

M I N N K O T A

# MESSENGER



JANUARY - FEBRUARY 2026



## 4 DOGGED DETERMINATION

Just because you're a small-town girl doesn't mean you can't dream big. A 19-year-old from Cavalier, North Dakota, has made a name for herself as the only competitive musher in the state, and she has her sights set on The Iditarod.

*On the cover: Musher Eva Robinson poses with her sled dog Skruff, who Eva received from six-time Iditarod winner Dallas Seavey. Skruff is one of the 22 dogs who make up Diva Dogs Racing.*

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# DOGGED DETERMINATION

## Cavalier's Eva Robinson, 19, shines as North Dakota's only competitive musher

By Kaylee Cusack /// Photography Michael Hoeft, Submitted

Subzero cold is quiet in rural Cavalier, North Dakota. The Styrofoam squeak of 19-year-old Eva Robinson's boot against the snow sliced across the farmyard and hit the ears of 22 Alaskan husky mixes. Suddenly, a chorus of joy and anticipation.

The pack leader was here, ready for training day.

It was one week before the annual Beargrease sled dog races in Duluth, Minnesota, where Eva and her six-dog team would compete in the Beargrease 40, a 40-mile sled race along the North Shore of Lake Superior. It wouldn't be

the young musher's first time at the Beargrease. She'd already competed twice in the Junior Beargrease 120 and brought home first place once – when she was just 14 years old.

"Yes, Eva likes to win. It was awesome when she won the Junior Beargrease," said her father, Nodak Electric Cooperative member Justin Robinson. "But she does

this because she loves to see a new adventure. The dogs love to see a new adventure, and she loves that bonding with her dogs."

As North Dakota's only competitive musher, Eva has been chasing races since she was 11 years old. She not only won the Junior Beargrease in 2021, but has also run the Junior Iditarod twice, as well as countless other short- to mid-distance races in Alaska and the Upper Midwest. At 19, she's just getting started.

"I want to do the Iditarod once," she said, referring to the famous 1,049-mile dog sled race from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska. "More people have climbed Mount Everest than have finished the Iditarod. If I can be one of the people who finishes the Iditarod, me and my dogs are going to do it."

### Just a pup

Justin and Katt Robinson, who help with the training and handling of Eva's dogs, had an early suspicion their daughter would share their fascination with dog sled culture. The family adopted two Alaskan malamutes when Eva was 2, and soon she'd be putting them to work. "She was 4 years old when she was first on the sled by herself, just taking one malamute to the garbage dumpster," Katt said.



Eva Robinson and her team race in the 150-mile Junior Iditarod in 2024, held outside of Anchorage, Alaska.

Submitted Photo

Eva's team is supported by her parents, Katt (left) and Justin Robinson (right), who help with the care and training of the dogs.



Eva mounts her racing sled from Prairie Bilt Sleds, a mushing equipment manufacturer out of Luverne, North Dakota.

"I used to beg my dad, 'Can we take the trash out? Can we take the trash out, please?'" Eva recalled. "It was a quarter mile away, and he would hook up our biggest malamute to go take the trash out. And he would walk with me."

Before Eva started school, Katt and Justin were working with Cavalier's Parent Teacher Organization to present information on the Iditarod and educate students about dog sled racing. When Eva entered kindergarten, she got to see the presentation firsthand. Her parents described the Junior Iditarod, a 150-mile race for mushers between 14 and 17 years old.

"I went home that day and I asked about it," Eva said. "I was fired up, and I said, 'I'm going to run the Junior Iditarod.'"

Her will to race was strong, but as an elementary student, her bank account was nonexistent. She

needed dogs, sled equipment, cold-weather gear – it started to add up. Eva came to her parents with a business plan to sell dog treats until she had enough to enter the Junior Iditarod. The business, Eva Diva Puppy Snacks, was registered with the state, and

as her nest egg grew and Eva began to build her team, Diva Dogs Racing was born.

By 2022, when Eva was 15 and had some races already under her belt, she headed to Alaska for her first Junior Iditarod.

## The big leagues

As Eva trained on Alaska's historic Iditarod Trail, local mushers began to take note of the young racer from North Dakota. Her host family lived within walking distance of many Iditarod finishers, and Eva quickly made connections with Iditarod royalty like Kelly Maixner, Dallas Seavey and the Berington twins (Kristy and Anna). Eventually, they would even be a source to build Eva's team, with lead dog Skruff coming from Seavey, a six-time Iditarod winner.

"It's a very close-knit family because it's a dying sport, a dying culture, and there's not a lot of us left out here," Eva said. "Naturally, these mushers all want to foster the youth, but they don't just stop when you turn 18."

Eva's first Junior Iditarod was a story of excitement, fear and resilience. She pulled the No. 2 bib, meaning she would be the first musher out of the gate. It was a huge responsibility, as all the teams to follow would be locked onto her scent.

"I remember crying to my mom," Eva said. "We were sitting in the trailer and she was giving me a little pep talk: 'Do you want to do this or do you want to go home?' I was like, I spent 10 years trying to get here. I'm not going to go home."

Eva set off with her team. The first day was flawless, with good weather and hard trails. But challenges arose. Snowmobiles accompanied the teams to protect them from aggressive moose, and even more snowmobile traffic from the area began to slow and discourage Eva's team, who would stop at the sight of one.

Soon, one of Eva's lead dogs started to show signs of wear. She had to make the decision to load him onto the sled and run a single-lead team, with her dog Frost at the helm. It was something she'd never attempted.

"You need an incredible amount of trust for a dog to lead a single lead, because it's just them up there and they're just listening to you. And she did it," Eva said, emotion building with the memory. "She did it for 56 of 64 miles. For 10 hours from sunrise to sunset when we crossed the finish line, she did it."

