

M I N N K O T A

MESSENGER



JULY - AUGUST 2026



4 PLANTING ROOTS IN NORTH DAKOTA

Something new is growing in Grand Forks, North Dakota – and it's sprouting incredible ag opportunity. Agristo celebrated its U.S. groundbreaking this summer, with a plan to process potatoes from across Minnkota's territory.

On the cover: Mike Loyland, a multigenerational farmer in Thompson, North Dakota, walks rows of potato plants in early July. Loyland's family will be growing for Agristo when the facility opens in 2029.

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.

SUBSCRIPTION INQUIRIES

For change of address or subscription inquiries, contact Ben Fladhammer at bfladhammer@minnkota.com.

Minnkota Power Cooperative is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

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 171,000 consumers.



STAY CONNECTED

Follow us on our website for additional information, expanded stories, video and photo galleries. Go to news.minnkota.com.



MESSENGER STAFF

Editor
Ben Fladhammer

Contributing Writers
Kaylee Cusack
Emily Windjue

Graphic Designer
Jennifer Erickson

Photography
Michael Hoeft

Printing & Mailing
Troy Ahonen
Travis McCleish

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Chair
Mark Habedank

Vice Chair
Tom Woinarowicz

Secretary-Treasurer
Colette Kujava

Steve Arnesen
Paul Baukol
Rick Coe
Kalvin Hoff
Cheryl Grover
Anthony Ottem
Lucas Spaeth
Mike Wahl
Les Windjue

President & CEO
Mac McLennan



10 WELCOME TO PEMBINA GORGE(OUS) STATE PARK

North Dakota welcomed its newest state park this summer, but visitors are no strangers to the land's unique northern beauty. We take a tour of Pembina Gorge State Park, served by Cavalier Rural Electric Cooperative.



16 FROM LINEMAN'S SON TO LEADER

Tommy Houdek grew up on Wild Rice Electric Cooperative lines. Now, after more than a decade of serving the co-op, he's stepping into leadership as their new president and CEO.



18 SWEETS, MEATS AND A BUCKET TRUCK FLEET

North Star Electric Cooperative has found a powerful (and delicious) way to express gratitude to its member-owners. The co-op's Member Appreciation Days bring in hundreds for a good meal and great conversation.



22 AN AILMENT FIXER ELIXIR IN THE HEART OF MINNESOTA

Some would call it a cough and cold cure. But a Clearwater-Polk Electric Cooperative family calls elderberry an integral part of their lives. Get an inside look at the magic of Popple Tree Creek Farms.

PLANTING ROOTS IN NORTH DAKOTA

Agristo breaks ground on new Grand Forks potato facility, sprouts economic growth

By Kaylee Cusack /// Photography Michael Hoeft

Every potato farmer will tell you that growing spuds – and doing it well – is a blend of art, science and business. In Thompson, North Dakota, Mike Loyland has been balancing those variables for decades in the Red River Valley, on soil that's been turned and re-turned by his family for five generations.

From the look of the early days of July, 2026 was shaping up to be a good potato year. For a bushel of reasons.

"This is exciting," Loyland said, shaking dirt from a freshly pulled Musica potato plant now halfway through its summer growth cycle. Tiny tubers stemming from a large seed potato had begun to form

into small, yellow duplicates. "This is a really good set. Lots of stems."

This healthy plot of table potatoes is one of 700 acres of different varieties that Loyland farms, with additional acreage dedicated to sugar beets, edible beans, soybeans and wheat. But potatoes are where a new opportunity has recently taken root for the Thompson farmer and more than 50 other potato growers in the region.

By the fall of 2029, they'll be harvesting potatoes for Agristo, a Belgium-based potato processor that has committed an investment of more than \$1 billion in a state-of-the-art processing facility in Grand Forks, North Dakota. The development will not only have

AGRISTO BY THE NUMBERS

More than **\$1 billion** investment

More than **300 jobs** created

550 million lbs. annual capacity

20,000 contracted acres

Up to **\$1.5 billion** in economic impact

Thompson, North Dakota, farmer Mike Loyland examines a healthy potato crop just south of Grand Forks.



Hundreds stand throughout the event tent on July 7 to hear from Agristo's Kristof Wallays and a full slate of speakers.

an enormous economic impact on Grand Forks and its surrounding communities, but it could also prove to be a gamechanger for the farm families who have become early contracted partners to supply the facility with potatoes.

"We work in the fresh market, which is very volatile. Processing contracts have more stability. There's maybe less upside potential, but that consistency is probably worth more in the end," Loyland said. "That stability brings a lot to us."

Loyland further explained that before Agristo, there wasn't an opportunity for a local farmer to

raise potatoes for a processor without irrigation. "Agristo opened up that dry land opportunity, so that's going to make a big difference."

Good spot for tots

Just two days earlier on July 7, Loyland stood in a crowd of more than 300 people gathered at the site of the future Agristo facility for a celebratory groundbreaking ceremony. Attendees huddled under an event tent filled with facility renderings, video screens and a buffet of Agristo potato

Agristo CEO Filip Wallays welcomes guests to the celebration.



products, from fries to tater tots. The dreary, drizzly air outside had no chance of dampening the warm spirit of achievement and partnership under the white canvas.

"It is great weather, I would say," said Agristo CEO Filip Wallays, welcoming guests with a cheery Belgian cadence. "I mean, we

are here with a lot of farmers. This is true potato weather, so it's fantastic."

Wallays recalled when his family-owned business (with additional sites in The Netherlands, India and France) began to look for expansion opportunities across the Atlantic in 2020. Agristo sent experts to different regions in the U.S. and Canada, searching for a perfect ecosystem of good soil, good climate, good economics and good people. At one point, Wallays received a call from one of his scouts, who had struck gold in North Dakota.

