

# COOPERATIVE *focus*

WINTER 2024

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**ON THE COVER:**  
University of Wisconsin-River Falls student August Roach gained valuable experience working as an intern for WinField United through a partnership between the university and the agricultural company. His internship included applying herbicides and nutrients on test plots as part of WinField United's product testing process. Megan Culpitt photo.



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# Among our new goals, let's make in-person meetings a priority



by **Sadie Frericks** Cooperative Network Board Chair

**W**ith a new year come new goals. But before we decide on what we'd like to accomplish this coming year, it's helpful to look back at what we accomplished last year. What went well? What are the highlights?

For me, one of the highlights of 2023 was Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting. For those members who weren't there, you'll find several stories in this issue that provide a recap of the annual meeting. We had a number of great speakers share their formulas for success. And during the presentation of our Cooperative Builder Awards, the stories of those recognized – Audrey Hjelle, Tim Size, and Gene Traxler – reminded us of the power of engaging in our cooperatives and inspired us to be better leaders.

For those members who were there: Thank you for making time to attend. Each of you contributed to the sense of connection I felt throughout the meeting. During each break and each meal, rich conversations ensued in which we found common ground as cooperative members. I especially enjoyed the group discussion following Jeff Lakner's presentation.

In this increasingly digital world in which we live, many of the trainings and meetings we used to do in person are now done through a computer screen. Our new reality is great for efficiency, but we miss out on the value of meeting in person. Opportunities to connect in person are what I find to be one of the greatest benefits of membership in associations.

My goal for 2024 is to connect with even more of our members at our main in-person events: our capitol lobby days and, especially, our annual meeting. Until then, I wish all the best for you, your family, and your cooperative in the coming year.

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# A changing world waits for no one



by **Dan Smith** Cooperative Network President and CEO

**W**elcome to 2024!

Each year, as we turn the calendar from the past to the future, we are given the opportunity to look back at our accomplishments and ahead to our goals. 2023 was a challenging year in most every aspect, from war to political upheaval to economic instability. Cooperatives, large or small, from every sector, faced the impacts of a constantly changing landscape.

As we have done for decades, Cooperative Network worked on behalf of cooperatives in Minnesota and Wisconsin on important legislation impacting agriculture, energy, finance, telecommunications, insurance, and other essential parts of business and community. We made certain policymakers understand the decisions made in state government directly impact cooperatives in areas such as labor, costs of goods, supply chain management, regulatory requirements, and many other components of running a business.

In addition, we supported new cooperative development, consulted on cooperative governance issues, provided education for cooperative directors, and reinforced The Seven Cooperative Principles.

The accomplishments of the past year provide a road map to the future. Cooperative Network's mission is well defined by the Sixth Cooperative Principle – *Cooperation Among Cooperatives*. More than any other trade association, Cooperative Network exists to bring a diverse membership under one tent. Our members come from a dozen cooperative sectors in two states. Some of our members are among the

largest cooperatives in the world, and some are small, locally based cooperatives. In accordance with cooperative governance, each member has equal say in the association. Our resolutions, board elections, and management are in the hands of our cooperative members.

This unique structure holds both challenges and benefits. Our goal for 2024 is to use our collective voice in St. Paul and Madison to support the continued vitality of the cooperative business model. A changing world waits for no one, and cooperatives must be prepared for emerging opportunities and challenges in artificial intelligence, climate change, workforce, communication, and many other areas. Cooperative Network is committed to leading our cooperative members through the challenging times ahead.

We recognize the fact that there is strength in numbers. Therefore, it is imperative that we increase our cooperative membership. Within the pages of *Cooperative Focus* one can find example after example of *Cooperation Among Cooperatives*. When meeting with Cooperative Network, government leaders become aware of the broad constituency of various cooperatives in communities both big and small. That is an advantage the cooperative model must never surrender.

Thank you for your support and membership over the past year. We look forward to working with you in 2024. If you know of a cooperative in your sector or community who is not a member of Cooperative Network, please encourage them to consider joining. I am happy to arrange a conversation and welcome them into our cooperative community.

# COOPERATIVE HISTORY BRIEFS

Often called the **Magna Carta of Cooperatives**, the U.S. Government's **Capper-Volstead Act** of 1922 provides a limited exemption from antitrust liability for agricultural producers who market the products they produce on a cooperative basis, in effect, as one farmer. The Act, which remains in effect, was introduced by U.S. Senators Andrew Volstead of Minnesota and Arthur Capper of Kansas.

In 1936, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the **Rural Electrification Act** as part of his New Deal programs to overcome the Great Depression. The law allowed the federal government to make low-cost loans to fund rural electric cooperative start-ups. At the time, just 10 percent of rural Americans had access. By 1950, 90 percent of American farms had electricity.

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# Cooperative Network: providing expertise in cooperative advocacy, education and communication

by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

**A**s a trade association for cooperatives in Minnesota and Wisconsin – home to the largest concentration of co-ops in the nation – Cooperative Network provides government advocacy, education, and communication services on a broad range of topics affecting all types of cooperatives.

“We have deep roots in the Midwest and we've achieved ongoing bipartisan support for legislative advocacy efforts that protect and promote the best interests of cooperatives and the cooperative business model,” said Cooperative Network president and CEO Dan Smith. “Known as the *Trusted Voice for Cooperatives*, we make sure cooperatives have a voice on issues that affect their efforts and we rally the larger co-op community behind their causes. Quite frankly, no other group or entity has the impact, or bears the responsibility, of acting on behalf of cooperatives that we do.”

Added Smith, “Cooperatives trace their roots to seven ethical principles that set them apart from investor-owned companies and ensure that control of the business is in the hands of our customer. Because of our unique ownership structure, cooperatives act in the best interest of our members and our communities for the long term. Cooperative Network exists to ensure that this powerful business model continues to thrive and prosper.”

Cooperative Network's membership includes cooperatives from across 12 sectors: credit unions, dairy, energy, farm credit, farm supply/fuel/grain, food, housing, health care, livestock and genetics,

mutual insurance, processing and marketing, and telecommunications.

The organization is governed by a board of directors made up of cooperative leaders from around Wisconsin and Minnesota. Member cooperatives gather each year at Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting to determine legislative and educational priorities, and member committees meet throughout the year to develop and guide strategies.

“Our board, committees and events provide valuable opportunities for co-op staff, managers and directors to connect and share best practices,” said Smith, “and our respected government affairs professionals have many decades of experience in private sector lobbying and government service. Their deep connections with decision makers throughout government and stakeholder groups create the basis for success.”

## **Grassroots Advocacy: Co-op Day at the Capitol**

Cooperative Network annually invites members to participate in Minnesota and Wisconsin Co-op Days at the Capitol, where cross-sector teams advocate on behalf of cooperative issues with their respective legislators. The events build relationships with legislators and agency officials, and help explain the role cooperatives play in both states' economies. The day concludes with a reception where cooperative representatives interact with legislators, state officials, and Cooperative Network's colleague organizations.

The first Co-op Day at the Capitol in Minnesota took place in 2009; Wisconsin held its first in 2018.



**Member services, communications and outreach**

Cooperative Network strives to provide its member cooperatives with a number of services geared toward public relations and overall co-op communication, including an online collection of nearly 2,000 professional photos taken in coordination with member cooperatives. The royalty-free images are a members-only benefit.

Two electronic newsletters – *Capitol Connection* and *Co-op Connection* – provide members with frequent up-to-date information on member services and issues in which the organization is engaged.

Cooperative Network annually invites public relations and communications staff from member cooperatives to participate in an annual Cooperative Communicators Workshop. The 2023 workshop featured professionals from varied communications fields who shared strategies and tips on “How to

become better communicators.” Presenters discussed how to amplify brands and objectives through marketing efforts and platforms such as social media and other engagement initiatives.

Smith is a frequent guest on radio programs where he discusses issues facing cooperatives. Cooperative Network also shares timely cooperative-related editorials, opinion pieces and news articles with media outlets throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin and via social media.

In an effort to expand its communications portfolio, in 2023 Cooperative Network launched *Cooperative Focus*, a biannual magazine featuring news, feature stories, columns and editorials about Cooperative Network members and the cooperative industry. Cooperative Network also expanded its communications outreach through increased social media engagement.

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# Cooperative benefits: Market access and clout, shared earnings, political influence, economic enhancement

**C**ooperatives are a trusted, democratic, time-tested business model that builds local wealth for members and communities. Organized to meet the economic needs of its member-owners, a cooperative is a particularly resilient business. It embodies the concept of self-help: members use the cooperative, own it, and control it.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), more than 30,000 cooperatives operate at 73,000 places of business throughout the U.S., account for more than two million jobs, boast about 350 million memberships, and generate more than \$700 billion in annual revenue. Wisconsin and Minnesota have the highest concentration of cooperatives in the United States, with Wisconsin home to more than 700 cooperatives and Minnesota about 1,000 (Sources: University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives, and Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development).

