minnkota maintains strong investment-grade credit ratings and continues to build its Resource Transition Fund, which is designated to address future power supply needs or respond to extreme wholesale energy market conditions.

"We're grateful for the continued support of our membership," McLennan said. "The decisions we make today ensure the strength and success of Minnkota for decades to come."

MATERIAL COST INCREASES SINCE 2020

The cost of keeping the electric grid strong has risen dramatically in recent years. From transformers to insulators, nearly every material required to build and maintain the system has become significantly more expensive, adding to the financial pressures faced by utilities like Minnkota.

TRANSFORMERS
↑ 88%

TRANSMISSION POLES
↑ 70%

INSULATORS
↑ 70%

LIGHTNING ARRESTORS
↑ 68%

SWITCHES
↑ 56%

CONDUCTOR
↑ 53%

CAPACITORS
↑ 43%

MINNKOTA AND COBANK ARE SHARING SUCCESS

Minnkota and CoBank give $60,000 in matched donations to community organizations through the Sharing Success program.

By Emily Windjue \\\ Photography Jennifer Erickson, Submitted

A cooperative's strength is rooted in its community. This year, Minnkota Power Cooperative joined with its longtime financing partner, CoBank, to support organizations across its service area. Square Butte Electric Cooperative, Minnkota's sister cooperative, also participated with donations in Oliver County, North Dakota. Through CoBank's Sharing Success program, the three cooperatives contributed a combined $60,000 to six wide-reaching organizations.

"Minnkota and Square Butte are grateful for the opportunity to partner with CoBank to double the impact of our donations," said Brita Endrud, Minnkota external affairs representative. "These contributions will help provide essential equipment, sustain vital services, and enhance quality of life in the region we are proud to call home."

Brita Endrud (center), Minnkota's external affairs representative, presents Farm Rescue volunteers with a check to help support farm families in need.

Kaylee Cusack (second from right), Minnkota senior communications specialist, and Brita Endrud (far right) present the Community Foundation of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks & Region a check to support Dolly Parton's Imagination Library efforts.

The funds donated to the Grand Forks Children's Museum will help create exhibits that feature the industries and life throughout the Red River Valley and surrounding communities. Minnkota's Sadie Gilbraith (second from right) and Stacey Dahl (far right) presented the donation.

Minnkota's roots run deep in the agricultural community. Employees, board members and member-consumers maintain strong ties to farms throughout the service territory. Each year, Minnkota allocates funds to Farm Rescue, whose mission is to assist up to 100 farming families in crisis annually. Minnkota and CoBank donated $10,000 to the organization in 2025.

"Each year direct assistance expenses increase like lodging, meals and repairs to equipment. Our local support is extremely important to cover a portion of these costs," said Tim Sullivan, executive director of Farm Rescue. "The funding support through the Minnkota and CoBank Sharing Success program provides annual volunteer expense support."

The Community Foundation of Grand Forks, East Grand Forks & Region is working to bring back a popular literacy program to the area. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library provides children from birth to age five a free, high-quality book each month, building home libraries of up to 60 books before kindergarten. The foundation received a joint $5,000 donation.

"We are deeply grateful to Minnkota and CoBank for recognizing the importance of early literacy and making an investment that will benefit children, families and our community for years to come," said Becca Baumbach, the foundation's president and CEO. "Together, Minnkota and CoBank will provide a year of free books for 142 children (that's 1,704 books!), ensuring that more children can be enrolled and that the program remains sustainable."