"[He said,] 'You should just see it with your own eyes because it's difficult to believe,'" he remembers the Agristo representative telling him. "And that's what we did."

Soon after, the Agristo team started meeting face-to-face with area potato farmers to learn more about their crops and gauge their interest in partnerships. They began to make connections with local leaders, suppliers, government officials, economic developers and other stakeholders to ensure Grand Forks was the right place to grow.

It was the right place.

"We're keenly aware that North Dakota is in competition with other states for projects like Agristo, and we are deeply grateful that they chose to invest in our great state," North Dakota Lt. Gov. Michelle Strinden said from the podium. "Agristo truly is a win-win-win for our potato growers, the city of Grand

Forks, the Red River Valley and the entire state of North Dakota."

North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring followed, touting the innovation and grit of the region's farmers, whose common sense and applied research have driven the industry forward. "You're bringing a lot of value to our communities, but we're going to give you an awful lot of value back," he told Agristo leadership at the event. "I think we share a lot of the same common goals and a commitment to the true purpose of bettering people's lives."

Grand Forks Mayor Brandon Bochenski then took a moment

to speak to the local growers and their families directly.

"Just raise your hand so I can see how many producers are out there today," he said. It took a moment for dozens of humble hands to slowly rise throughout the crowd. "This project doesn't happen without you. We don't have the food we eat without you. So, from the bottom of my heart, I just want to say thank you."



Agristo representatives and local project partners shovel dirt over their ceremonial seed potatoes.



Agristo CEO Filip Wallays (left) shares a laugh with North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring (middle) and Grand Forks Mayor Brandon Bochenski (right).

The power of place

In the fall of 2025, Ruben Devos packed up his life in Belgium, including his wife and two little girls, and flew across the ocean to North Dakota. As Agristo's project director for Grand Forks, he would need to oversee development of the facility from the ground. The Devos family survived their first Grand Forks winter and have come to enjoy their new environment. "The community is really nice to us," he said as his girls bounded into the event tent. "They're helping us out with everything, and we feel really welcomed."

Since it's their first time in the U.S. – for both the Devos family and Agristo itself – a lot of learning is underway. Devos noted that there's been an "open atmosphere" from the earliest project discussions with Grand Forks stakeholders.

"Together, we find the right solutions. And it's on the side of construction, it's on the side

of utilities, and with the city or with the farmers," he said. "We really feel embraced by the community, and that really helps forward the project."

Minnkota Power Cooperative was a collaborative partner for Agristo throughout the site selection and development process. Minnkota's Economic Development staff worked with other project partners to communicate the importance of the Agristo facility and help demonstrate why local incentives and state investment would be critical to the project's success.

"Just as importantly, we spent time listening," said Minnkota Economic Development Administrator Melissa Beach. "Conversations with growers and project partners helped us better understand what would be needed not just to land the project, but to support it over the long term for both the company and growers."

At the Agristo facility, uninterrupted power from Nodak Elec-

tric Cooperative will be critical to the production of French fries and other frozen potatoes. "If we do not have power, we cannot cool our product," Devos said. "Also, we are producing seven days a week, 24 hours a day, so reliable power is in fact one of the major elements we are looking for when we're looking for sites."

Now that the facility is solidly planted in the heart of Minnkota's service territory, the impacts of the Agristo investment will root throughout the cooperative region. Many growers who receive electricity from Minnkota member cooperatives like Nodak Electric, PKM Electric and Red River Valley Cooperative Power are planning investments in expanded potato storage and additional acreage to meet future Agristo demand.

Beach added that from an economic development perspective, value-added agriculture creates one of the strongest multiplier effects of any industry.

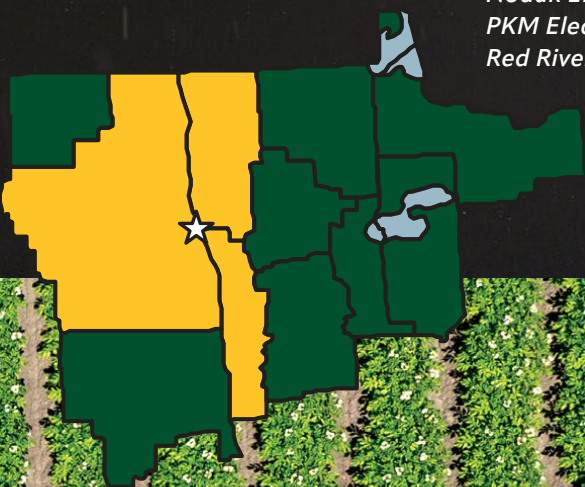
"Every dollar invested in processing generates additional demand for local growers, transportation, construction, equipment suppliers, utilities, professional services and a wide range of supporting businesses," she said. "Agristo will strengthen farm profitability while creating long-term manufacturing jobs and expanding the regional tax base."

Guests of the July 7 Agristo groundbreaking went home with commemorative mugs containing their own young potato plant.



★ Agristo facility site
Grand Forks,
North Dakota

■ Agristo grower
co-op territories
Nodak Electric Cooperative
PKM Electric Cooperative
Red River Valley Co-op Power



On the grow

But first, Agristo must build. The company has already invested \$100 million in ground improvements at the construction site. Development will continue until 2029, when the first potatoes are expected to make their way through the facility. Those potatoes will be turned into various potato products, including private-label goods for big brands like Walmart.