When Eva and her team crossed the finish line, mushers and spectators were waiting to cheer her on. Frost earned the Blue Harness award, given to the Junior Iditarod's outstanding lead dog.

Eva and her dogs have received many awards and accolades over eight years of racing, but the thing she holds most dear is the Humanitarian Award she received at the 2022 Willow Junior 100 in Willow, Alaska. "That's voted on by all the race vets, and they say you took the best care of your dogs. I have it hanging in my room," Eva smiled.



Eva grabs a hug from her mom, Katt, at the 2024 Junior Iditarod finish line.

Submitted Photo



Eva displays some home state spirit at the 2024 Junior Iditarod in Alaska.

Submitted Photo



Eva (right) and her team on the trail of the 2024 Junior Iditarod.

Submitted Photo

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“Other mushers are like, ‘Eva’s dogs are always just happy.’ And that’s what I want to hear. I want to see that they’re happy and wagging their tails and having a good time.”

Eva Robinson



## Forward motion

Even as a full-time sophomore at the University of Minnesota Crookston (majoring in Communications and running for the cross country team), Eva makes time on the weekends to get home to Cavalier and train with her dogs. Her parents have formed a strong support system, caring for and training with the dogs when she’s away. Eva notes it sometimes feels like she’s living a “double life,” but insists she would never trade it.

“Nothing in this life can compare to the love that these dogs give you,” she said. “These dogs have such an energy and a passionate drive to do this that it would be wrong not to. They make it worth it.”

Education has become a huge piece of Eva’s devotion to mushing. As the only musher of her kind in North Dakota, she’s been asked to speak at many events across the state, including a

motivational presentation at TEDxCavalier in 2024. After graduation, she plans to bring North Dakotans even closer to the state’s mushing history. Along with her parents, she wants to establish Diva Dogs Adventure Tours in Cavalier, a one-stop place for visitors to learn about mushing and experience the thrill of the sled. Eventually, Eva would love to develop a junior program for young mushers to get their start.

Eva wants to build a mushing community in her home state. She knows all it takes is showing someone it’s possible.

“Walt Disney put it best: ‘All dreams are achievable if you have the courage to pursue them,’” she said. “I want to be able to inspire people to pursue their dreams, even though it may seem farfetched. And if I can show people that their dreams are achievable, I’m going to.”



Kita and Frost lead the way during the Junior Beargrease 120 near Duluth, Minnesota.

Submitted Photo



Eva attempts a smile during a mid-race checkpoint in the 2023 Junior Beargrease 120, where temperatures had dipped to 35 below.

Submitted Photo

## All About Eva

Eva just finished the Beargrease 40 on Jan. 27 as a fun run, as her team didn’t have ideal winter weather conditions for competitive racing.

Eva uses a dog sled from Prairie Bilt Sleds in Luverne, North Dakota (also a Nodak Electric member). She even helps them test their new products on the trail.

Diva Dogs Racing is supported by sponsors, including KLN Family Brands in Minnesota, which produces Wiley Wallaby licorice and NutriSource pet food.

For some competitive races, Eva must sleep outside, surrounded by her dogs.

Eva has younger twin siblings who enjoy gaming, basketball and piano – and leave most of the mushing to their older sister.

# CREATING CONNECTIONS



Minnkota CEO Mac McLennan (left) listens as Applied Digital CEO Wes Cummins speaks during a January fireside chat with the Minnkota and Cass County Electric boards.

## CEOs of Minnkota, Applied Digital participate in fireside chat

By Ben Fladhammer // Photography Michael Hoeft

A fireside chat held Jan. 29 brought together leadership from Minnkota Power Cooperative, Cass County Electric Cooperative and Applied Digital to discuss

the development of a large-scale data center campus in Harwood, North Dakota.

The discussion, held at Minnkota's Grand Forks offices, featured

Wes Cummins, CEO of Applied Digital, Minnkota CEO Mac McLennan and Cass County Electric CEO Paul Matthys, along with questions from directors from both cooperative boards.

Construction and planning for the Harwood campus continues to move forward at a brisk pace, with a target of early 2027 for full commercial operation. At the same time, Applied Digital has completed its second of four data centers in Ellendale, North Dakota, which has already demonstrated the potential benefits of large-scale energy users in the region.

Cummins said projects in the Dakotas have already shown benefits to electric consumers.

"We located there because we identified excess electricity and infrastructure that could be better utilized," Cummins said. "The use of that excess electricity has actually lowered energy bills for the surrounding residents. To date there have been more than \$31.7 million in total savings for North Dakota customers and more than \$1.1 million in savings for South Dakota customers."

Those savings were passed back to regional consumers through a bill credit, illustrating how large energy users can help share the fixed costs of maintaining the electric system.

McLennan emphasized that while data center development presents significant opportunities, the cooperative's primary responsibility remains with its existing members.

"We are not going to place undue risk on our legacy members, those people we've served for 80-plus years," McLennan said. "Our focus is on ensuring that any growth benefits our membership and maintains the reliability and affordability they expect."

Minnkota and Cass County Electric are approaching the Harwood project with legacy members in mind. Large, consistent energy purchases from data centers help recover the fixed costs of generation, transmission and distribution infrastructure. Without those additional loads, costs would otherwise be borne by homes, farms, schools and businesses across the system. Applied Digital will pay the full cost of the infrastructure and resources it uses, along with any additional development required specifically for the project.

By making more efficient use of existing resources, cooperative leaders say the project is expected to help stabilize long-term rates for members. However, they also noted that supply chain challenges and inflationary pressures continue to affect near-term rate impacts across the utility industry.