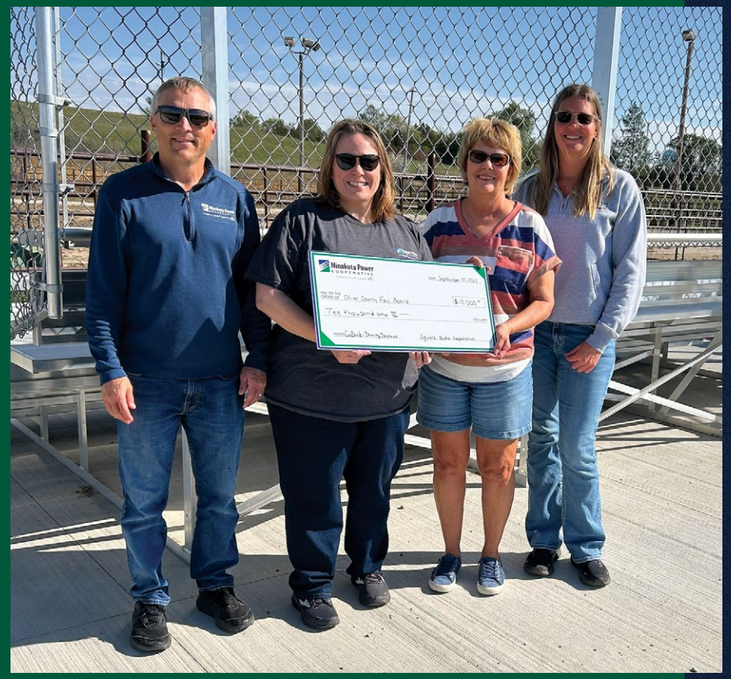
Minnkota employees present the Oliver County Rural Fire Protection District with a check on behalf of Square Butte Electric Cooperative.

The Grand Forks Children's Museum is nearing its groundbreaking on a year-round, affordable learning space where children can build confidence and explore STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) activities through play. The museum plans to highlight the industries and resources unique to the region. Minnkota and CoBank were proud to donate $15,000 to help this innovative organization get one step closer to its goal.

"These gifts create a year-round, affordable learning space where children build curiosity, confidence, and early STEM identity through play," said Diane Martinson, fundraising and event coordinator at the museum. "Families gain a welcoming place to learn together; teachers gain field trip and classroom-ready experiences; and employers benefit from earlier exposure to high-demand careers rooted in our local industries."

On behalf of Square Butte Electric Cooperative, Minnkota also donated $30,000 to organizations in Center, North Dakota, supporting projects that strengthen the community.

The Oliver County Fair Board was looking to add two new sets of bleachers to its arena space. The new bleachers include safety features like a back cage and handrails, which allowed the fairgrounds to accommodate more guests at all their community events. They received a total donation of $10,000 through the Sharing Success program.



Dawn Alderin, a member of the Oliver County Fair Board, is presented with a Sharing Success donation on behalf of Square Butte Electric Cooperative.

Minnkota employees Carlee McLeod (far right), Andy Freidt (center right) and Becky Berg (center left) present Laverne Hoffman at the Oliver County Food Pantry with a check on behalf of Square Butte Electric Cooperative.

"Donations from Minnkota and CoBank are very much appreciated not for just our board but for other organizations in our community," said Dawn Alderin, Oliver County Fair board member. "Without these donations a lot of projects would get put on the back burner and in some cases may not happen. With the fair board bleacher project, it will provide families attending events at the fairgrounds a safer option for seating at events for many years to come."

When the Oliver County Rural Fire Protection District's budget was reduced this year, Fire Chief Austin Weigel wasn't sure how they would complete major safety projects. The Sharing Success program provided $15,000 from Minnkota (on behalf of Square Butte) and CoBank to support their operations.

"Our department is extremely grateful to receive this donation," said Weigel. "It helps give us hope that we can keep the department operating to help protect our community. We are the only fire and rescue department within 20 miles and cover approximately 800 square miles. Our main priority is keeping our doors open for years to come."

A final $5,000 donation was made to the Oliver County Food Pantry, which supports about 40 families each month. As the county's only pantry, the organization also provides soap and paper products in its baskets.

In 2025, CoBank and its Sharing Success program matched $6 million in contributions across all 50 states, benefiting more than 1,100 rural communities. To learn more about the program, visit CoBank.com/citizenship.

CONTROLLED CHAOS

GridEx VIII simulates physical and cyber mayhem for Minnkota, members

By Ben Fladhammer \\\ Photography Michael Hoeft

On a calm November morning, the hallways inside Minnkota's headquarters were humming with a kind of purposeful chaos. Phones buzzed with urgent updates. Teams huddled over maps and monitors. Across conference rooms, more than 100 people – including cyber specialists, operations crews, communicators and many others – braced themselves for an escalating series of grid emergencies.