Here are some benefits of cooperative membership and how they relate to use:

## 1. Access to quality supplies and services at reasonable cost

By banding together and purchasing business supplies and services as a group, individuals offset the market power advantage of firms providing those supplies; gain access to volume discounts; and negotiate from a position of greater strength for better delivery terms, credit terms, and other arrangements. Suppliers will be more willing to discuss customizing products and services to meet specifications if the purchasing group provides them sufficient volume to justify the extra time and expense. Another option for cooperative members

is to manufacture their own supplies and hire experts directly to provide essential services. This gives members even more reliable sources of supply and greater control over the types of products available, the cost, and the quality of services received.

## 2. Increased clout in the marketplace

Marketing on a cooperative basis, like purchasing supplies and services, permits members to combine their strength while maintaining their status as independent business people. They can lower distribution costs, conduct joint product promotion, and develop the ability to deliver products in the amounts and types that will attract better offers from purchasers. The Capper-Volstead Act provides a limited exemption from antitrust liability for marketing agricultural products on a cooperative basis. Under this law, farmers can agree on the prices they will accept for their products and other terms of sale. Through cooperative marketing, members can share information and negotiate with buyers from a position of greater strength and security. They can also develop processing facilities by themselves or as part of a joint venture with other cooperative or non-cooperative firms. A cooperative can also serve as a vehicle for people selling goods and services to work with their customers to promote industry research, reduce regulatory burdens, and develop markets for their products.

## 3. Share in the earnings

People often talk about non-cooperative firms operating “for profit” while cooperatives operate “at cost.” This isn’t totally accurate. Most cooperatives generate earnings. They differ from non-cooperative firms in how they allocate and distribute their earnings. A non-cooperative firm retains its earnings for its own account, or perhaps pays part of them out

to shareholders as dividends, based on the amount of stock each investor owns. In a cooperative, earnings are usually allocated among the members on the basis of the amount of business each did with the cooperative during the year. Take the example of a cooperative that has net earnings of \$20,000 during the year and conducts two percent of its business with Ms. Jones. She is allocated \$400 of those earnings ( $\$20,000 \times .02$ ). Typically, Ms. Jones would receive her allocation, called a patronage refund, partly in cash and the remainder as an addition to her equity account in the cooperative. Permitting their cooperative to accumulate retained patronage refunds is a relatively easy and painless way for members to help finance activities and growth.

#### 4. Political action

Growers, small business owners, and other rural residents have to realize that no one gives you a favorable law or regulatory ruling just because you think you deserve it. You have to build your case and argue your point convincingly. A cooperative gives people a means to organize for effective political action. They can meet to develop priorities and strategies. They can send representatives to meet with legislators and regulators. These persons will have more influence because they will be speaking for many, not just for themselves. They can also form coalitions with other groups having similar views on issues. The larger the voice calling for a specific action, the more likely that the system will respond with the policy you desire.

#### 5. Local economy enhanced and protected

Having its businesses owned and controlled on a cooperative basis helps the entire community. Cooperatives generate jobs and salaries for local

residents. They pay taxes that help finance schools, hospitals, and other community services. When a business is a cooperative, your town is less likely to lose those jobs and taxes. A business owned by one person, or a subsidiary of a big company, can easily be moved to another community. When many local people share the ownership of a cooperative, no individual or company can take it from your area or simply close it. Only the membership as a whole can make such decisions.

(From: *USDA Co-ops 101 Booklet*)



# Cooperative governance excellence delivers business success

*(Cooperative Network member FCCS provides business services, consulting, insurance and risk management to the Farm Credit System, agricultural cooperatives and agribusinesses. This article, from FCCS's September-October 2023 newsletter, was reprinted with permission.)*

With ultimate responsibility for setting a cooperative's strategy and overseeing management's execution of the business plan, the board of directors plays an essential role in their organization's direction and success, with a direct correlation between board excellence and business performance.

"An effective board is an integral and critical part of the success of every cooperative organization," says Jean Cantey-Segal, Chief Learning Officer with FCCS. "And since no individual or group performs at a high level over time by accident, it takes a consistent commitment from each director to contribute to and achieve top-level board performance."

The board is responsible for providing important insight to management, hiring and overseeing the CEO, and ensuring execution of strategy by management. They're also responsible for providing long-term strategic guidance, as well as financial, risk and operational oversight. With all these responsibilities, it's clear that the board's role is critical to the organization's sustainability and success.

"Board excellence is ultimately measured by the value the board delivers to the organization," says Leslie Hilton, FCCS Vice President of Governance/ Board Development. "When a board is fully carrying out its responsibilities through its deliberations, inputs to management, actions on behalf of the organization and decision-making, it will be more likely to add value."

Beyond ensuring the long-term sustainability and mission achievement of the organization, an excellent board provides consistent long-term direction and guidance for management, providing constructive feedback, challenge and support that helps them improve their performance and respond effectively to change and disruption. Excellent boards consistently push themselves to become more knowledgeable,

and their directors push themselves individually to grow their own effectiveness and contributions to the board and the organization.

"An effective board is an integral and critical part of the success of every cooperative organization".

- Jean Cantey-Segal,  
FCCS

"The board needs to look at its own effectiveness and contribution, and ensure it is continually improving and changing with growth and change in the organization," says Leslie. "Sometimes an organization can perform well for a few years, but that doesn't mean the board is operating in excellence. The board deciding to simply 'get out of the way' of management isn't excellence in governance."

When a board focuses its attention on forward-looking thinking and long-term strategy, it encourages the management team to do the same, providing amplified benefit to the organization. Board excellence delivers other significant benefits, as well. A well-run board that, through its oversight of management, leads to a well-run cooperative will be attractive to top-level employees: bright, talented employees want to work for a successful organization.

In fact, top-tier candidates, especially at the CEO level, will ask questions about the board and how it

functions. The cooperative will also be more attractive to potential customers and open opportunities for strategic alliances.

“Much of excellence in the boardroom is process related, in terms of best practices in communication, meeting management and other key functions,” says Jay Lux, Vice President of Leadership and Organizational Development. “The bigger part is ensuring the board is undertaking the right kinds of

discussions in the boardroom, focusing on strategic conversations rather than falling into the trap of diving into operational tactics.”

Board excellence becomes especially critical in times of turmoil or disruption. Crises can derail the best-run organizations, but a commitment to strong governance prepares the board to respond and support management so the organization can continue to thrive.

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# SPIRE and Hiway credit unions merge as Blaze Credit Union

by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

Two of Minnesota's largest credit unions, SPIRE Credit Union and Hiway Credit Union, merged effective Jan. 1, 2024 to create a new credit union with nearly \$4 billion in assets, more than 600 employees operating 26 branches, and nearly 250,000 members. Renamed Blaze Credit Union, the new company is the fourth largest credit union in Minnesota.

"Inspired by the two organizations' shared histories and roots, as well as the new credit union's vision, the name reflects the conceptual meaning of brightly colored blazes along a tree-lined trail: guidance, navigation, and wayfinding," the company said in an announcement.

"No matter your age or where you're at, financial journeys can appear daunting, and it's natural for people to sometimes feel a little lost," said former SPIRE President/CEO Dan Stoltz, who took on the role of CEO of the merged credit union. "SPIRE and Hiway have been helping our members follow the path to their dreams – improving their lives – for more than 180 years combined. Our new credit union's name and brand underscores our mission: to be a partner along that path, helping our members go for it, whatever their 'it' might be."

"Blaze Credit Union isn't just our name, it's what we do," added former Hiway President/CEO Dave Boden, who is assumed the position of president. "Beyond providing guidance to our members, we're also here to move our communities forward. Both Hiway and SPIRE have a long history of giving back to our home communities, and that commitment to bettering our shared road ahead will continue."

In addition to the new name, "other brand elements muse on regional geography and many Midwesterners' love of the outdoors.



In the logo, the 'B' is carved to show a blazed trail to a destination. The color palette is full of coppers, golds and greens – colors of money which also reflect scenery like raw

iron ore, warm sunsets, and the beautiful pines that line our roads and dot our city parks," the company said.

On the effective merge date, Hiway and SPIRE combined assets, liabilities, and capital in a merger-of-equals. Organizational processes and technologies will be integrated throughout 2024.

Chrisinger retiring in June 2024, Tranberg to succeed

# Co-op Credit Union President/CEO to retire after 43 years at the helm

**A**fter 43 years of service, Eric Chrisinger, President/CEO of Co-op Credit Union (CCU), has announced his plan to retire in June 2024.

"I am so grateful to have been a part of this organization and its growth and success," said Chrisinger. "The time is right to begin my next chapter. I leave with an experienced team who are prepared to lead and provide the best service possible."