For Applied Digital, North Dakota offers several advantages

for large-scale data center development. Cummins cited the state's strong energy production, robust fiber infrastructure, business-friendly environment and cold climate as key factors. Available workforce is also a key, as the Harwood facility plans to add more than 200 full-time jobs.

"This is an energy-rich state that produces much more than what is used inside the state," Cummins said. "It's also a fiber-rich and business-friendly state. Maybe most importantly, it's cold, which is a big benefit for cooling the equipment."

As work continues on the Harwood campus, cooperative leaders say the project represents an opportunity to support economic development while strengthening the electric system for the members they serve.



Check out construction progress on **Polaris Forge 2** – Applied Digital's data facility in Harwood, North Dakota.



Cass County Electric CEO Paul Matthys (right) discusses the distribution side of providing power to the Applied Digital data center currently under construction.

# A NEW ALGORITHM FOR HEALTH CARE



Dr. Dave Newman serves as Sanford Health's chief medical officer of virtual care, a role that leverages technology and AI to benefit patients and providers.

## Sanford Health leverages AI to enhance patient care, address workforce shortages

By Kaylee Cusack // Photography Michael Hoeft

Some doctors aren't just doctors anymore. And that's a good thing.

With new worlds of information revealing themselves every day, health care providers like Sanford Health's Dr. Dave Newman aren't just dipping their toes into the digital sphere. They're cannonballing.

"I'm an endocrinologist by medical training. But I'm also an informativist, which is like being a doctor tech bro," Newman explained from his office in Fargo, North Dakota. "It's using data science, computers, technology, all those things. That's how I got into the role that I'm in now, as chief medical officer of virtual care here at Sanford."

Sanford, a business member of Cass County Electric Cooperative, is one of several health systems across the nation embracing the digital evolution of patient care, including virtual care and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. In 2021, Sanford received a gift of \$350 million to develop a Virtual Care Center in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The hub now provides more accessible medical support for patients in the rural areas of the Upper Midwest.

In Newman's definition, virtual care includes any non-face-to-face care that leverages technology. "We perform virtual care visits and e-medicine visits, and we are expanding into virtual reality,"

he said. "A lot of our artificial intelligence ideas run through our Virtual Care Center, and it's really moving health care into the technology age."

### 'Literally changing people's lives'

Sanford has been at the forefront of exploring AI processes that benefit both patients and providers. For example, they've created a large data science team to develop a predictive analytics program, which uses AI algorithms to predict certain diseases. Sanford can currently use patient data to predict eight conditions but expects to uncover more in the future.

"The one that we've had the most success with has been for chronic kidney disease," Newman said. "We can look at your chart, your labs, your ethnicity,

your family history, and we can predict if you're going to develop chronic kidney disease and get that information to your primary care provider faster."

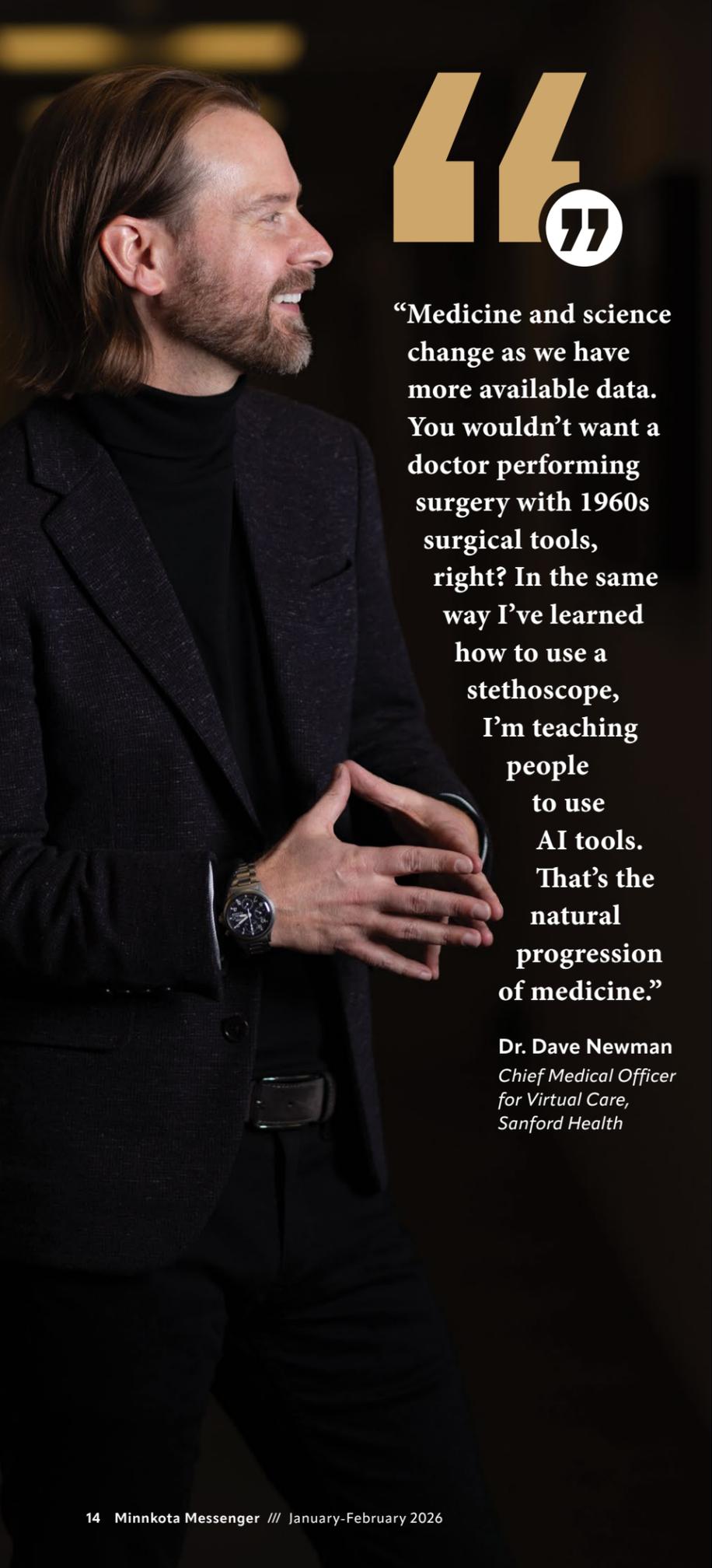
Predictive analytics will soon also assist with colon cancer screenings. There currently aren't enough doctors to perform all the rural colonoscopies that are needed, so the predictive analytics team can determine which patients may be best served by a less-invasive test.