At the July 7 celebration, project leaders grabbed shovels for a new take on a groundbreaking, tossing seed potatoes into the soil and covering them with Red River Valley earth. Cheers erupted from those standing by – the dreamers, planners, connectors and growers who made it all possible.

"It's really milestone by milestone. It all has something special," Devos said. "When we have the first potatoes arriving, the first fries, those moments will be very, I think, even emotional, because it's the work of four years to get to that moment."

When that moment comes, Loyland says he may be ready to pull his last potato and hand the farm over to his son. Retirement comes for everyone. However, with the relationships and trust he's built with his new Agristo family, he knows his legacy is in good, dirt-covered hands.

"Things will change, and we don't know what that looks like yet," he said, acres of potato flowers blooming behind him. "But from all the interaction and all the time that the company has spent with us over the last four years, we have a lot of confidence that they mean what they say."

WELCOME TO PEMBINA GORGE(OUS) STATE PARK

Cavalier Rural Electric Cooperative powers North Dakota's newest state park

By Kaylee Cusack
Photography Michael Hoeft

It's common to observe a level of shock in first-time visitors to the Pembina Gorge area of north-east North Dakota, just south of the Canadian border. A gasp sneaks out when people expect flat farmland but instead bear witness to thousands of acres of rolling river valley, carved steeply by flowing water and overgrown with lush woodland.

Getting guests to engage with the jaw-dropping terrain was one of Mike Duerre's first goals when he joined North Dakota Parks and Recreation in 2007. He was hired to oversee Pembina Gorge State Recreation Area (and later the

nearby Icelandic State Park) and, although he didn't have a set plan, he knew developing the area's off-highway vehicle (OHV) trail system was a place to start.

"I've always said if you're going more than seven miles an hour, you're going too fast, because there's just so much to see," he said. "There are beautiful views. Up on top on the Trappers Ridge Trail, you're overlooking the entire gorge. It's just ... it's gorgeous."

Now, nearly two decades and several trails later, Duerre and his team are celebrating a milestone of even grander scale. This June,

Pembina Gorge State Recreation Area became North Dakota's newest state park – now known as Pembina Gorge State Park. North Dakota hadn't opened a new state park since 1989, when it introduced Cross Ranch State Park in the central part of the state near Washburn.

"I went to Cross Ranch State Park when it was new, and I was in the fifth grade, so it's exciting to be a part of this," Duerre said. "Taking this job was such an opportunity, because I was young and had no idea what it would lead to. Getting to this point now and seeing it turn into a state park – it's pretty cool."

To mark its elevation to a state park, Pembina Gorge State Park now offers a full campground with more than 50 modern and primitive campsites. Later this fall, a comfort station with showers and bathrooms will be added. Over time, the park plans to build five

family cabins, a visitors' center and other guest amenities as funding opportunities allow. Although the campground looks like it appeared effortlessly, with native grasses, wildflowers and forest hugging the site, it took a

lot of work and determination to get to opening day. And the work will continue. "When an architect builds a building, you go in for the grand opening and that's the best it's ever going to look. After that, it slowly deteriorates," noted Paul Taylor, deputy director of North Dakota Parks and Recreation. "But with a landscape or a park, it's the opposite. It's not something that rolls off the back of a truck. You put certain things in place and then it grows. It's like a big garden, and this is the gardener," he added, nodding to Duerre.

The journey to state park

In his first couple of years with Pembina Gorge State Recreation Area, Duerre spent a lot of his time getting a lay of the land. Literally. The area was a checkerboard of public and private lands, making the development of a clear OHV trail system challenging. But the trails were needed. Use of OHVs was growing to the point where public lands were becoming inundated, and drivers needed an avenue to explore.

"Nowhere else in the state was allowing for that. So, we considered how we could build that up so that people can use it, while taking away that burden from the landowners," Duerre explained. "We wanted to do it in a way that we could conserve the public lands and make sure they're being managed to the intention for which they were purchased."

Through a number of conversations and partnerships, Parks and Recreation was able to map out a strong system of trails through

the steep terrain of the Pembina Gorge. By 2010, they had their land base established and applied for a state Recreation Trails Program grant. That funded their first section, including the popular Three Sisters Trail and Trappers Ridge Trail, which opened in 2012.

For the next three years, the Pembina Gorge team opened new trails annually for use by not only OHVs, but bikers, hikers and horses, too. The trails were a success, but Duerre knew there was more to be done.

The state legislature funded a master plan for the recreation area in 2013, which proved to be a nine-month undertaking.

Pembina Gorge State Park Manager Mike Duerre has overseen the area since 2007. "This park is giving people the ability to increase their time here and see all that's to offer," he says.



Native grasses and wildflowers are beginning to grow in the new Pembina Gorge State Park campground, which just opened this summer.



Paul Taylor, deputy director of North Dakota Parks and Recreation, stops at one of the park's scenic overlooks.



Just minutes from the campground, visitors can access the Three Sisters Trailhead for OHV trails, hiking, horseback riding and more.



"We did a lot of public surveys and a lot of stakeholder meetings, and we gathered input to put together the next steps for what the public wanted. Landowners, business owners – we gathered everybody for that conversation," Duerre said.

In that master plan, the group laid out a 17-item list of their next priorities. One of those was a campground. "We put our sights on that and said, now we need to figure out where to build a campground," he continued. "In a river

gorge, all our land is very rough and steep. How do you do that?"

Things began to fall into place. They purchased a piece of land for the campground in 2018, but still needed funding to build the campground. Their opportunity came in the 2023 legislative session. State lawmakers funded \$6 million for campground development, and Parks and Recreation leveraged those state funds to pull in an additional \$2 million federal Land and Water Conservation Fund grant.