*Eric Chrisinger*

In 1981, Chrisinger was hired as the Melrose Branch Manager and Loan Officer when the Melrose Credit Union merged with Black River Falls-based CCU. Since then, he played a crucial role in the development of CCU's field of membership with the merging of nine different credit unions – Strum Credit Union, Melrose Credit Union, Fall Creek Credit Union, Galesville Credit Union, Augusta Credit Union, Blair Credit Union, Fairchild Credit Union, and La Crosse Postal Credit Union.

Throughout his career at CCU, he has led the lending area, and served as Executive Vice President before being named President/CEO in 2008. Under his leadership and alongside his dedicated team, CCU has experienced tremendous growth and now has more than 22,000 members, over \$500 million in total assets, and 93 employees.

"When I first started at CCU, I was one of 10 employees," he said. "I'm proud that today we are considered an employer of choice in our communities. We've worked hard to build a culture that supports and encourages employees in all stages of their development."

The success and growth of the credit union ranks CCU 21st out of 113 credit unions in Wisconsin.

Chrisinger has served both the community and credit union industry in many ways over his career, including the Corporate Central Credit Union Board, Black River Falls Area Foundation, League Governmental Affairs Committee, and the Jackson County Housing Commission.

Chrisinger will be succeeded by CCU's Chief Lending Officer, Tim Tranberg.



*Tim Tranberg*

"Eric has mentored, coached and prepared us for the future," said Tranberg. "His influence can be felt at every branch and in every community we serve. He has pushed us to always do the right thing so that we can be the best for our members. I am honored and excited to carry that tradition

forward as the next President/CEO. I look forward to continuing to provide excellent service to our employees and our members."

Tranberg has shown his commitment to CCU over the past 35 years as a Consumer, Mortgage and Commercial Loan Officer to Executive Vice President - Lending and most recently as Chief Lending Officer.

"The CCU Board of Directors would like to extend a warm welcome to Tim as our next President/CEO," said Tim Torkelson, CCU Board Chair. "Tim is dedicated to doing what is best for our members and we look forward to the continued success and growth of CCU under his leadership."

# ALCIVIA to open new rail-loading grain terminal in Hager City

In December 2023, ALCIVIA announced the purchase of 40 acres and over 21,000 linear feet of Class I Burlington Northern Railroad track in Hager City, Wis., where a new state-of-the-art rail-loading grain terminal will be built. The new facility will bring grain terminal assets to producers in west central Wisconsin and southeast Minnesota, the company said in a press release.

In addition to the grain facility, ALCIVIA plans to build a 24-hour unattended, two-bay loading terminal for liquid fertilizer, a dry fertilizer transload, rail liquid propane unload, and storage capacity.

Features of the new grain facility will include upright grain storage space for 3.9 million bushels serviced by two 4,700-bushel p/hr grain dryers and three 1,500-bushel capacity dump pits that will move grain at a combined handling speed of 60,000 bushels p/hr.

Once built, ALCIVIA will have three shuttle loading facilities on three different Class I railroads (BN, UP, CP), access to the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers,

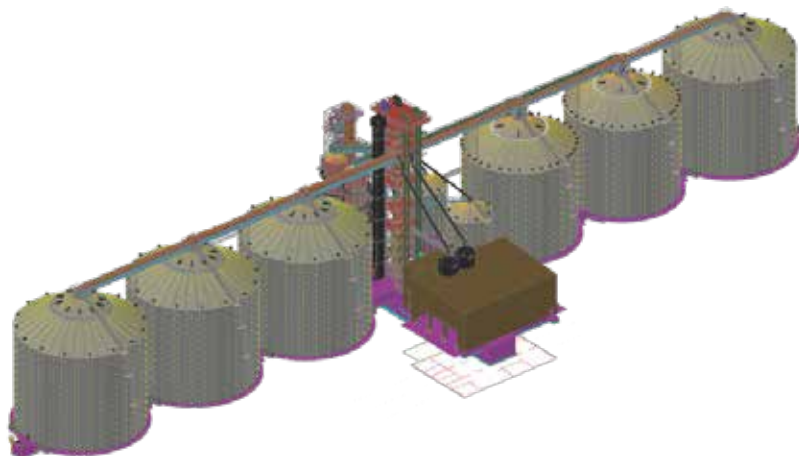
and logistics to domestic corn ethanol plants and soybean crush plants. This positions ALCIVIA with highly desirable domestic and export market access and arbitrage.

"It is our mission to advance our customers through innovative and responsible solutions," said ALCIVIA CEO and president Jim Dell. "This new site will provide tremendous value to our members by offering state-of-the-art speed, space, and market access and utility. We are thrilled to be adding additional domestic and export market access that will have a positive impact on ALCIVIA members across our territory."

A groundbreaking will be scheduled for later this winter. The estimated project completion date is March 2025.

Company officials said that over the last three years, including the new investment in Hager City, ALCIVIA will have invested \$86 million in capital spending, and an additional \$9.5 million for five strategic acquisitions to strengthen their core offerings and service the needs of their current and future patrons. During that same period, ALCIVIA has returned over \$13 million in cash to members.

ALCIVIA is a leading, member-owned agricultural and energy cooperative located in Wisconsin and serving farm, business and retail customers in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, and Iowa.





# Cenex's 'Hometown Throwdown' competition encourages local pride

In May, 2024 one deserving "hometown festival" will receive \$100,000 and two others will each get \$25,000 thanks to Hometown Throwdown, a new social-first contest sponsored by Cenex, the energy brand of CHS Inc.

Launched in October 2023, the contest encourages local pride by asking people and organizations to share what makes their hometown festivals unique. Qualifying festivals have a chance to win the cash prizes to bring their hometown celebrations to the next level.

Hometown Throwdown is inspired by the Cenex brand's strong local roots and is a continuation of its long history of giving back to the communities it calls home. The brand is local to its core, with all 1,400-plus retail locations across 19 states run by members of the community.

To date, Cenex has given more than \$500,000 in grants to support local communities. These efforts have helped fund more than 80 community projects, including the improvement of aging baseball fields, athletic workshops in schools, support of local food shelters and more.

"At Cenex, we have always made it a priority to celebrate and support our local communities where our valued retailers and dealers call home. This new social contest, Hometown Throwdown, does just that and so much more," says Mimi Berlin, expert

marketing and communications specialist, energy, at CHS Inc. "It highlights the unique celebrations that bring our local communities together and fosters community pride. We are excited to launch the Hometown Throwdown contest to enable consumers to celebrate the festivals that are near and dear to their hearts."



The entry period for the competition opened in October and ran through mid-December. People and organizations could nominate their festivals through various social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram (tagging @CenexStores) or TikTok (tagging @

CenexStores\_) and using the #PoweredLocally and #Contest hashtags.

Three finalists will be announced in April 2024, and voting will open. The grand-prize winner will be revealed in May 2024 and will receive \$100,000 for their festival. The remaining two finalists will receive \$25,000 each.

To be eligible, festivals must be run by a local chamber of commerce, municipality, downtown commission, community-oriented non-profit group or similar organization. Festivals must take place in the following states: Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

# Annual Meeting: Networking across sectors to build effective boards, management teams, and business plans

by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

**H**eld November 14-15, 2023 in Rochester, Minn., Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting featured a full slate of engaging speakers, networking opportunities, board elections, legislative reports, action on member-approved lobbying resolutions, and the always highly anticipated presentation of the organization's Cooperative Builder Awards.

"No other organization brings the diverse cooperative businesses, their directors and members together the way Cooperative Network does," Cooperative Network President and CEO Dan Smith said after



*Cooperative Network President and CEO Dan Smith.*

the meeting. "We serve as a forum for cross-sector collaboration, and activities such as the annual meeting provide excellent opportunities to advance our mission. We're very grateful – and relieved – to be able to host the annual meetings in person again and meet face-to-face with our members."

Following two years (2020 and 2021) in which the annual event was held virtually due to the pandemic, it returned in-person in La Crosse in 2022, and Rochester in 2023.

And although attendance for both the 2022 and 2023 in-person iterations was down significantly from annual meetings before the pandemic, Smith said the organization is hoping there'll be an attendance "bounce back."

"I heard from numerous attendees in Rochester that it was great to have the annual meetings in person again, but they wished there were more people in attendance. I couldn't agree more," said Smith, "but it's generally understood that because of the pandemic and the resulting growth and acceptance of on-line tools such as Zoom, that many civic groups and associations have experienced declines in in-person meetings and events. Hopefully, our members will double down moving forward and reinforce their commitment and support for activities such as the annual meeting. It's their engagement in events like this that ultimately helps strengthen and build the cooperative community."

"In the meantime, our staff is committed to hosting annual meetings that are engaging, informative and meaningful to attendees. Starting last year in La Crosse and now this year in Rochester, we're back to form after a couple of years of meeting virtually. Frankly, meeting virtually just does not compare to the real thing."

Rochester attendees gave the event high marks.