Sanford also uses a virtual operating room to help surgeons walk through upcoming surgeries using virtual reality goggles, allowing them to look more deeply at the nerves and anatomy of any given body part before the patient is even prepped.

Newman also describes an AI-enabled fall prevention device now found in Sanford facilities. A camera placed on the ceiling can evaluate if a patient is lying flat, sitting up or leaving bed. If a patient is leaving bed when they shouldn't be, the AI agent can tell them to stay in bed, in their native language, and call a nurse for help.



Virtual reality is one method Sanford Health can use to educate providers in rural locations.



“ ”

“Medicine and science change as we have more available data. You wouldn’t want a doctor performing surgery with 1960s surgical tools, right? In the same way I’ve learned how to use a stethoscope, I’m teaching people to use AI tools. That’s the natural progression of medicine.”

**Dr. Dave Newman**  
Chief Medical Officer  
for Virtual Care,  
Sanford Health

“A big issue in hospitals and nursing homes is falls. You can break a hip, and it’s a huge cause of transfers and even deaths,” he said. “In the past, we’ve had to have somebody sitting in the room and a nurse available at all times to prevent falls. Now, one nurse can visually monitor several patients, helping to solve workforce shortages.”

Staffing is a continual challenge in the hospitals and clinics of the Upper Midwest, especially in rural communities. AI is not only offering enhanced, personalized care for patients, but it’s also giving relief to providers who are being asked to do more.

According to Newman, burnout becomes a creeping issue for providers. It’s a problem that’s exacerbated by the time needed to fill out forms and patient documentation after every interaction. With a new AI tool, doctors and nurses can, with a patient’s permission, allow AI to listen to their conversation and analyze it into a set of usable notes and documentation. On average, this one AI product saves providers close to an hour per day, and for some, up to two hours.

“One of our providers, he was on what we call the ‘naughty list’ – for people that couldn’t get their notes done in effective time,” Newman recalled. “He came to me (after using this AI tool) and said, ‘Dave, I’m no longer on the naughty list, and I got to go to my daughter’s gymnastics meet.’ It’s literally changing people’s lives.”

Newman knows there’s skepticism surrounding AI, especially when utilized for health. However, just like a hospital wouldn’t



Construction is underway on a 280-megawatt AI Factory near Harwood, North Dakota, developed by Applied Digital and powered by Cass County Electric.

As Newman speaks to new classes of medical students, he’s learning that AI is now included in the curriculum as a tool to synthesize a medical information landscape that now doubles year over year. But knowledge is only the start of what AI can provide.

allow a new medication without testing, Sanford will not allow a new AI or digital process without rigorous study and committee approval. “Patient safety is always at the forefront,” he said.

### Powering AI

As the use cases for AI grow and become woven into everyday life, data centers that create the backbone for AI become more essential. Those data centers need power, and that’s where rural electric cooperatives like Minnkota Power Cooperative and Cass County Electric come in. The co-ops are working together to help power a data center development near

Harwood, North Dakota, which is anticipated to come online within the next year.

“Cass County Electric is proud to serve an AI data center, because it supports our core values of advancing innovation and strong commitment to our communities,” said Paul Matthys, president and CEO of Cass County Electric. “AI data centers are coming either way. We have an opportunity to embrace this technology here in North Dakota, where we can help secure data sovereignty and security, while also leveraging AI in weather forecasting, agriculture, health care and other important regional sectors.”

“I’m very optimistic that this is going to help patients and save lives,” Newman said. “Right now, with the huge workforce shortages we have, we don’t have another option but to leverage technology to get to all the patients in rural America.”



Paul Matthys, Cass County Electric Cooperative President & CEO

# ALWAYS ON GUARD

Chad Ulland, Minnkota senior manager of IT and enterprise cybersecurity, inspects a server rack inside Minnkota's data center.

## As cyber risks grow, Minnkota strengthens defenses

By Ben Fladhammer /// Photography Michael Hoeft

Before most Minnkota employees open their first email of the day, the cooperative's cybersecurity systems have already blocked millions of potential threats. Almost all of them are harmless. But buried in that digital noise are suspicious signals, irregular patterns and active attack attempts.

"It only takes one thing to sneak past our tools and systems and it's a bad day," said Chad Ulland, Minnkota Senior Manager of Information Technology and Enterprise Cybersecurity. "We have to be correct 100% of the time; the adversary only has to be right once to cause issues."

Cybersecurity is the quiet but important work that often happens behind the scenes. If nothing happens, that usually means the people and systems are doing their jobs well. Behind that calm, however, is a constantly evolving program designed to keep up with a threat landscape that changes by the day.

"The rate of change is what keeps you up at night," Ulland said. "You're working to address a risk you see today, and by the time you mitigate it, two more have already popped up."

That pace is exactly why Minnkota recently commissioned a third-party cyber risk assessment. Reviewers examined how a real

attacker might attempt to gain initial access, how they could establish a foothold inside systems, and whether they might move from traditional IT networks into operational technology (OT) that supports power plants and transmission infrastructure.