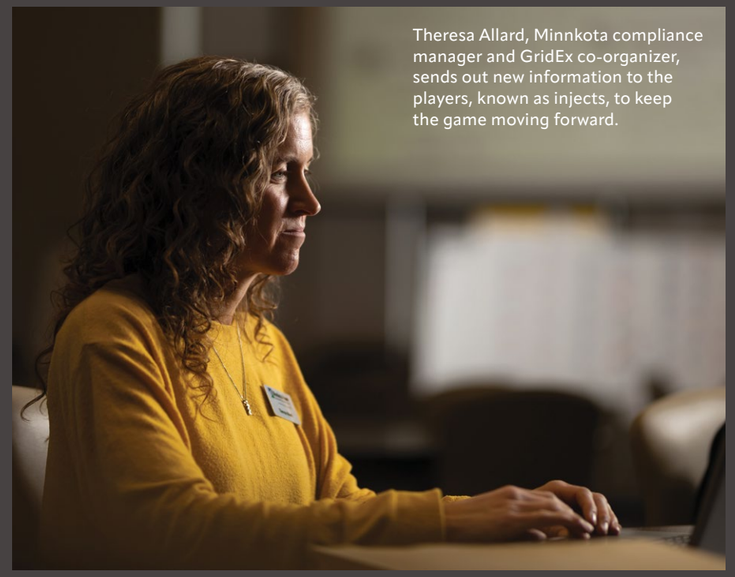
None of the threats were real. But the pressure sure was.

The name of the game is GridEx VIII, and Theresa Allard, co-organizer and Minnkota compliance manager, said the goal is to create realism but also simulate stress during the two-day exercise.

"We want them engaged through each step of the exercise, and we also want them to feel a little bit of pressure," Allard said. "There's a lot being thrown at them at one time. It's hard to get it exactly right, but we have fun trying."

GridEx is one of the world's largest grid security exercises organized by the North American Electric Reliability Corporation's (NERC) Electricity Information Sharing and Analysis Center (E-ISAC). For Minnkota and its members, it was the most expansive and collaborative version of the event the cooperative has ever undertaken. Together they faced simulated cyber intrusions, malware outbreaks, terrorist activity, supply disruptions, misinformation campaigns and even fictional grid attackers with chainsaws. The onslaught of challenges pushed the GridEx players to practice what they hope they never face: a cascading grid crisis with real-world consequences.

Dan Inman, Senior VP of Power Delivery and Chief Information Technology Officer, addresses the more than 100 GridEx players representing Minnkota and its member cooperatives during a designated debrief session.



Theresa Allard, Minnkota compliance manager and GridEx co-organizer, sends out new information to the players, known as injects, to keep the game moving forward.

Brandon Trontvet, a GridEx co-organizer, addresses the crowd during a hotwash – a time to gather and collectively share information and lessons learned.

A storyline set in reality

For 2025, NERC's E-ISAC delivered a scenario that felt uncomfortably realistic. Global political tensions simmered. A hostile nation-state known as "Crimsonia" unleashed sophisticated malware – called Icy Gunk and Group Think – while fueling a wave of misinformation and coordinating physical threats across the country.

The scenario even tied into the upcoming North American World Cup, which will be hosted in the United States, reflecting how geopolitical events can ripple into grid security.

"This was one of my favorite GridEx storylines," Allard said. "It's fairly relevant to what we're actually seeing globally."

For co-planner Brandon Trontvet, Minnkota's Senior Manager of System Operations and Operational Technology, the storyline's realism was striking.

"E-ISAC really put some thought into this," he said. "They're incorporating what's happening in the geopolitical world and making it realistic. There's a real preparedness we're trying to get toward as an industry."

Building the playbook

Minnkota's GridEx planners began preparing for the exercise back in January, long before the fictional adversary made its first move. E-ISAC provides the overarching narrative and a master inject list – a library of potential scenarios planners can use. Minnkota's planning team customized the national scenario into something that hit home for the players protecting assets in North Dakota and Minnesota.

"We take the framework and customize it specifically to Minnkota and our co-ops," Trontvet explained. "This year we brought in controllers (subject matter experts) to help tailor the injects. They were integral in putting the finer details in."

Those details matter. As the scenario unfolded, the tempo quickened. Multiple attacks layered on top of one another. Communications systems faltered. Equipment alarms sounded. Misinformation spread.