The next three years were a flurry of ideas, design and construction. In spring of 2026, when planning and development ended and operations began, North Dakota welcomed its newest state park.

Powering the park

Marty Tetrault, general manager of Cavalier Rural Electric Cooperative (CREC), has lived his entire life with the Pembina Gorge in his backyard. He recalls memories of hitting the trails with friends and responding to tricky lineworker

Deputy Director Taylor (left) walks the primitive camping trail with CREC General Manager Marty Tetrault.



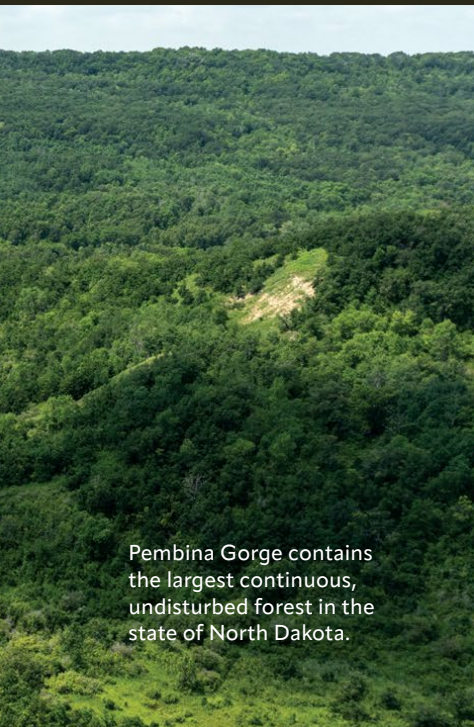
Served by
**CAVALIER RURAL
ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE**
Langdon, North Dakota

Incorporated: September 5, 1945
Board members: 7
Members: 1,620
Miles of line: 1,387

The campground offers modern, pull-though campsites close to the nearby trail system.



Camper Peter Moe from Washburn, North Dakota, rests with his dog Maggie after a morning on the trails.



Pembina Gorge contains the largest continuous, undisturbed forest in the state of North Dakota.

calls on the valley's steep sides. When it came time to power the new state park, he was happy to help.

"I love to see it evolve up here in our area, especially with the OHV trails and now the campground," Tetrault said. "It just ties whole Pembina Gorge region together and creates an opportunity for people to come and visit."

The CREC crew examined a few different options to run electricity to the campground. After working with landowners and obtaining easements, they found a pathway for underground primary cable along the east side of the campground. The original plan had the line cutting across the park, but after some conversations with the campground's contracted electricians, Tetrault recommended the line stay on the outskirts to allow flexibility for park expansion.

"That was a really great example of being adaptable and open to ideas through the process," Taylor said. "It was just a great call for just that reason. As we're thinking about the future, and not knowing exactly what is going to happen, we don't want to create impediments to growth."

The growth of the state park will also tee up the surrounding region for growth. By creating another place for people to stay, the campground can keep people in the area longer. Those visitors can spend more money at gas stations and restaurants in nearby Walhalla, hit the links at the Walhalla Country Club, or spend time at the beautiful Frost Fire Park just down the road. The state park's future cabins will create a four-season opportunity for visitors, creating an even stronger economic impact.

"It's been great to be able to work with North Dakota and Parks and Recreation," Tetrault

said. "Mike [Duerre] has been an electric member of ours for a long time, so I got to know Mike when he first moved out here. One of our members had a dream, and we get to see it become reality."

As Duerre prepares for the busy fall season in the Pembina Gorge – the autumn color change is not to be missed – he's reminding himself to take a step back and truly appreciate the opportunity he and his collaborators have built not only for North Dakotans, but for those who travel far from home to see what his corner of the world has to offer.

"We're about 60 years old as an agency," he said of North Dakota Parks and Recreation. "In those 60-some years, I think we've been very successful in creating memories and living our mission: Connecting People and Places."

FROM LINEMAN'S SON TO LEADER

Wild Rice Electric Cooperative names Mahnomen native Tommy Houdek as new CEO

By Kaylee Cusack
Photography Michael Hoeft

On stormy evenings in Mahnomen, Minnesota, young Tommy Houdek always had an ear open for the ring of his home's special landline. It was the number the electric co-op would call to alert his dad, a Wild Rice Electric Cooperative lineworker, that a power outage needed attention.

"When I was about 10 years old, I remember answering that phone and yelling, 'Dad, phone call! You got an outage!'" he recalled, smiling. "So, I say I've probably been working for the co-op much longer than people think."

Houdek, who was (actually) hired in 2015 as Director of Member Services & Communications, can now reflect on that early crisis training as preparation for what

was ahead. On July 15, he became the latest CEO of Wild Rice Electric, where his father had worked for 38 years before his retirement.

When Houdek ran into his dad for the first time following the announcement, they shared a strong handshake. And, of course, a celebratory hug. "He was proud, and I was just happy to make him proud," the new CEO said.

Cooperative leadership wasn't always the plan for the Minnesota kid. He earned his bachelor's degree in mass communications from Bemidji State University and was soon hired by Target Corporation. He spent time in different areas of North Dakota and Minnesota before marrying his high school sweetheart, Amy, and moving back to their hometown of Mahnomen. There, he worked in marketing and promotions for Shooting Star Casino before he was offered a job at Mike's Heating, where he spent 12 years learning about all sides of the business, from advertising to bookkeeping and sales.

The resume he had built aligned perfectly for an opportunity in 2015, when Wild Rice Electric was looking for its next Director of Member Services & Communications.

"I talked to my dad about it. He said co-ops were a great place to work, and I'd be foolish not to at least give it a shot," Houdek said.