The outcome was reassuring. The assessment found Minnkota's overall cyber risk to be low, compared to an industry-wide medium-risk baseline.

"We do multiple cybersecurity assessments each year," Ulland explained. "Some focus on processes and controls, while other times we bring in an external party to dig deeper. The value of this particular assessment is that it crossed both IT and OT environments."

### Defense in depth

A successful cyberattack on a utility doesn't just steal information. It can disrupt operations, damage equipment or even interrupt power to communities. That reality has transformed cybersecurity from a technical concern into a core value at Minnkota.

"My job didn't exist here 10 years ago," said Matt Odermann, who is in his first year at Minnkota as cybersecurity supervisor. It's a role that requires a risk-based mindset to help determine where to invest time, resources and people to most effectively reduce exposure.

"We know it's not possible to get to zero risk," Odermann said. "We can't just bury all our computers in concrete and say we're safe. People still need to do their jobs. There are thousands and thousands of vulnerabilities, so we're always evaluating how to minimize our risk."

To avoid single points of failure, Minnkota relies on layered protections – often referred to as "defense in depth." That approach has become increasingly important as Minnkota's environment grows more complex. Remote work, cloud systems, legacy operational technology and hun-

dreds of vendor connections have pushed security well beyond the traditional network edge.

"Securing that consistently is challenging," Odermann said. "That's one of our biggest risk factors."

The emergence of artificial intelligence has also accelerated risks. Odermann says many attacks today are automated, with scripts scanning the internet for known vulnerabilities and circling back when something responds. On the flip side, Minnkota is also exploring how to grow the use of AI in its security processes.

"AI is still a technology that's growing so fast," Odermann said. "I think it's going to be an advantage to us as cybersecurity professionals and to our posture, but we know bad actors will be using it, too."

### People are part of the solution

Technology does much of the heavy lifting, but Minnkota's cybersecurity program depends just as much on people. Over the past year, that human layer has grown stronger. The cooperative has invested in a robust cybersecurity awareness program and plans to continue enhancing and expanding it in 2026.

"We're trying to meet people where they are," Ulland said. "We plan to introduce shorter, more intentional training that reflects what we're actually seeing in the real world."

Minnkota also offsets risk by working closely with federal and state partners who provide advanced threat intelligence.

"What looks like a one-off event to us might be part of a national pattern," Ulland said. "Those partnerships help connect the dots and keep our systems safe."

Together, that combination of informed employees, targeted training and trusted external partners creates a team designed to adapt as threats evolve.

"Everyone has a role to play in cybersecurity," Odermann said. "Anybody that interacts with our systems has a major role in what we're trying to do."



Minnkota continuously monitors and defends against cyber threats. Matt Odermann, Minnkota cybersecurity supervisor, reviews the system status on his laptop.



# BLAZING A TRAIL FOR WILDFIRE MITIGATION

## Minnkota develops, implements co-op's first Wildfire Mitigation Plan

By Kaylee Cusack // Photography Michael Hoeft

In the Upper Midwest, people experience wildfires in an often-disconnected way. North Dakotans and Minnesotans speak of smoke from Canadian

forest fires stretching a haze over their summer months. When 2025 wildfires devastated communities in Los Angeles County, California, those living nearly 2,000 miles

away could only sympathize with the families who lost their homes and livelihoods.

Wildfire is usually a problem happening elsewhere. But it can happen anywhere.

In late 2024, Minnkota Power Cooperative kicked off a conversation on how to prevent situations like these from happening within its transmission footprint. That

conversation would turn into the cooperative's Wildfire Mitigation Plan, approved by the board of directors one year later.

"Within the utility business, wildfire has become a bigger issue. We've had our eyes on it from a risk perspective for quite some time," said Minnkota Transmission Engineering Manager Wayne Lembke. "Understanding what we were already doing was the starting point, and then we built upon that to make an effective mitigation plan."

Minnkota's new Wildfire Mitigation Plan was drafted in 2025 in accordance with legislation

passed during North Dakota's 2025 legislative session requiring utilities to have one in place. The 24-page document first outlines wildfire risk factors in Minnkota's territory and continues with the steps the cooperative takes to reduce the risk of wildfire ignition and spread in its system.

The goals of the Wildfire Mitigation Plan go beyond complying with state law and limiting legal liability in the case of a fire.

"Two of Minnkota's core values are safety and reliability," said Shawna Setter, Minnkota vegetation management specialist and Wildfire Mitigation Plan coordina-