"The speakers were very good," said Patrick Laws, president of the Wisconsin Association of Mutual Insurance Companies. "In general, I felt there was a strong message that cooperatives need to modernize



Andy Fiene, former Premier Cooperative CEO, speaking about the topic 'Leading Your Cooperative Through Never-ending Change.'

in order to compete and thrive in the future." Laws said he's attended several previous annual meetings and will attend again.

Gary Eekhoff, board member with the Renville-Sibley Cooperative Power Association, agreed, saying the meeting featured a "dynamic" lineup of speakers. However, he added, "We need more people in the room . . . The organization needs to grow."

"Post-pandemic, we need ways to reconnect with the cooperative community and with each other, and this event is a great way to do both," said Cathy Statz, a previous attendee who was at the 2023 event in a new role with Ralph K. Morris Foundation, assisting with the Tom Lyon Family Leadership Symposium.

"The speakers are always a highlight of the program; the importance of education and constant improvement – of self, but also for organizations and broader systems – seemed to be a common thread," she said. "And, as always, I treasured the conversations around the edges, before and after sessions, during the reception and banquet, and in the Q&A that followed presentations. This rich exchange of ideas and opinions – and the convivial atmosphere that supports it – is definitely worth the time, energy, and resources we expend to come to events like this."

Added Statz, "I'd love to see more attendees . . . Membership organizations are challenged now more than ever, and we all need to find ways to engage not just the board chairs and managers, but rank-and-file members and staff to help them see the value of organizations like Cooperative Network. Our associations need energetic ambassadors and compelling outreach to help cooperators at every level see how much we all benefit – as individuals, and as cooperatives – when we work together across sectors, demographics, and geography."

In his President's Report, Smith emphasized the 2023 Annual Meeting, theme – *Cooperation Among Cooperatives*. That theme, echoed by Cooperative Network Board Chair Sadie Frericks in her chair report, also is Principle Six of the Seven Cooperative Principles.



Cooperative Network Board Chair Sadie Frericks.

"It is also the core reason Cooperative Network exists," Smith told attendees. "Years ago, those who founded this organization envisioned a 'cooperative of cooperatives,' a non-profit, cooperative association working across sectors and state lines to provide a voice for the cooperative business model in the halls of government, and in the public square.

"While membership in this unique cooperative would be voluntary, its work would benefit all cooperatives, big or small, from a dozen sectors, in two states," said Smith. "In compliance with cooperative governance, members would approve the bylaws, resolutions, and elect directors. Cooperative power would be enhanced by cooperative collaboration, communication, and concern. Cooperative leaders



*Jennifer Wickman, Cooperative Network Government Affairs Director - WI, presents the legislative policy and political update.*

would benefit from networking across sectors to build effective boards, management teams, and business plans. The new association would be named Cooperative Network.

"The founders were committed to the Seven Cooperative Principles and were adamant that cooperatives do not take their present success for granted. We live in a world constantly changing. To navigate change, to survive change, requires adherence to core principles, to a common cause, to the good of the cooperative community. That is why Cooperative Network was founded. That is why Cooperative Network exists today," said Smith.

In addition to president and chair reports, legislative policy and political updates, board elections and action on "business items," the annual meeting featured several speakers addressing cooperative- and industry-related topics.

Andy Fiene, former Premier Cooperative CEO, spoke on the topic of 'Leading Your Cooperative Through Never-ending Change.' His address focused on how cooperatives should use cooperative governance, the Seven Cooperative Principles, and strategic planning to overcome obstacles and seize opportunities in constantly changing business environments.

Cheryl DeVault, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative primary care program manager, delivered an address entitled, 'At the Heart of the Matter:

Engaging Your Workforce,' in which she discussed how organizations can go about "engaging the heart of others to get the job done by understanding what makes them tick."

Jeff Lakner, farmer/lender and Lakner Farms LLC cooperative board member, was the speaker for the Ralph K. Morris Foundation/Tom Lyon Family Symposium (see related article on page 20). His address, entitled 'Taking a Wider View: Holistic perspectives help us go farther, when we go together,' discussed how producers and stakeholders can move closer to attaining societal goals by "taking an end-to-end view."

"All of the speakers touched on methods and practices that cooperatives need to have in their tool kits in order to thrive and move forward in these changing times," said Smith. "I think the cooperators attending the annual meeting found the presentations to be very meaningful and relevant."



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## Cooperative Builder Award recognizes individuals for distinguished service to the cooperative movement



**Audrey Hjelle**

**Tim Size**

**Gene Traxler**

At a special banquet held in their honor during Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting, Audrey Hjelle, Tim Size and Gene Traxler were bestowed the 2023 Cooperative Builder Award, the organization's highest honor.

Through this award, Cooperative Network recognizes individuals for outstanding contributions, loyalty and service to the cooperative movement. Recipients are cooperative builders in their respective fields or cooperative sectors. They have served as mentors and coaches, leading by example and keenly aware of their responsibility to build up the next generation of leaders.

Cooperative Network has honored the achievements of cooperative leaders from Minnesota and Wisconsin since the two statewide associations merged in 2009. Prior to this, the former Wisconsin Federation of Cooperatives began giving Cooperative Builder Awards in 1976, and the former Minnesota Association of Cooperatives bestowed Cooperative Leadership Awards beginning in 2000. Nominees are nominated by their peers, and a committee selects up to three individuals to receive the award each year.

View video biographies of the 2023 award recipients at [www.cooperativenetwork.coop/cooperative-builder-award/](http://www.cooperativenetwork.coop/cooperative-builder-award/)

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# Legacies of Ralph K. Morris, Tom Lyon live on through foundation, symposium

## Symposium marked 20th anniversary at Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting

by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

One of the highlights of Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting is the Ralph K. Morris Foundation/Tom Lyon Family Leadership Symposium, an annual event honoring the legacies of two individuals who believed strongly in the cooperative system and its capacity to support a more robust civil society.

The foundation is named after the late Ralph K. Morris, a Minnesota dairy farmer and lawyer who devoted his long legal career to providing legal services to agricultural and rural electric cooperatives throughout the United States. A nationally and internationally respected lawyer, Morris wrote and lectured frequently on cooperative law and provided leadership and mentoring to his colleagues in this field.

The Tom Lyon Family Leadership Symposium honors Tom Lyon, a dedicated agribusiness, cooperative, and farmland preservation leader in Wisconsin and across the U.S. His professional career in the cooperative world included serving as CEO of Cooperative Resources International (GENEX) of Shawano, Wis. His lifetime of work on behalf of cooperatives earned him induction into the National Cooperative Hall of Fame in 2006. His lengthy list of civic involvement includes serving on the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents, two years as president.

Lyon and Morris both served on the board of the American Farmland Trust, a national organization that works to protect and conserve farmland.

Ralph K. Morris died in 2000 and the foundation was named in his honor in 2004, with Lyon serving as a

founding member. Since 2004, the foundation has hosted the Leadership Symposium during Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting, with the 2023 edition marking the 20th anniversary of the symposium.

Lyon passed away in 2020, and the foundation named its annual flagship event the Tom Lyon Leadership Symposium later that year. It was renamed the Tom Lyon Family Leadership Symposium in 2021.

The symposium has featured speakers of national prominence, including former Vice President Walter Mondale, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, American Farmland Trust President Ralph Grossi, and many others.

In addition to hosting the annual symposium, the foundation, according to its website, is a nonprofit corporation which provides development opportunities for emerging leaders expressing interest in applying and advancing the principles of cooperation, and in promoting farmland preservation, land stewardship and sustainability."



*Ralph K. Morris*



*Tom Lyon*



*William J. Nelson,  
Ralph K. Morris  
Foundation  
Board Chair*

Established by Lyon and others, it has provided nearly 2,000 professional development scholarships in 20 years of operation. In addition, it hosts educational events on topics related to cooperatives and land and water conservation. Scholarship recipient info and foundation updates are provided at Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting.

The foundation also supports the Rod Nilsestuen Legacy Program at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, named after the late cooperative and agricultural leader.

"Tom Lyon, as one of our founders, was not only the inspiration and driving force of our two mission areas – education about cooperatives and land and water conservation – but also our program delivery methods, professional development scholarships, the Leadership Symposium, and educational symposia on university campuses," said Ralph K. Morris Foundation Board Chair William J. Nelson.

Nelson added, "The Ralph K. Morris Foundation – and particularly the Tom Lyon Family Leadership Symposium – recognize that this system must be nurtured and supported, and a key to its success is the thoughtful development of future cooperative leadership, whether that be for management and staff, or boards and members. The foundation does this by providing development opportunities for emerging leaders expressing interest in applying and advancing the principles of cooperation, and in promoting farmland preservation, land stewardship, and sustainability."

Nelson said foundation/symposium officials are appreciative of their 20-year relationship with Cooperative Network and the opportunity to host the symposium at the organization's annual meeting.

"Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting has been an excellent opportunity for us to model the sort of collaborative approach that was a hallmark of Tom Lyon's work in cooperatives, farmland preservation, and education – and the legacy that has inspired his family, his colleagues, and the communities and organizations in which he worked," said Nelson.