He was hired and immediately got to work. Over the next decade, Houdek, along with his team, fine-tuned and elevated the co-op's approach to energy programs, annual meetings, legislative advocacy and member engagement. They created moments for one-

on-one time with member-owners through events at the co-operative, including Co-op Celebration Day, electric vehicle ride-and-drives and open houses. But they also made a concerted effort to meet members where they were: out in the community.

Under Houdek's leadership, the member services department developed a social media strategy to engage members on the go, allowing Facebook followers to stay updated on programs, co-op happenings, outages and other items of note. They also formed community partnerships, including one with the local high school. On basketball game nights, the Wild Rice crew can be found giving away free popcorn, educating people about the Operation Round Up giving program and speaking about the benefits of co-op membership.

"Those opportunities have really been the most impactful," Houdek said. "It's the interaction with the members. We're able to listen to their needs, truly hear them in a face-to-face discussion and put it all into action with decisions that we can make at the co-op."

Houdek also completed the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's Management Internship Program (MIP), a six-week, intensive training that prepares co-op employees to become co-op leaders. He wanted to continue growing within his role and be ready when a door opened.

The door cracked in early 2026, when Wild Rice Electric CEO Mike Wade announced his upcoming summer retirement.

Houdek was sad to see a mentor leave, but he knew he'd been training for this chance. "I thought, 'Why not me?' I'm going to try for this, and I'm going to try to make my membership proud, my fellow employees proud and my board proud."

Now, he has the chance to do just that.

"Tommy has a strong passion for serving the membership," said outgoing CEO Mike Wade. "His background in member service and energy programs has prepared him well for leading a member-focused cooperative like Wild Rice Electric. He brings a strong work ethic and a lot of energy to the co-op, and he truly wants to make a difference in the communities we serve."

Over his first months as CEO, Houdek plans to stay the course with important co-op initiatives, from overhead-to-underground line conversions to Wild Rice's successful vegetation management program. He says his goal will be to give his team the resources they need to meet the members' reliability expectations, which grow every year.

But as any good leader would attest, he believes the key to reaching long-term technical excellence is lifting up the humans who make it happen.

"I want to spark a good culture at the co-op and allow our employees to invite the membership into that culture as well," Houdek said. "It takes every single employee and every single resource in order to make what we do happen, and our team is simply phenomenal."

SWEETS, MEATS AND A BUCKET TRUCK FLEET



North Star Electric journeyman lineworker Josh Hamm (right) preps for one of dozens of bucket truck rides throughout Member Appreciation Days.

 **Atec**

 **Atec**

North Star Electric Cooperative celebrates 25th annual Member Appreciation Days

By Kaylee Cusack
Photography Jennifer Erickson

Clayton Gubbels was in Member Appreciation Days planning mode for six months. By the middle of June, the member services manager for North Star Electric Cooperative had secured the necessary employee volunteers, lined up industry education booths and, of course, locked in a menu to feed hundreds.

"This year, I had to probably order almost 200 more brats because we ran low last year," he said, and then laughed. "I had to make an emergency run to the grocery store and clear off their shelf, and you don't want to do that."

The smell of grilled meat, fresh cotton candy and popcorn created pure carnival ambiance in North Star's Baudette garage on June 12, as more than 500 members and guests filed through for day two of Member Appreciation Days. The first day, held at North Star's Littlefork offices, welcomed another 300 people, an estimated tally based on the number of brats and sauerkraut served. How delightfully Minnesota.

"This is our chance to bring the membership together and celebrate the unity of the cooperative



North Star Electric employees serve a meal to hundreds of guests at their Baudette facility.

world," said North Star General Manager Kevin Holen, grinning as more families walked through the doors to register. "And it's a little something extra than our annual meeting."

In its 25th year, Member Appreciation Days certainly feels different than an annual meeting. Instead of a business session with rows of chairs, members gather at tables to enjoy a meal and conversation. Instead of making a motion or offering a second, families are in motion, offered seconds on cookies and lemonade.

"We have all the things that kids like," said Robyn Sonstegard, the co-op's finance manager. "We have popcorn, we have cotton candy, we have face painting, balloons, bucket truck rides..."

"And we don't even limit the bucket truck rides to kids," added Gubbels. "Yesterday in Littlefork,