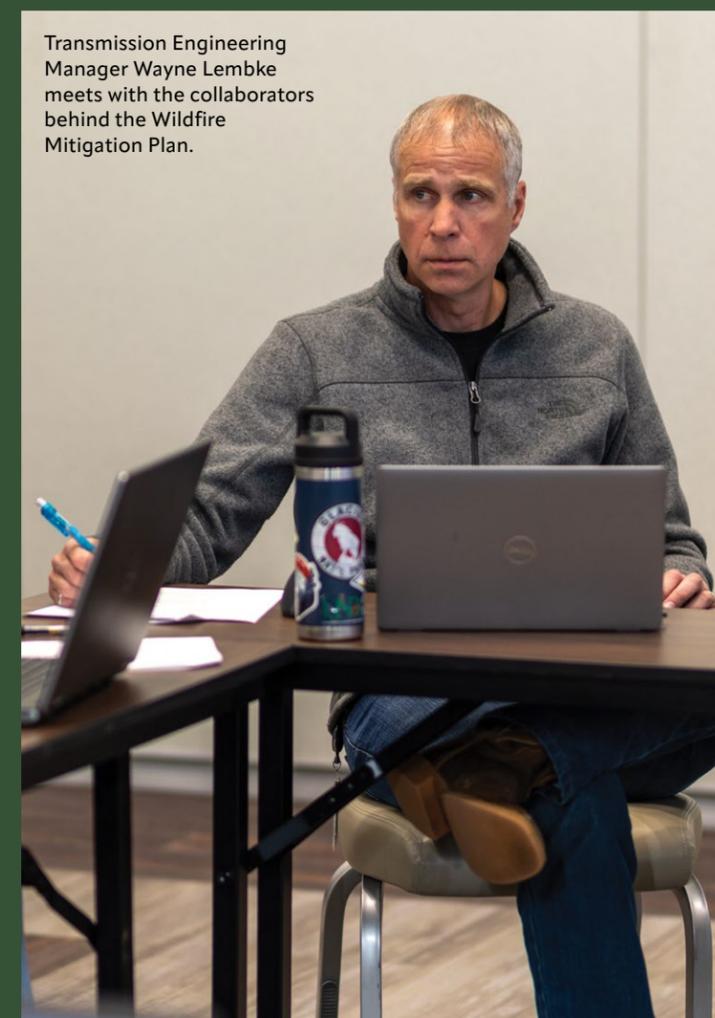
tor. "In creating this plan, we're increasing safety and reliability throughout our system and for our members, our communities and employees – everybody."

### Gathering the kindling

When it was time to start on Minnkota's plan, Setter knew it would be crucial to get as many stakeholders in the room as possible, including those from Safety, Power Delivery Operations, Power System Operations and Engineering.

"We don't know everybody's day-to-day work, so getting everybody else's perspective on how things are done out in the field was very helpful," she said. "It takes an army. There are a lot of aspects of creating and implementing a plan, so it takes everybody to help mitigate fire risk."

Transmission Engineering Manager Wayne Lembke meets with the collaborators behind the Wildfire Mitigation Plan.



Vegetation Management Specialist Shawna Setter leads a discussion on the implementation of the new plan.



Once all departments were on the same page about the needs of the Wildfire Mitigation Plan, Setter set her sights on researching the wildfire risks of Minnkota's transmission territory, which stretches from the Milton R. Young Station near Center, North Dakota, all the way east to International Falls,

Minnesota. The region is diverse, from flat grasslands to thick forests.

Assessing risk can be difficult. A wildfire can happen anywhere during any season. However, Setter explained that by examining where wildfires have occurred

in the past, and cross-referencing that historical risk with the region's topography, drought prevalence and vegetation types, she can get a good feel of wildfire potential.

"The wildland urban interface is also a key tool, because it shows

you where forested regions intersect with populated areas and can cause the greatest wildfire impact," she said. "It's a significant factor in identifying risk."

After a risk analysis of the region – which indicates low wildfire risk across the majority of the footprint – the Wildfire Mitigation Plan clearly lays out the processes and procedures Minnkota follows to mitigate any potential risk, from operational practices and construction standards to infrastructure inspections and vegetation management.

"Improper vegetation in our transmission corridors is both an ignition risk and a burn risk. It can start the fire, and it can also cause the fire to persist depending on how we maintain our rights of way," Setter said.

"For engineering, the mitigation focus is twofold. One is on the safety side, knowing that our equipment is designed properly so it's not the ignition source," Lembke added. "At the same time, if there is a wildfire, we want to be able to be resilient through that. When we're designing projects in areas that are higher risk, we're looking at using steel structures or ductile iron instead of wood."

### Heating up

Although Minnkota has always followed strong fire mitigation practices, drafting a formal plan allowed the team to expand upon its procedures to include new technologies and changes in industry standards. As a part of the plan's full implementation, wildfire mitigation training for crews, contractors and other stakeholders will be enhanced, as will com-

munity outreach and education on wildfire prevention.

Throughout the process, Minnkota collaborated with other utilities who had already completed a wildfire mitigation plan, whether by state decree or internal proactivity. The collaboration will continue as Minnkota navigates its own plan's first year of implementation. The plan's authors have already been contacted by other utilities who are looking for guidance in writing their own plans, and they intend to pass the support forward.

"I think wildfire mitigation plans like this are going to become a standard," Setter said. "It's not just legislation that's pushing it. Regulators like FERC (Federal Energy Regulatory Commission) and NERC (North American Electric Reliability Corporation) are starting to look at standards as far as wildfire mitigation goes."

Wildfire mitigation plans began to develop heavily in California, a state prone to wildfire. But the idea has made its way from west to east and is now currently under discussion in the Minnesota state legislature as well. If passed, Minnkota will already be one step ahead with a plan in place – not only because it's law, but because it's the right thing to do.

"We want to make sure we're never the ignition source out there, and if we are, we know how to handle it," Lembke said. "One of our principles is concern for the community. This directly impacts our communities. We need to operate in a safe and reliable manner and not create an issue for our neighbors."



Minnkota's Shawna Setter (left) and Wayne Lembke review the wildfire hazard potential map used in the Wildfire Mitigation Plan.

## See the full Wildfire Mitigation Plan



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## MINNKOTA RECEIVES 2026 EXCELLENCE IN SAFETY AWARD

Minnkota Power Cooperative has been recognized once again for its strong culture of safety in the workplace and beyond. On Jan. 29, the cooperative was presented with the 2026 Excellence in Safety Award at the Energy Progress & Innovation Conference (EPIC) held in Bismarck. This award honors energy-aligned organizations who have implemented initiatives that have significantly reduced safety risks to employees, made changes to processes to provide positive environmental impacts, and provided improvements in general health and safety.