Minnkota's member distribution cooperatives, who provide retail service to the end-use consumer, had about 30 staff members onsite to participate in the exercise with Minnkota personnel. The members embraced the pressure.

"The experience was incredibly fast-paced, much like what a real crisis would feel like," said Angela Lyseng, Beltrami Electric Cooperative's communication specialist. "Keeping up with multiple unfolding scenarios at once was challenging, but it made the training meaningful."

For Wild Rice Electric's Tommy Houdek, director of member services and communications, the intensity forced creativity.

"We had to think both critically and creatively as we responded," he said. "Whether managing limited communication channels or adapting to rapidly evolving circumstances, it kept us alert and engaged."

The exercise scenarios became storytelling sessions in real time, with co-ops learning from each other's lived crises. Many aspects of the exercise had happened in real-life – even the chainsaw attacks to power infrastructure.

"Bringing that experience forward so others can prepare – that's literally what we're trying to do," Trontvet said.

Beltrami Electric's Angela Lyseng reviews plans on her laptop during the exercise.

As chaos ensues, Wild Rice Electric's Tommy Houdek makes a call to Minnkota's control center.

Representatives from Minnkota's member cooperatives play the game together in a conference room, which helped them collaborate on complex scenarios.

Strengthening relationships

One of Minnkota's goals this year was strengthening internal and external relationships. Creating connections before the crisis happens can help improve the response when a threat occurs in real life. That meant involving agencies directly in the simulation.

This year's exercise included partners from Oliver County (N.D.) Emergency Management, North Dakota State & Local Intelligence Center (NDSLIC), Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO), Otter Tail Power Company, ACES and the Grand Forks Air Force Base.

"In the past, we might have said, 'We'll call county emergency management,' but we didn't actually do it," Allard said. "This time, not only did we call them – they were actually here."

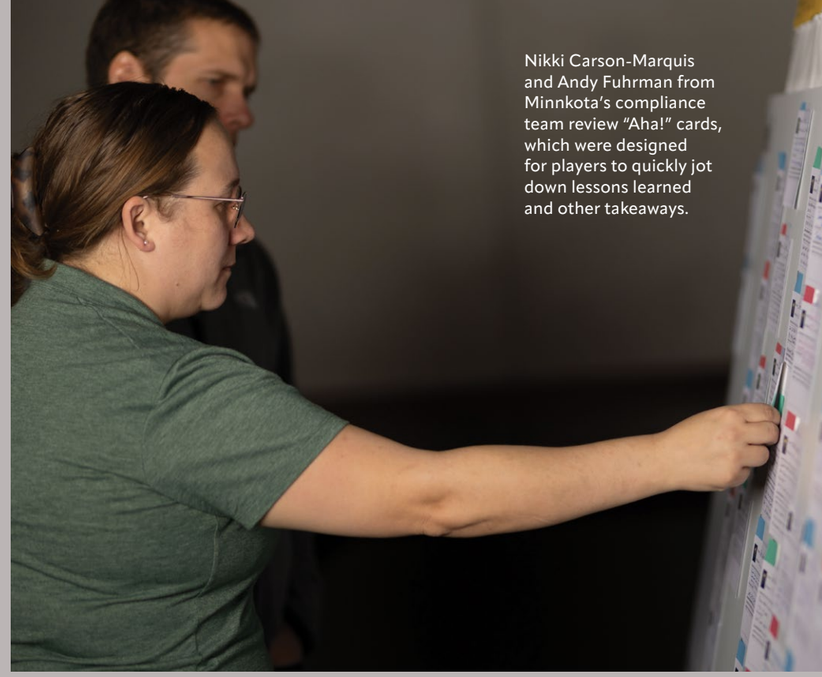
No matter how well GridEx is scripted, its success hinges on the people responding to it.

"Experiences shared by other co-ops and agencies offered perspectives we might have missed on our own," Houdek said.

What comes next

With the 2025 exercise complete, Minnkota planners are sifting through over 80 "Aha!" cards – handwritten reflections from participants capturing areas for improvement — as well as a post-exercise survey.

"A lot of the items are very achievable," Allard shared. "Documentation, coordination, developing criteria and processes. We'll turn these into actionable tasks."



Nikki Carson-Marquis and Andy Fuhrman from Minnkota's compliance team review "Aha!" cards, which were designed for players to quickly jot down lessons learned and other takeaways.