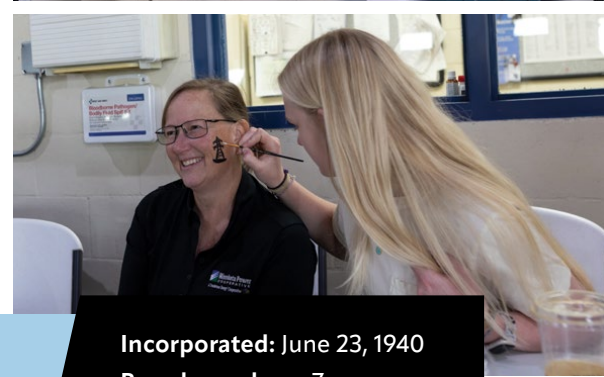
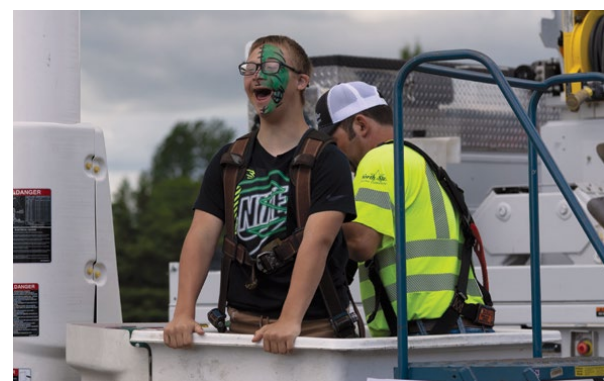
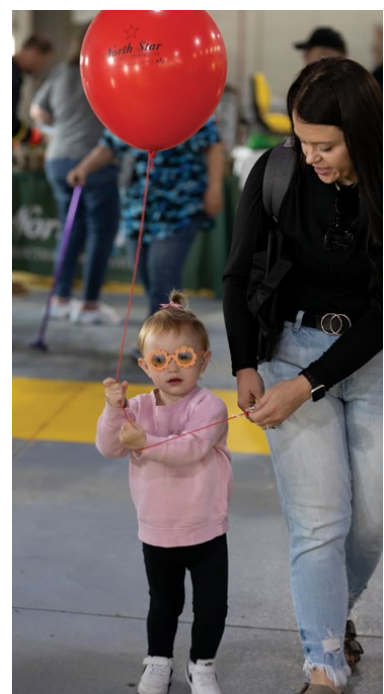
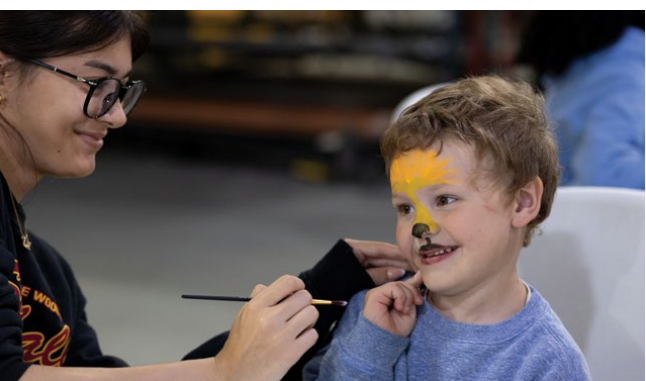


we had a 100-year-old lady go up in the bucket because her grandson is a lineman. She wanted to experience it and see what it was like."

Outside, little Amelia Fickert, with a pink butterfly already adorning her face, harnessed up and hopped into the bucket of a bucket truck. She was thrilled to make the 50-foot trip skyward as her mom Christen and brother Colton watched from the ground.

According to her mom, Amelia took a bucket truck ride at last year's Member Appreciation Days and ended up on the front page of the member newsletter.

Young Amelia Fickert (left) gets ready for a bucket truck ride with North Star journeyman lineworker Blake Huwe.



NORTH STAR ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE
Baudette, Minnesota

Incorporated: June 23, 1940
Board members: 7
Members: 6,984
Miles of line: 1,470

"They used her picture again for advertising the event this year," Christen said, adding that the party has become a family favorite. "My mom personally knows so many of these guys out here who do this, and it's really great to come and see everybody.

They're the only company around that I know that does something like this." Holen takes pride in the experience his team has built over more than two decades. He shares a secondhand story from North

Star board director Randy Bergan. "Last year, a young person came up to him and asked if she could have her birthday party here. That's the kind of atmosphere we've developed, and that's the kind of atmosphere we're striving for," he said.

Electrification education

At 12:30 p.m., a small crowd of attendees gravitated to a trailer outside the co-op's shop, equipped with short power poles, transformers and other electric equipment. North Star lineworkers Blake Huwe and Josh Hamm stepped forward to put on a show of sparks and arcs – for the sake of safety.

"We're going to show you what 7,200 volts looks like," Huwe said. He lifted a hot stick affixed with a charred stuffed animal, perhaps a lion at one point, to the transformer on one of the poles. A blue-gold bolt hissed between them.

The high-voltage demonstration trailer, built from scratch by North Star lineworkers more than 20 years ago, is one of several safety and technology elements worked into the day. This year, the safety team from Minnkota Power Cooperative used a tabletop display to teach attendees to "Watch the Wires" on the farm. North Star also invited electric technology vendors specializing in furnaces, heat pumps, backup generators and battery storage to answer member questions. Visitors could see what the insulation of an electric water heater really looks like and examine the interior-exterior setup of a mini-split heat pump.

"It helps keep the members involved in what's going on and how everything's evolving, because technology changes so fast," Gubbels explained. "It's nice for them to see it firsthand instead of just us talking about it."

The electricity industry moves fast these days, and that change

isn't relegated to technology. Power resources are changing, rates are changing, policy is changing, and it's challenging to keep up with it all. But by engaging in face-to-face conversations, building trust and sharing a cookie (or two), the North Star team has found a way to navigate that change as a co-op community.

"It's nice seeing that everyone's interested in what the cooperative's doing and takes the time to come here. We enjoy these one-on-one discussions and just making sure everyone's needs are met as best we can," Holen said. "The co-op world, it's like a family. You've heard that many times before, but it really is."

Journeyman Lineworker Blake Huwe performs a high-voltage safety demonstration.



Minnkota Safety Administrator Brandon Greene wows with a tabletop power line safety demo.

A TEAM EFFORT

North Star's Member Appreciation Days is an event brought to life by former general manager Dan Hoskins, who retired from the co-op in 2015. Hoskins worked with the board of directors to create an experience to enhance the co-op's relationship with its members and thank them for their support. Since its inception, nearly every co-op employee has had a role in elevating the event, from lineworkers constructing a life-size high-voltage safety trailer to employees grilling brats, spinning cotton candy and giving bucket truck rides. Thank you to the North Star team for demonstrating true commitment to community.