The committee that selected Minnkota for this award noted the co-op's "strong safety-first culture rooted in integrity, teamwork, innovation, reliability and an unwavering commitment to protecting employees, members and communities." Minnkota was also applauded for its industry-leading safety performance over several years, including out-

standing results in national safety assessments. Minnkota is proud to support the strengthening of its safety culture through comprehensive training, advanced safety technologies, specialized emergency response teams, and innovative programs that enhance both workplace and public safety.

Beyond safety, the award committee also recognized Minnkota's commitment to environmental stewardship through responsible

operations, emissions reduction efforts, and land and water conservation initiatives.

"Together, these efforts position Minnkota as a model of excellence in health, safety and environmental responsibility within the energy industry," the committee said.

Thank you to all the employees of Minnkota for your dedication to safety – our power is truly our people.



## MINNKOTA, SQUARE BUTTE TO HOLD ANNUAL MEETINGS

Minnkota Power Cooperative and Square Butte Electric Cooperative will host their annual meetings on Friday, March 27, at Minnkota headquarters in Grand Forks. Minnkota Chair Mark Habedank,

Twin Valley, Minnesota, and Square Butte President Paul Aakre, Angus, Minnesota, will preside over the meetings, where cooperative leaders will report on 2025 operations and provide updates on future

generation and transmission projects. The agenda will also include the election of directors and adoption of policy resolutions. A Class A membership-only meeting will take place on Thursday, March 26, followed by a member social, with more details to come. Minnkota's 11 member distribution cooperatives supply electricity to more than 153,000 consumers in a 35,000-square-mile area. Square Butte owns Unit 2 at the Milton R. Young Station and is governed by the cooperatives associated with Minnkota.



## MINNKOTA, PARTNERS HOST 38TH ANNUAL ELECTRICAL CONTINUING EDUCATION CLASSES



In January and February, Minnkota Power Cooperative welcomed more than 630 electricians from the region for continuing education courses designed to keep them up to date on the latest electrical codes and industry practices. The training, essential for license renewal, was held in Fargo and Grand Forks, North Dakota, as well as Fergus Falls and

Bemidji, Minnesota. Approved for licensing in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota, the program has been a trusted resource for 38 years. Minnkota collaborates with Otter Tail Power Company, Western Area Power Administration, Northern Municipal Power Agency and its member cooperatives to ensure its continued success.

## MINNKOTA, MEMBERS NAVIGATE MAXIMUM GENERATION EVENT

On Saturday, Jan. 24, Minnkota and its members navigated through an extended Maximum Generation Event declared by Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO).

A Maximum Generation Event is an emergency signal that electricity demand is very high and may soon exceed the amount of power available on the MISO grid, which covers 15 states in the central U.S. When this happens, utilities are asked to run every available generating resource and reduce demand wherever possible to keep the electric system stable. MISO attributed the event to below-normal temperatures, forced generation outages and higher-than-forecasted load.

While the conditions were serious, the event passed without any major grid reliability problems. Utilities were not required to implement rotating outages or service interruptions.

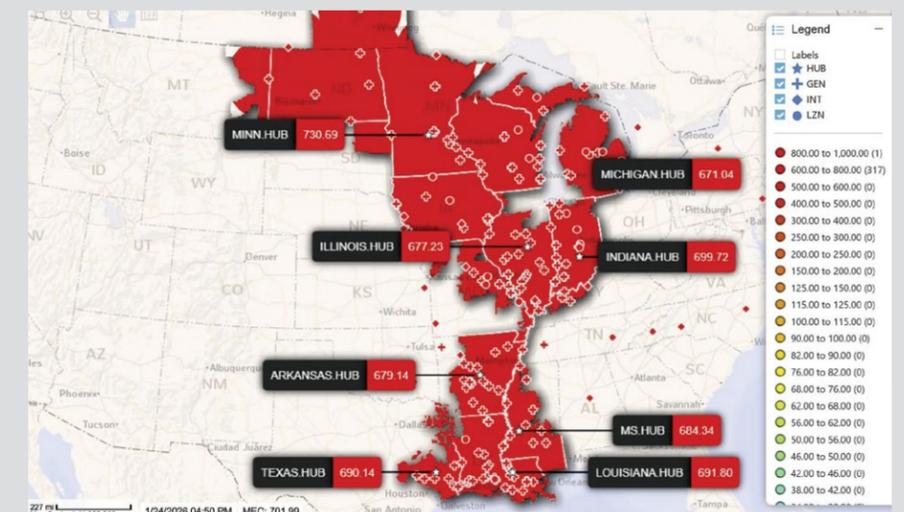
During the event, energy market prices rose to extremely high

levels as MISO managed limited power supplies. Minnkota utilized a variety of strategies and all available resources to limit exposure to these high prices. All of Minnkota's coal-based generating units were running during the event. Hydroelectric resources were also operating, providing steady output. Wind generation operated at lower levels.

In addition to generation, Minnkota fully activated its demand

response program. This program allows the cooperative to temporarily reduce off-peak electrical loads across its system, lowering overall demand during critical periods.

By using every available generating resource and managing demand carefully, Minnkota successfully navigated the Maximum Generation Event while working with its members to limit risks and maintain system stability.



A snapshot of the MISO pricing map at 4:50 p.m., on Saturday, Jan. 24

## ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES PREPARE FOR MINNESOTA'S 2026 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The 2026 Minnesota legislative session convened Feb. 17 and must adjourn by May 18. With the state budget passed in 2025, lawmakers are expected to focus primarily on policy issues and the state's capital investment bill, which funds public infrastructure projects. A tied House and a one-vote DFL majority in the Senate mean compromise will be essential.

Adding to the dynamics, all 201 legislative seats, statewide offices and the governorship will be on the ballot in November.