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# Priority list developed for an abbreviated 2024 Legislative Session

by **Bennett Smith** Cooperative Network Contract Lobbyist-MN

Thanks to the 2022 election resulting in a Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) trifecta, the DFL was able to push through a budget and related policies during the 2023 Legislative Session that were historic and transformational. New spending, which pushed the two-year budget to a record \$72 billion, was made possible by a revenue surplus exceeding \$17 billion. That surplus had actually been enlarged by a Senate GOP strategy during the 2022 session to suspend negotiations with Gov. Walz on what to do with surplus funds that year because GOP leaders assumed those unused dollars would be awaiting a 2023 legislative session overseen by a new GOP governor and GOP majorities in the House and Senate.

Instead, voters reelected Walz, and the DFL maintained a majority in the House and gained a narrow majority in the Senate, and the DFL used its victory to push through a lengthy and progressive agenda.

In 2024, voters will deliver their assessment on the DFL's performance. Although Walz and the Senate won't be on the ballot, all 134 House seats will be up for grabs.

Despite a trifecta that enabled the DFL to plow through a legislative agenda with few obstacles, Cooperative Network was able to achieve many of our members' goals, including working with the Department of Agriculture to establish a grant program to help finance new cooperatives for agricultural purposes. Additionally, Cooperative Network, along with our partners, advocated for the State Competitiveness Fund, which provides \$115 million from the general fund to match federal grant dollars available from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act. We also were part of a coalition that asked for and received an historic investment in broadband infrastructure of at least \$210 million of state and federal funding. Our organization also supported

language requiring high school students to take a personal finance course to graduate.

The Legislature reconvenes February 12 for an abbreviated 2024 session that ends the third week of May. While 2024 is not a budget year, legislators and Governor Walz will likely negotiate a much smaller supplemental budget and a capital investment bill to maintain public infrastructure. The magnitude of these efforts all hinges on the financial forecast conducted at the end of February to project government revenue surpluses and deficits.

Looking ahead, our initial legislative "priority list" covers three areas: workforce development, property insurance costs and availability, and water and land conservation.

Workforce development means more than just training, education and apprenticeships; it includes many other issues that go along with it: adequate childcare, access to transportation, housing near employment, physical/mental health care, remote work, and flexible schedules. One of our goals will be to work with state agencies to develop programs that address these issues.

Due to the increase in major climate-related disasters in recent years (record snowfalls, heat/drought, tornadoes, etc.) many insurance carriers have, and will continue to, drop their property insurance coverage offerings. With fewer carriers, premiums will increase and coverage will decrease. In some cases, farmers and property owners will be at risk of losing insurance coverage and falling out of compliance with mortgage lenders requiring insurance.

We also will lobby for more programs that support water and land conservation. In addition to well-administered programs that keep our waters clean, and provide access to clean water, we need to advocate for more programs supporting soil health and soil fertility.



# 2024 will be a different kind of election year in Wisconsin

by **Jennifer Wickman** Cooperative Network Government Affairs Director-WI

**W**isconsin will again play a critical role in the 2024 presidential election as a key swing state. However, thanks to the recent Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling, Wisconsin will have new legislative maps for that election which will surely change the political make-up of the state legislature.

Currently, the Republican Party controls both houses, with a supermajority in the Wisconsin Senate (22 of the 33 seats) and a strong majority in the Wisconsin Assembly (64 of the 99 seats). Since the Supreme Court has indicated it will consider partisan fairness when reviewing new maps, we are likely to see many more competitive races in the fall, including some races in which incumbents are pitted against each other in newly re-drawn districts.

For this reason, GOP leadership is anxious to finish the current session as soon as possible so everyone can concentrate on redistricting and campaigning. For Cooperative Network, that means advocating for a few important bills that are still in the queue:

**Helping food banks** – Assembly Bill 645 would allow county boards, many of which still have unspent federal dollars from the pandemic, to purchase food from Wisconsin's commodity and food processing organizations to be distributed to local food banks and food pantries.

**Propane for automobiles** – Agricultural and supply cooperatives have long known that propane autogas provides fleets with the lowest total cost-of-ownership, reduced emissions and more uptime compared with other fuels. Assembly Bill 491 eliminates current requirements for driver training to self-serve autogas. This bill could help expand the market for propane as a fuel for private vehicles.

**Wild Parsnip** – Senate Bill 269 would create a grant program in the WI Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to support mapping, control, eradication, monitoring, and containment of wild parsnip.

**Overweight permits for whey** – While Wisconsin allows haulers to obtain overweight permits for liquid milk, Assembly Bill 440 would extend those permits to all liquid milk products (most especially liquid whey). Passage of the bill would help dairy producers increase efficiency and address the truck-driver labor shortage.

**Next Gen 911** – Assembly Bill 36 requires the Department of Military Affairs to reimburse local carriers, including telecommunication cooperatives, for costs associated with 911 services. Provider cost recovery for facilitating 911 has existed for decades, but statutes do not specifically allow cost recovery to continue after the transition to the digital NG-911 Emergency Services Internet Protocol Network.

**Financial Protection of Vulnerable Adults** – Often financial institutions are aware that someone is being scammed, but because of current laws regarding confidentiality, they are powerless to do anything but talk to the victim. Assembly Bill 578 allows financial service providers to refuse or delay financial transactions when financial exploitation of a vulnerable adult is suspected.

We hope to add all of these bills to the list of "WINS" we've had so far this session. We are proud to have been part of the elimination of the Personal Property Tax, the refunding of Cooperative Development Grants, the creation of the Agricultural Roads Improvement Program, making important changes to the Broadband Expansion Grant program, and improving financial literacy by requiring all students to earn at least half a credit in personal financial literacy in order to graduate high school.

Our effectiveness on these and all legislative issues depends on the involvement of our member cooperatives, so please participate! You can do this by bringing important issues to our attention, by testifying on bills that affect your cooperatives and by attending fundraisers for our legislative friends who support cooperatives.

Company receives UW System Regents Business Partnership Award

# WinField United and UW River Falls continue to reap rewards of long-term partnership

by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

**A** symbiotic partnership between WinField United, the crop products and consulting division of Arden Hills, Minn.-based Land O'Lakes, Inc., and the University of Wisconsin-River Falls (UWRF) has been reaping benefits for more than three decades.

For WinField United, the partnership has led to the development of many saleable agronomy products thanks to the work of UWRF interns, and for the university, the relationship has provided high-quality educational opportunities which oftentimes lead to full-time jobs with WinField United and other Land O'Lakes-affiliated companies.



*Land O' Lakes division WinField United was presented with a UW System Regents Business Partnership Award on Oct. 4, 2023. Pictured at the presentation ceremony are (l-r): UW System President Jay Rothman; Vice President of Research and Development Operations, Diversified Field Crops and Forage Genetics International at Land O' Lakes, Inc. Glenda Gehl; UW-River Falls Chancellor Maria Gallo; and Board of Regents President Karen Walsh. Sam Silver photo.*

For its work with UWRF, WinField United was recognized in October 2023 with a UW System Regents Business Partnership Award, a prestigious honor presented to businesses which make a significant positive impact on University of Wisconsin System universities. The award was presented during a ceremony at the company's \$40 million, state-of-the-art WinField United Innovation Center in River Falls. Opened in 2017, the center is a 55,000-sq.-ft. hub dedicated to cutting-edge agronomic research and product development, and a reflection of a partnership that started in 1989 as a land rental agreement that has evolved into so much more over the years.

"The partnerships that we have like this are so absolutely vital to our being able to help our students and to help the state of Wisconsin," UW System President Jay Rothman said during the awards ceremony, according to a UWRF press release.

Glenda Gehl, vice president of Research and Development Operations, Diversified Field Crops and Forage Genetics International at Land O' Lakes, Inc., praised the longstanding relationship between the two entities.

"As a farmer-owned cooperative, we believe in the power of partnerships and the strength of working together for the common good," Gehl said at the ceremony. "For more than 30 years, the University of Wisconsin-River Falls has been a tremendous partner in supporting farmers and agriculture, and we look forward to continuing our work together into the future."

UW-River Falls Chancellor Maria Gallo said UWRF is similarly grateful for the partnership. The accord benefits the university, the company and the region in multiple ways, she said, noting that many students who complete internships are later hired by the company, helping them secure fulfilling, good paying jobs, while providing WinField United with valuable employees and supporting the regional economy.

“Our strong partnership with WinField United leads to amazing opportunities for our students, leads to jobs for many of our students, and helps build the economy of this region,” said Gallo.

In a press release, UWRF officials echoed the benefits of the relationship, saying “WinField United brings economic development to this part of Wisconsin and the company’s investments in infrastructure, job creation and media visibility have helped make River Falls a landmark of agricultural innovation in the Midwest.”