AN AILMENT FIXER ELIXIR IN THE HEART OF MINNESOTA

Family-owned Popple Tree Creek Farms
puts quality first in elderberry products

By Kaylee Cusack /// Photography Michael Hoeft



Popple Tree Creek Farms' bestseller is elderberry syrup.

In the winter of 2020, Ben Machlitt bought 1,740 dormant elderberry cuttings. He didn't know where he was going to plant an acre's worth of shrub stems, but he could sense that he was onto something.

That February, some land near his home in Clearbrook, Minnesota, went up for sale, and he made a purchase that would turn into Popple Tree Creek Farms, a family business served by Clearwater-Polk Electric Cooperative.

"We have around 30 varieties of elderberry here. That's a variety, that's a variety," he said, pointing over the tops of rows of more than 5,000 plants. "See how each one looks a little different?"

Ben and his wife Kori have been farming elderberries here since

Ben Machlitt describes the growing cycle of elderberries, which are typically harvested in August.

that spring, when the cuttings first hit the Minnesota soil. Over the first couple of years, they spent a lot of time discovering what makes the plant tick. Even though elderberries are regionally successful, a grower must learn how each plant wants to live in the particular soil in which they're set. Even now, Ben continues to experiment with different irrigation systems, weeding methods and pH-balancing fertilizers.

His attention to detail is paying off. The goods produced from his crop have become nationally known, with signature bottles of Popple Tree Creek Farms elderberry syrup being shipped to nearly every state. Over the past five years, the company has recorded an average growth of 25% year over year as more customers experience the firsthand benefits of



The Machlitts' elderberry farm contains more than 5,000 individual plants.

elderberries, which are known as a cold and flu remedy. But that's only the start of their power.

"We make something that is truly functional. It's high quality, it's minimally processed and it has a lot of the concentrated content

Freeze-dried elderberries can be used in a variety of products, from teas to syrups.



that people want to buy it for. Once people realize what we make, they latch onto it," Ben said. "Forty percent of our online sales are through recurring subscriptions. People figure it out and they're like, 'This is the good stuff.'"



Kori and Ben Machlitt show off fresh batches of elderberry syrup in their commercial kitchen.

Ben left his job in December of 2023, and Kori did the same six months later. With help from their two daughters, Caroline and Amelia, the family put everything into Popple Tree Creek Farms. They invested in a new building on the site of their elderberry plot that includes a commercial kitchen, packaging area and product storage space, and moved the business into it earlier this year.

Clearwater-Polk Electric was a partner in bringing electricity to the site. Member Services Manager Matt Rendahl assisted with the new service, which now helps power the 60-gallon elderberry kettle, large walk-in freezer space for berry storage, and all the other appliances needed to create elderberry syrups, honey varieties, teas, lip balms and other products.

"I think one of the really nice things about being in a smaller community is that, even though large cities have more available to you, nothing beats having that more intimate relationship with the electric company and other services," Kori said.

"It's important for us to be here when small businesses need us," Rendahl replied. "It's the co-op way."

Believers in the benefits

The Machlitts are also there for Rendahl when he needs them. He and his family are recurring patrons of Popple Tree Creek Farms.

"If one person is sick in my family, we'll all start taking the syrup," he said, noting that the rest of the house either escapes illness



A berry good plan

Ben, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, was employed as a safety manager in Bagley, Minnesota, when the world slowed down due to COVID-19. Working from home, he started making syrup from the few elderberry plants the Machlitts had in their yard. It was good enough that friends and neighbors started requesting it.

They made elderberry syrup in their kitchen for six months, charging only what it took to make it. But the demand kept growing. They eventually moved into a local commercial kitchen and obtained a license, selling a few bottles a week on the side of their day jobs.

At one point, a friend of Kori's family in Illinois wanted to try the syrup she'd been hearing about. She posted her experience on TikTok. Then everything changed.

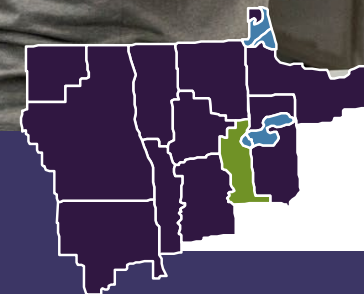
"My phone started just going off. I called Kori and I was like, 'What the hell's happening?'" Ben said. Kori told him about the video, which was getting traction online. "We got, I don't even know how many orders – 100, 200?"

"It was super overwhelming, because I was doing daycare and he was out of town," Kori added. "We didn't know what to do. We were not prepared for it."

The orders didn't slow. They were barely able to keep up, running their entire packaging and shipping operation out of their basement. "It got to a point where I was like, I have to either back off this or quit my job," Ben said. "And I chose this."



Ben Machlitt chats with Clearwater-Polk Electric Member Services Manager Matt Rendahl (right).



Served by
**CLEARWATER-POLK
ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE**
Bagley, Minnesota

Incorporated: September 8, 1945
Board members: 7
Members: 4,619
Miles of line: 1,543

or experiences less severe symptoms. "I was skeptical of it. It was my wife that talked me into trying it. Now I'm a firm believer."

Ben says sales of their elderberry syrup begin to climb every fall as students go back to school and begin to pick up sickness. They hit their annual peak in January and February, when cold, flu and COVID season is at its pinnacle.

"Ever since COVID, there's been a lot more money put into researching elderberries because they've become more popular," he said. He explained that elderberries are rich in polyphenols, which inhibit viral replication and reduce inflammation. "They always say an ounce of prevention

is worth a pound of cure. The earlier you take elderberry when you're sick, the better off you'll be."