During the session, Minnkota and its member cooperatives will be actively advocating for policies that ensure reliable, affordable and sustainable electricity for its members. While the political environment may be challenging, there are opportunities to advance solutions that benefit local communities, strengthen the grid and support responsible energy innovation.

Two priorities will guide these efforts: reforming outdated net metering policies and lifting Minnesota's moratorium on nuclear energy.

### Net metering reform

Net metering was created decades ago to encourage rooftop solar and other small-scale generation. While it helped spur early adoption, the policy has not kept pace with today's electric system. Under the current framework, the costs of maintaining power lines, substations and other systems are increasingly shifted to members who do not generate their own

power – often those who can least afford higher bills.

Electric cooperatives support renewable energy, but policies must be fair and equitable for all members. Updating net metering to better reflect the true costs of distributed energy resources helps ensure everyone pays their fair share for the grid we all rely on.

### Lifting Minnesota's nuclear energy moratorium

Minnesota's longstanding moratorium on new nuclear energy projects limits the state's ability to consider reliable, carbon-free power options. As electricity demand grows, advanced nuclear technologies offer the potential for dependable, around-the-clock baseload power. Unlike wind and solar, nuclear energy produces electricity regardless of weather or time of day.



Lifting the moratorium does not commit Minnesota to building nuclear facilities today. It simply allows for informed discussion and long-term planning to ensure a balanced and resilient energy mix.

### Additional areas of focus

Electric cooperatives are also engaged on other issues that affect members and rural communities, including:

- Wildfire mitigation: Working with partners to reduce wildfire risk and protect critical electric infrastructure.
- Data centers and carbon-free energy policy: Monitoring proposals related to data center development, electricity demand growth and compliance with Minnesota's carbon-free and renewable energy standards.

## MINNKOTA'S ODERMANN TESTIFIES BEFORE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE

Matt Odermann, cybersecurity supervisor at Minnkota, testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works on Feb. 4 during a full committee hearing focused on cybersecurity in the nation's water sector.

Odermann appeared on behalf of the North Dakota Rural Water Systems Association, where he serves as an executive board member. He was introduced by Sen. Kevin Cramer, who serves on the committee.

In his testimony, Odermann emphasized the importance of protecting smaller water systems from cyber threats.

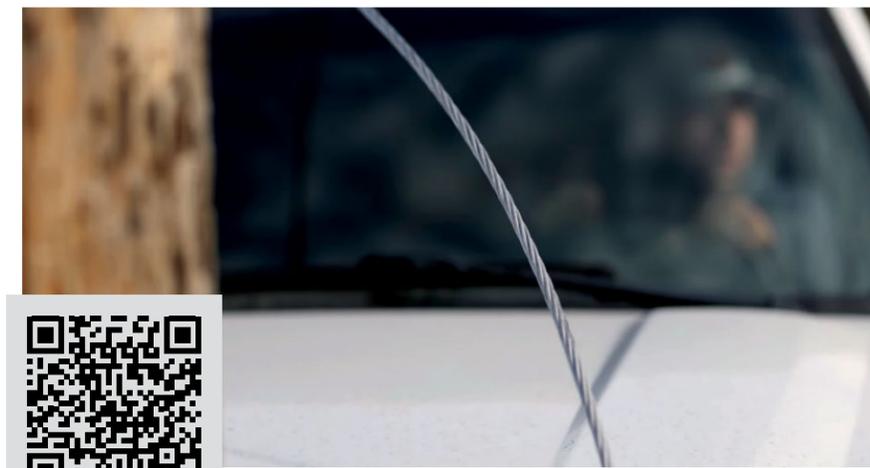
"Protecting small systems must be a national security priority,"

Odermann said. "With the right balance of partnership, practical guidance and resources, we can strengthen cybersecurity across

America's water infrastructure - not through fear, but through collaboration and resilience."



## MINNKOTA PRODUCES WATCH THE WIRES SAFETY PROCEDURE VIDEO



As a part of its Watch the Wires power line safety campaign, the Minnkota Communications and

Safety teams have developed a video to teach the public what to do in the case of vehicle contact with a power line or pole.

In the video, an unnamed man (played by Minnkota Field Safety Specialist Seth Baune) is shown in the aftermath of hitting a power pole. He follows step-by-step safety procedures for two scenarios – staying inside the cab and calling 911, or safely exiting if there is smoke or fire. This video is now available for member co-ops to use with their membership. It can also be found at [WatchtheWires.com](http://WatchtheWires.com) and Minnkota's YouTube channel.

Although our first step is preventing pole and line contacts, we must ensure that people know what to do in case it happens. Safety is our number one priority.

# MINNKOTA, EMPLOYEES PARTICIPATE IN GIVING HEARTS DAY

Every February, Minnkota Power Cooperative employees celebrate Giving Hearts Day by giving back to their communities. Giving Hearts Day is a 24-hour fundraising event in North Dakota and northwest Minnesota that provides a platform for charities to fund their missions. Every dollar donated during the online drive (held Feb. 12 this year) is matched, doubling the impact for more than 600 local charities.

This year, Minnkota's employee giving program, Minnkota Cares, donated \$500 to each of the following causes:

- Grand Forks Senior Center
- Grand Forks Public Library Foundation
- Global Friends Coalition
- Cystic Fibrosis Association of North Dakota
- Salvation Army Bismarck-Mandan
- American Heroes Outdoors
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention North Dakota Chapter
- NEXUS – PATH Healing (Foster Care Program)
- Good Samaritan Society – Park River
- Bis-Man Mentor Squad

Minnkota also provided corporate donations to the following organizations:

- Community Violence Intervention Center (in collaboration with Nodak Electric Cooperative) – \$3,500 each
- Grand Forks Public Library Foundation – \$500

Thank you to all employees who opened their hearts and wallets for this opportunity to strengthen our communities!