Through WinField United, UW-River Falls students have access to a strong internship program, collaborative research opportunities, and countless valuable hands-on learning opportunities.

The unique relationship began in 1989 when United WinField started renting plots on UWRF land for research and education. Today, the relationship continues to provide for the company’s research, experiential learning for interns, producers, and agronomists, and resultant development and improvement of agronomy products.

Tests conducted at UWRF are often a starting point for WinField United’s product testing process, with trials used as a screening to identify which products will go on to further company testing and development. The intern experience allows students to learn about the most current technology and crop protection methods, tour other field trials, and network within the industry.



August Roach helps Megan Culpitt suit up in protective gear as she prepares to test herbicides on crops in a test plot near River Falls last summer. Roach and Culpitt are among UW-River Falls students who have worked as interns with WinField United through a partnership between the company and the university. Contributed photo.

UW-River Falls Megan Culpitt works in a test plot. Contributed photo.

WinField United staff and UWRF faculty combine efforts on research plots for product development and field training for agronomy production specialists, agronomists, applicators and managers. Faculty and UW-Extension staff use data for classroom and outreach educational programs.

WinField United benefits UWRF in other ways including scholarship support and helping fund activities of the university's student Crops and Soils Science Club. The company has specialty farm equipment available for use by UWRF, and in turn the university provides equipment to the company. WinField United provides seeds and other plant materials for planting at the UWRF-operated Mann Valley Farm and for use in the university's crop science program and the company provides support for maintenance of the irrigation system used to irrigate research plots.

UWRF worked with WinField United during the building and testing the company's high-tech wind tunnel to study pesticide movement. Student research was also conducted, including designing and 3D-printing wind guards for sprayer nozzles that were then tested in the wind tunnel.

### **'Through the work I did during that internship, I learned I really did like research'**

As a field technician employed by WinField United, Lee Boles is involved in all stages of agriculture crop development, from treatment of seeds which will be planted in soil, to harvesting and measuring yields.

Growing up on a rural Prescott, Wis. farm, Boles worked in traditional production agriculture at home. He used that background to develop skills he uses in his current job at WinField United's River Falls location, where he tests crops products designed to reduce pest pressure, increase germination and maximize available nutrients.

During the summer of his junior year at UWRF, Boles was an intern with WinField United, working in product development. His hands-on work involved spraying and maintaining research plots to determine the best products for the crops.

Boles says that through his internship, he learned he enjoyed the research side of agriculture as much or more than producing agricultural products.

"This was an opportunity for me to try out the research side of ag," Boles said. "Through the work I did during that internship, I learned I really did like research. I learned (it) was a really good fit for me." Boles subsequently completed another internship at an agricultural cooperative. While he enjoyed that experience, it solidified his decision to seek a profession that combined agriculture and research. After graduating from UWRF in 2016, he completed another internship at WinField United, which led to a fulltime job at the company,

"The hands-on experience you gain in internships ... helps you decide the kind of work you want to do, and the work you don't want to do," he said. "I have a great job and future opportunities that are possible because of the experiences I had during my internships."

### **WinField United internship provides insight into ag career options**

When August Roach worked testing seed coatings and herbicide treatments during an internship with WinField United last summer, he not only had the opportunity to participate in state-of-the-art research, but may have set himself on a future career path. Roach, a junior at UWRF studying agriculture business, said the hands-on learning he experienced helped open his eyes to the many career opportunities available in the agriculture food production sector. Likewise, discussions with other WinField employees prompted Roach to consider various career possibilities, he said.



*August Roach tested seed coatings and herbicide treatments during an internship with WinField United last summer. Contributed photo*

"I was able to get my foot in the door at a large company and create a career path without really knowing it," said Roach, who is from Faribault, Minn. "I got to talk and network with the higher-ups at the (WinField United) Innovation Center, talk with multiple Ph.D. employees, see what they do, and create relationships with them that I wouldn't have gotten without taking this internship."

In addition to testing crop seed coating treatments, Roach worked with sprayers to gauge different rates of herbicides on various weeds and monitored how different nutrition packages impacted plant growth. He also worked with drone applications to test the efficiency of herbicides. As part of his internship, Roach toured sites in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Through his work last summer, he earned the opportunity to do another internship at the company this summer, this time in sales.

That opportunity will allow Roach "to see a different part of WinField United to further my business knowledge," he said.

### **Internship provides valuable 'real-field experience'**

Megan Culpitt knows she wants to work professionally in agricultural research, so when she landed an internship with WinField United last summer, she figured it was a good fit.

Culpitt was right. As an intern, Culpitt, a UWRF junior from Norwalk, Wis. who is majoring in crop and soil science, conducted small research trials measuring the impact of herbicides on crops. Culpitt's work involved tracking the capabilities of different herbicides in controlling weeds including measuring how well herbicides adhere to crops, an effort to reduce herbicide drift beyond farm fields.

Involved in every step of the research, from designing projects to measuring results, Culpitt said the hands-on nature of the work informed her beyond traditional classroom learning.

"I got to learn to do research and I got to do it myself," Culpitt said of her internship experience. "It taught me to be independent, what research is, and how it's done in industry."



*UW River Falls student interns arrive at a test plot where they will conduct herbicide applications. Contributed photo.*

Culpitt's internship ended in August, but she continued to do research with WinField United during the fall semester through a grant-funded program. She studied the impact of nitrogen-fixing bacteria on corn and no-till farming. She plans to do another internship with WinField this year and hopes it leads to a job with the company, while also helping her graduate school prospects.

"Because of my internships, I'll be miles ahead of others who didn't have that kind of real-field experience," she said.

### **Interns 'gain confidence' in addition to skills**

Brandt Burghuis, UWRF assistant professor of crop science who works closely with student interns and WinField United, said students obtain not only additional skills through their internships, but also gain confidence by being part of real-world research. He said many students go on to careers in agricultural science, some of them with WinField United, because of connections they make during their internship.

"The partnership between the University of Wisconsin-River Falls and WinField United has proven to be invaluable," Berghuis said. "Numerous students from UWRF have participated in facility tours for classes, gained internship experience, and even full-time employment. We are grateful for these local connections and look forward to more collaborations that will provide impactful experiences for our students."

# Wisconsin, Minnesota receive federal rural co-op development grants

Numerous entities which support cooperative development in Minnesota and Wisconsin were recipients of Rural Cooperative Development Grants (RCDG) awarded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in November 2023.

According to the USDA, in Minnesota, Cooperative Network member Northcountry Co-op Foundation, along with Cooperative Development Services, Inc., and Agriculture UtilizResearch, each received \$200,000 grants. Funds are intended to be used to "provide business development, technical assistance, coordination of local and state rural development activities, due diligence assessments, technical and economic feasibility analysis, cooperative development strategies, professional referrals and strategic networking opportunities, as well as assist in capitalization efforts for business development activities in Minnesota."

Additionally, the Food Co-op Initiative was awarded a \$200,000 grant to support and improve economic conditions in rural communities around Montgomery, Minn. The Initiative provides technical assistance to rural food cooperatives in rural Minnesota.

In Wisconsin, the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC) received \$199,985. Funds will be used "to provide technical assistance to rural cooperatives ... The RCDG program exists to help rural cooperatives and small businesses form, expand, create jobs, and strengthen their capacity to serve rural citizens and communities. This grant enables UWCC to provide cooperative development services to rural clients in Wisconsin and throughout the upper Midwest. Types of assistance available include organizational development, cooperative education,

board training, strategic planning, and support during feasibility and business planning activities. Key project areas include food systems; conversions to employee ownership; forestry; and childcare."

The Cooperative Development Foundation (CDF), which serves cooperatives in numerous states including Minnesota and Wisconsin, received two grants.

One grant, for \$200,000, will be used by the foundation "to provide technical assistance to further the development and execution of a national strategy for rural home care cooperative development. CDF is a 79-year-old nonprofit headquartered in Washington, D.C. It specifically targets the home care/elder care population because there is a dire need in rural areas for elder care that is affordable. Additionally, many seniors prefer to stay in their own homes for comfort and cost effectiveness rather than move to a group home."

A second grant, for \$174,946 will be utilized to provide technical assistance to women-owned and particularly Native American-owned home care cooperatives in rural areas. The goal of the technical assistance is to help home care co-ops remain profitable, expand operations, and serve more rural residents in need, despite significant industry challenges.

In addition, CDF is proposing to continue a partnership begun in 2020 with Native American agriculturalists to enhance the practice of Nativeowned food production, marketing and distribution. The rural areas to be served are located in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Washington, and California.

## Minnesota establishes grant program to help finance new ag co-ops

Cooperative Network worked with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and the Minnesota Legislature during the 2023 legislative session to establish a grant program to help finance new cooperatives for agricultural purposes. Under the program, grants funds totaling \$400,000 have been allocated for the 2024-2025 biennium.

The money establishes a grant program to help farmers finance new cooperatives that organize for purposes of operating an agricultural product processing facility or marketing an agricultural product or agricultural service.