Ben himself uses elderberry to help with arthritis in his wrists, which can act up after long days on the farm. The entire Machlitt crew puts in hard work, with Ben caring for the plants, creating new products and hitting the festival circuit, Kori overseeing social media, marketing, packaging and shipping, and Caroline and Amelia stepping up where needed. They anticipate adding staff as the company continues to grow, but for now, it's elderberry syrup that runs through the family's veins.

"Doing it the good way is excruciatingly hard," Ben said.

"But it's worth it," Kori quickly added, looking to her husband of 20 years. "This isn't something he makes quick because he can make money off it. This is something that truly does help families ... and he cares about what the product is because he cares about the people who are receiving it."

Learn more about Popple Tree Creek Farms and see available products at **poppletreecreekfarms.com**.



PROJECT TUNDRA ANNOUNCES UPDATED DEVELOPMENT STRUCTURE, LANDOWNER MEETING HELD



Project Tundra is continuing forward under an updated joint development structure that brings an experienced carbon capture project developer into a larger role while creating new opportunities for carbon dioxide (CO₂) utilization in North Dakota.

Under the revised structure, Reliant Carbon Capture & Storage, LLC will assume responsibility for the development, ownership and operation of the carbon capture facility planned at the coal-based Milton R. Young Station near Center, North Dakota. Reliant's management team brings more than 30 years of experience delivering emissions-control technologies for coal-based power plants.

Reliant's approach to carbon capture project development offers advantages over previously evaluated approaches. Because the majority of the capture system can be manufactured off-site and assembled at the plant location, the design is expected to materially improve operational efficiency and reduce construction risks.

Project Tundra is designed to capture up to 5 million tons of

CO₂ emissions annually from the Young Station, helping position the station to meet evolving environmental requirements while preserving a reliable source of electricity for Minnkota's member cooperatives.

Minnkota will maintain responsibility for CO₂ storage activities, including management of its permitted geologic storage facilities and ongoing engagement with project landowners.

In addition to carbon storage, Minnkota and Reliant are pursuing opportunities to utilize captured CO₂ for enhanced oil recovery (EOR) operations in North Dakota. The Project Tundra team is working with oilfield partners to evaluate the use of CO₂ captured

through Project Tundra to increase North Dakota oil production while creating an additional market for captured emissions.

"The updated development structure and emerging CO₂ utilization opportunities strengthen the long-term potential of Project Tundra," said Mac McLennan, Minnkota president and CEO. "The addition of carbon capture technologies at the Young Station would help preserve the value of the facility while delivering economic and environmental benefits, supporting North Dakota's energy economy and maintaining reliable, affordable electricity for our members."

The Project Tundra developers are committed to open lines of communication with landowners, community members and other key stakeholders. A project landowner meeting was held in July 2026 to provide updates, answer questions and receive feedback.

Development activities for Project Tundra are expected to continue through next year, with a final investment decision anticipated in 2027.



Minnkota CEO Mac McLennan presents to the Project Tundra landowner group in July.

MINNKOTA SIGNS RATEPAYER PLEDGE

Minnkota joined more than 200 electric cooperatives, utilities, data center developers and state leaders from across the country in signing the White House Ratepayer Protection Pledge in July.

The pledge is focused on ensuring the rapid growth of data centers and artificial intelligence infrastructure does not shift new energy and infrastructure costs to existing electric consumers. Under the framework, large data center customers are expected to pay for the new generation, transmission and other infrastructure needed to serve their facilities. The pledge also calls for large loads to support grid reliability and invest in the communities where they operate.

Those principles align with Minnkota's approach through its Large Load Interconnection process. As significant new electric demand develops across the region, Minnkota has the appropriate structure in place to ensure existing members are protected from project-related costs while maintaining a reliable and affordable electric system.

MINNKOTA CELEBRATES SAFETY AT MAJOR PROJECT SITES

Safety remains the top priority at Minnkota, including at major construction projects underway across the system this summer.

In July, Minnkota joined contractor partners for two events recognizing safe work practices at the Agassiz substation near Harwood, North Dakota, and the Erie interconnect near Detroit Lakes, Minnesota.

At Agassiz, Minnkota and Burns & McDonnell hosted a luncheon for nearly 50 contractors, thanking crews for maintaining a strong safety record while work-

ing on an accelerated construction schedule.

Later in the month, Minnkota representatives participated in Conductor Power's "Born to Be Safe" event at the Erie site. The event included discussions and hands-on exercises focused on hazard recognition and safe work practices.

These events are an opportunity to recognize the crews completing important work while reinforcing a shared expectation across every Minnkota project: Everyone goes home safely at the end of the day.



REMEMBERING FORMER MINNKOTA CEO DAVID LOER



Minnkota is saddened to share the passing of David Loer, who served as the third president and CEO in Minnkota's history.

Dave devoted his 43-year career to Minnkota, including 20 years as president and CEO, before retiring in 2010. Raised on a rural farm, he carried the cooperative spirit with him throughout his life and career, always keeping the needs of the member at the end

of the line and the broader community at the center of his work.

Minnkota extends its sincere condolences to Dave's family, friends, former colleagues and all who knew him.



5301 32nd Ave S • Grand Forks, ND 58201-3312

PRESORTED
STANDARD
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
Permit No. 313
Grand Forks, ND



**THE RACE TO
HARVEST IS ON.
SLOW DOWN
FOR POWER
LINES.**

Even when you're trying to beat the rain or finish just one more acre, remember to stay alert to the power lines around you. One wrong move can be dangerous – even deadly.



VISIT WATCHTHEWIRES.COM TO REQUEST
A FREE POWER LINE SAFETY KIT FOR YOUR
FARM TEAM.