Minnkota's Matt Odermann (left) and Dan Inman have a passing conversation during the exercise.

(Left to right) Neil Kramar, Brandon Zinne and Casey Axtman from Minnkota's Milton R. Young Station team collaborate on a scenario.

Troy Karlberg (foreground) reviews documentation on his laptop. Karlberg represented the Young Station's safety and physical security team.

The planners expect to wrap up their analysis in January, then take a brief breath before planning begins anew for GridEx IX in 2027.

Through it all, the focus remains clear.

"We want to keep getting better," Trontvet said. "The point of these exercises is preparedness, and we're committed to strengthening that every time."

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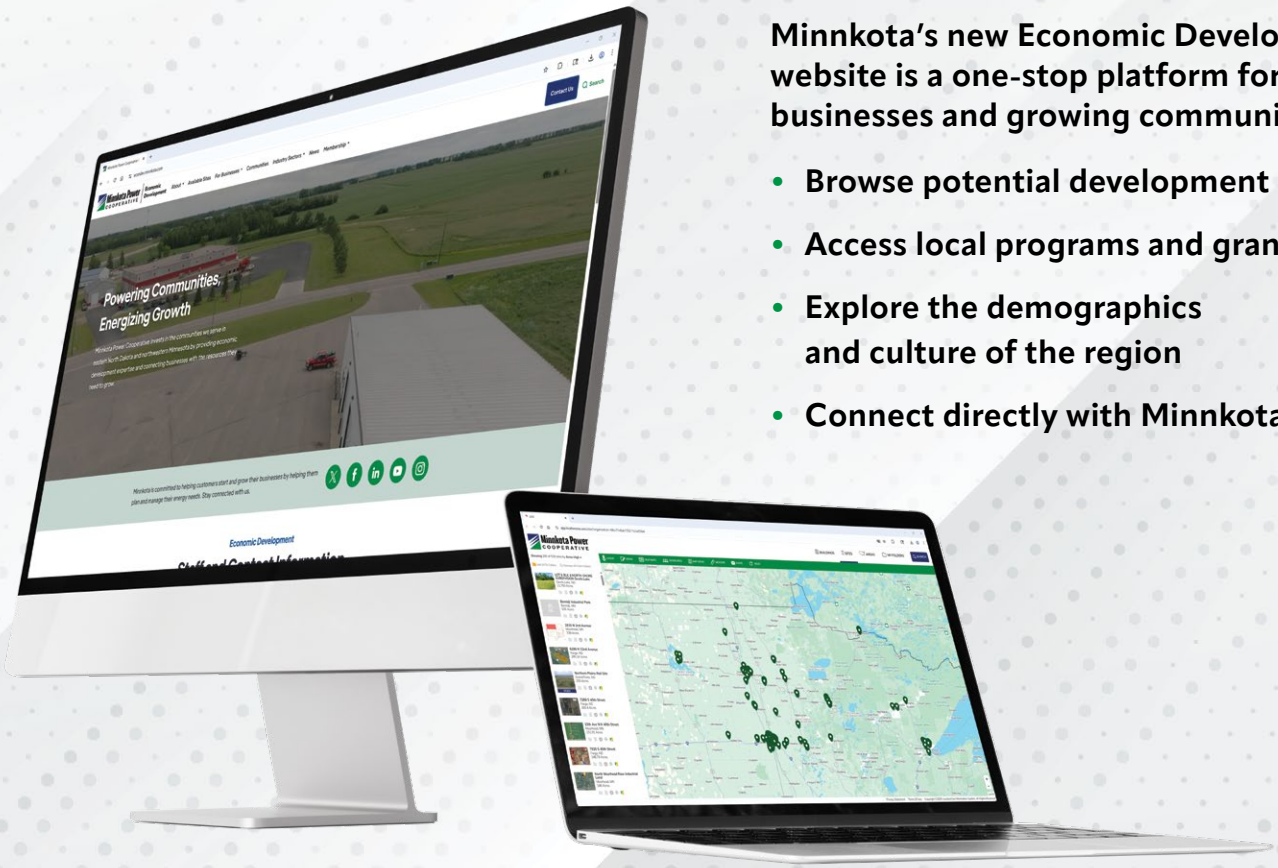

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