Grants up to \$50,000 may be awarded to eligible grantees for feasibility, marketing analysis, assistance with organizational development, financing and managing new cooperatives, product development, development of business and marketing plans, and predesign of facilities. Grants must be matched dollar for dollar or with in-kind contributions.

During the legislative session, the Minnesota Legislature allocated the \$400,000 over the biennium as part of the Omnibus Agriculture, Broadband, and Rural Development Bill, while also committing to have the program continue to be funded in future budgets through the Agricultural Growth, Research and Innovation (AGRI) program.

The program re-establishes a cooperative development grant program in effect prior to 2003 which was cut due to a state budget deficit.

Requests for proposals are expected to be announced in February 2024.

## Wisconsin grant program supports co-op development

The Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) is offering grants to support the development of new and existing cooperatives in Wisconsin, with a goal of fostering the success of current and future cooperatives by supporting planning and exploratory research in advance of making a large investment.

Eligible applicants include:

- An existing cooperative operating in Wisconsin
- Businesses looking to convert to the cooperative business model
- Any group of individuals actively working towards legal cooperative status in Wisconsin

Applicants may use the funds to cover consulting fees for business planning, feasibility studies, legal services, and accounting services to help new or existing cooperatives become established or further develop. Only projects related to development are eligible. Salaries and supplies are not eligible costs.

WEDC has set aside up to \$200,000 for each of the next two years (FY24 and FY25), with a \$50,000 maximum per grant. A minimum 20 percent cash match of the grant amount is required. Proposals that provide for a match of greater than 20 percent will receive stronger consideration.

To apply, contact your WEDC regional economic development director (<https://wedc.org/inside-wedc>) or the Office of Rural Prosperity (<https://ruralwi.com>) to get started.

# Top 10 list, workplace equality, awards, and more

## Fredrikson to provide Minnesota government relations services for Cooperative Network

Cooperative Network entered into a working relationship with the Minneapolis-based Fredrikson law firm effective Jan. 1, 2024. Throughout the 2024 Minnesota legislative session, Fredrikson will assist Cooperative Network in developing policy priorities, preparing alliance leaders for bill hearings and legislator meetings, developing strategic communications recommendations, securing bill authors, tracking legislation and monitoring committees, among other tasks.

Fredrikson has expertise in agriculture, rural broadband, health care, energy, technology, regulatory, housing, capital investment, tax, transportation, and local government.

Fredrikson government relations specialist Bennett Smith will lead the efforts for Cooperative Network. Smith has experience with Minnesota agriculture policy and practices and is involved with his family's farm operation.

"Cooperative Network is excited to have the expertise and experience of the Fredrikson team lead the government affairs efforts in Minnesota," said Cooperative Network president and CEO Dan Smith. "Cooperative members will benefit from the team's multi-sector experience, and their ability to work across party lines for the good of the cooperative model."

## Top 10 largest co-op list includes numerous Cooperative Network members

Four Cooperative Network (CN) members ranked among the Top 10 largest cooperatives in the United States in 2022, according to the National Cooperative Bank's Top 100 cooperative businesses listing released in October 2023.

CN member CHS, Inc. remains the largest cooperative in the United States with revenues of \$47.8 billion in 2022, according to the list. CHS, an energy, farm supply, grain and food co-op, is the nation's largest agricultural co-op – in fact, it is the largest U.S. co-op of any kind – and has held that position for many years. Dairy Farmers of America is a

distant second with annual revenue of \$24.5 billion. CN members Land O'Lakes, GROWMARK and CoBank are the other cooperatives in the Top 10. Land O'Lakes, a supply, dairy, and food co-op, ranked third on the list, with \$19.3 billion in revenues. Agricultural supply cooperative GROWMARK ranked fourth with revenues of \$14.577 billion, and financial institution CoBank was tenth, with revenues of \$7.444 billion.

According to National Cooperative Bank, in 2022 the Top 100 cooperatives in the U.S. generated revenues of \$319 billion, an increase of 25 percent over 2021.

## Allied, ProVizion Partners using 'Allied' name publicly following merger

Following their October 2023 merger, Allied Cooperative and ProVizion Partners Cooperative are doing business as (dba) Allied Cooperative, while using the name ProVizion Partners Cooperative for legal matters.

Believing the co-ops already had two strong names, board members decided to forego the expense of rebranding and trademarking a new name, and instead utilize their existing names in the new company. The name ProVizion Partners Cooperative now is used on legal documents, while the name Allied Cooperative is utilized for marketing purposes and is the name the public sees.

"We believe this is a win-win for both cooperatives. Each cooperative's name is represented with significant savings for our organization as a whole," said Rob Larson, former ProVizion CEO and now the CEO of the merged company. "The name Allied Cooperative has an active registration with the U.S. Trademark office and is a strong representative of who we are moving forward," said Tim Clemens, former Allied CEO, who is serving as merge consultant. "The word 'Allied' means connected or joining together by compact or treaty. It's a definition that just fits."

The combined co-op has more than 600 employees and serves customers across central Wisconsin. The combined organization's sales will be approximately \$570 million.



### **GROWMARK, CHS launching exploratory process to identify collaboration opportunities**

The GROWMARK and CHS boards of directors announced in January 2024 that they had jointly agreed to conduct an “exploratory process” over the coming months to identify opportunities for the two cooperatives to “further collaborate to better serve owners, customers and the cooperative system into the future.”

The two farmer-owned cooperatives have had a long-standing relationship. In 2021, they formed Cooperative Ventures, a venture capital fund focused on supporting advancements in breakthrough technologies for the agriculture industry.

“Continuing our long history of adding value to our members and customers, while ensuring a strong and vibrant cooperative system for the future, is critical to the GROWMARK System,” said GROWMARK CEO Mark Orr. “Our partnership with CHS in Cooperative Ventures is a great example of cooperation amongst cooperatives that benefits the shareholders of both companies.”

“We believe that by working together we can better serve our farmer- and cooperative-owners. Ultimately, we aim to better meet customer demand for our owners’ products around the world and increase the value of the cooperative system,” said Jay Debertin, president and CEO of CHS.

In a press release, the companies said “while the outcome of the exploratory process is not yet known, the companies anticipate emerging with a stronger relationship focused on improving customer outcomes and strengthening agriculture for farmer- and cooperative-owners.”

### **Dairyland and member cooperatives launch Cooperative Day of Service**

The Touchstone Energy Cooperatives® of the Dairyland Power System kicked-off National Co-op Month with their inaugural Cooperative Day of Service on Oct. 4, 2023. Dairyland coordinated six service projects throughout its service territory and joined forces with employees from local electric cooperatives to showcase the cooperatives’ dedication to the cooperative principle, *Concern for Community*.

Projects included:

- Alma, Wis. – 12 miles of highway clean-up.
- Elk Mound, Wis. – Painting at the Elk Mound Hill Castle and the Village Park, including the Lions shed and ball field dugouts. Volunteers also weeded, raked and seeded the Solid Waste and Recycling Site, cleared brush and trails, seal-coated the basketball court and painted curb stops at the library.
- Rushford, Minn. – Volunteers worked with the Southeastern Minnesota Citizens Action Council (SEMCAAC) to complete various projects, including highway clean-up and painting, cleaning windows and replacing exterior lighting at SEMCAAC facilities.
- Holmen, Wis. – Volunteers worked with the Mississippi Valley Conservancy to conduct brush clearing at the New Amsterdam Prairie.
- Tony, Wis. – Volunteers gave a local ballfield a facelift by removing and replacing old fences and bleachers.
- Prairie du Chien, Wis. – Volunteers worked at Wisconsin Badger Camp painting tables and cabins, organizing the maintenance shop, cleaning up trails and clearing brush.

### **Great River receives top score for LGBTQ+ workplace equality**

Great River Energy received a top score of 100 on the Human Rights Campaign Foundation’s 2023-24 Corporate Equality Index (CEI), the nation’s foremost benchmarking survey and report measuring corporate policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ workplace equality.

Great River joined the ranks of 545 major U.S. businesses that earned top marks and the designation of being a 2023 Equality 100 Award: Leader in LGBTQ+ Workplace Inclusion recipient.

“It’s quite an accomplishment to be consistently recognized as a leader in LGBTQ+ workplace inclusion,” said Jason Vollbrecht, manager of benefits and retirement at Great River Energy and co-chair of the cooperative’s Pride Alliance Employee Resource Group (ERG). “While earning a top score of 100 does not mean perfection, it validates the work we have done as an organization for diversity, equity and inclusion in the workplace. There is still room to progress and Great River Energy is dedicated to continuing these conversations and doing the necessary work.”

To earn top ratings, employers took concrete steps to establish and implement comprehensive policies, benefits and practices that ensure greater equity for LGBTQ+ workers and their families. The index rates companies on detailed criteria falling under four central pillars: non-discrimination policies across business entities; equitable benefits for LGBTQ+ workers and their families; supporting an inclusive culture; and, corporate social responsibility.

### **CHS Foundation makes multi-million grant commitment to National FFA**

The CHS Foundation recently announced it is making a \$4.3 million grant commitment to National FFA over the next three years, the largest gift in the foundation's 75-year history. The grant will help fund FFA programs in 17 states, provide scholarships for conferences and contests, introduce students from all backgrounds to ag careers through the workforce development program, and support the National Association of Ag Educators in attracting ag teachers and building strong teaching programs.

"We have been a long-time supporter of FFA because it is the number-one organization dedicated to developing the next generation of ag leaders," said Megan Wolle, senior director, CHS stewardship. "The future of the cooperative system and the entire ag industry depends on having a strong talent pipeline. Our increased commitment will help FFA elevate and expand its amazing work with ag educators and students."

"We are thrilled to continue our partnership with CHS," said Molly Ball, president of the National FFA Foundation and chief marketing officer of the National FFA Organization. "Throughout our partnership, CHS has been unwavering in its support and continues to see the potential leaders in each of our members and advisors."

The National FFA Organization is a school-based national youth leadership development organization of more than 945,000 student members who are part of 9,163 local FFA chapters in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

### **Organic Valley cooperative adds 84 more family farms to its ranks**

Already the largest cooperative of organic farmers in the nation, Organic Valley reported in late December

that the cooperative had brought 84 more family farms into its fold in 2023. Today, more than 1,600 organic family farms own the cooperative, which was founded in 1988 and is based in La Farge, Wis.

"This is who we are," says Shawna Nelson, Organic Valley executive vice president of membership. "Last year, we brought in farms that were abruptly dropped by their milk buyers, and this year, we've welcomed 84 more into our organic dairy community."

In a media release, Organic Valley said it is flipping the script by welcoming dozens of farms during a year marked by significant challenges for family farms and rural communities.

"Our commitment to organic family farmers is unwavering," says Nelson. "We aim to be the go-to option for those seeking a stable future in farming." The cooperative welcomed a dozen new farms from Wisconsin. It also added 26 farms from Pennsylvania, 22 in New York, six from Ohio, and several others from Minnesota, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan and Vermont.

### **WI Electric Cooperative Association relocates to Middleton**

The Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association has relocated its headquarters from leased space in downtown Madison near the Capitol Square to a newly purchased building in Middleton.

WECA President and CEO Steve Freese said the move is the result of WECA's ongoing efforts to operate as efficiently as possible. WECA's new address is: 6405 Century Avenue, Suite 102, Middleton, WI 53562.

### **M3 Insurance receives Executive Choice Award for 'Business Insurance Company'**

Cooperative Network member M3 Insurance was named the 2023 IB Executive Choice Winner in the Business Insurance Company category. *In Business Magazine* Executive Choice Award winners and finalists are selected by small business owners and senior executives in the Madison, Wis. area who used a fill-in-the-blank survey to state their vendor preferences for IB's Annual Executive Choice Awards. According to the magazine, winners and finalists across all 37 categories have achieved "top-of-mind-awareness" in the business community.

M3 handles insurance, employee benefits, and risk management needs of clients across a wide array of industries.

### TruStage named one of America's Best Insurance Companies by Forbes

Insurance, investment and technology provider TruStage was named one of America's Best Insurance Companies for 2024 by Forbes. Presented in partnership with Statista Inc., the prestigious award is based on responses from over 15,000 participants nationwide who were asked to evaluate insurance companies they have personally worked with. Formerly known as CUNA Mutual Group, the company changed its name to TruStage in May 2023.

America's Best Insurance Companies 2024 were identified in an independent survey that asked participants to evaluate the insurance companies they have held within the last three years. The survey considered customer recommendations, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. Additionally, six sub-dimensions were taken into consideration: Advice, Customer Service, Price/Performance ratio, Transparency, Digital Services, and Damage Service.

### Insight FS constructing state-of-the-art dry fertilizer shed in Amherst Junction

In July, Insight FS, part of the GROWMARK group of companies, broke ground on a state-of-the-art 25-thousand-ton dry fertilizer shed in Amherst Junction, Wis.



Ben Huber, Insight FS general manager, said with cutting-edge technology and increased storage capacity, the facility will streamline operations and provide enhanced support to customers.

"This was a fertilizer facility that was 30 years old and had not aged well," Huber said in a *Midwest Farm Report* article. "It was time to make a massive infrastructure improvement to add capacity, speed, and efficiency. This was not only for us, but also for the rest of the agriculture channel that we work with." The new facility, set to be operational by March 2024, will feature automation technology allowing trucks to be turned out in just 12 minutes, compared to 45

minutes at present. The new facility will help improve access points and alleviate some of the challenges with freight and logistics coming in to central Wisconsin.

### Organic Valley takes a bite out of the Big Apple

Organic Valley took a bite out of the Big Apple in September when the Wisconsin-based cooperative launched a new campaign in New York City highlighting the importance of the food system and protecting small organic family farms.

To launch the campaign, "Protecting Where Your Food Comes From," Organic Valley transformed the iconic Rockefeller Center Channel Gardens into a pop-up organic dairy farm experience.

The family-friendly farmstead featured a series of hands-on, immersive activities where visitors could meet real organic dairy farmers, sample Organic Valley's farm-fresh dairy products, sit on a tractor and other farm equipment, and dig into stories of resilience and climate-friendly dairy innovation.

According to Organic Valley, the U.S. is losing 100,000 family farms each decade. The cooperative said the country faced record-high temperatures this past summer leading to an uncertain future for food system resiliency. Organic Valley says its dairy farms average 24 percent lower greenhouse gas emissions than conventional dairy farms.

### Farmward, New Vision cooperatives decide not to pursue a merger

After a two-month study conducted this summer, Minnesota-based Farmward Cooperative and New Vision Cooperative decided not to pursue a merger. New Vision is based in Brewster, Minn., and has 19 locations in southwest Minnesota, northwest Iowa, and eastern South Dakota. Farmward, of Morgan, Minn., has 10 locations in southwest and west central Minnesota.

During the merger study, boards and leadership visited with employees and members, led focus groups, and toured each cooperative's facilities in addition to conducting financial and governance reviews.

"The two cooperatives are a good match, but we want to take some more time to sit back and focus

on our own teams while we continue to build upon the great partnership we've built in this process," Farmward board chair Dave Kadlec said. "Our cooperatives are each in great financial shape, and our employees are energized for serving our members," New Vision board chair Chad Wieneke said.

### **CoVantage Credit Union opens new location in DePere**

CoVantage Credit Union opened a new location in DePere, Wis. in October. The three-story, 24,000 sq.-ft. building is a full-service retail branch where members can receive deposit services, consumer loans, mortgage lending, commercial lending and CoVantage retirement and investment Services.

In addition to new digital services, the new branch has staff available to assist members with vehicle loans, mortgages, business loans and deposit accounts.

### **Renville-Sibley Cooperative opens new headquarters in Danube**

The Renville-Sibley Cooperative Power Association (RSCPA) unveiled its new \$8.3 million, 10-acre headquarters at an open house and dedication ceremony in August 2023. Located on Hwy 212 W in Danube, Minn. the modern facility brings all of the cooperative's services and operations to one campus and allows for better efficiencies.

RSCPA started in 1938 in Fairfax, and relocated to Danube in 1948. After many years of discussion, construction of the new campus, which includes the main offices and garage and warehouse facilities, was approved in 2020, with construction beginning the next year. The site includes room for future expansion, and the potential for the addition of solar panels and electric car charging stations.

### **Fredrikson named Keystone Honored Company by Minnesota Chamber**

In October, the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce named Fredrikson & Byron P.A. a 2023 Keystone Honored Company, an annual award recognizing businesses that have made extraordinary contributions within their community. Fredrikson was celebrated for its innovation in giving as a mid-size firm, with six different programs operated as unique parts of the corporate giving efforts: Pro Bono,

Community Service, Friends of Fredrikson, Community Presence Initiative, Foundation and Sponsorships.

Fredrikson was formally recognized at the annual Minnesota Keystone Luncheon in December. This annual event celebrates Minnesota's tradition of corporate social responsibility, philanthropic giving and the strong tradition of philanthropic and corporate donations that support communities. Members of the program give at least two percent of their pre-tax earnings to charitable organizations and are acknowledged for their giving programs.

### **Members First Credit Union merges with Avestar Credit Union**

Members First Credit Union, Madison, Wis. merged with and into Avestar Credit Union, Waterloo, Wis., effective December 1, 2023. Under the merger, the 'Members First' name officially transitioned to 'Members First Credit Union, An Affiliate of Avestar Credit Union.'

The combined company, which has four branches, has approximately 6,800 members and combined assets of \$67 million. Members First was chartered in 1955, and Avestar's origins date back to 1964.

### **WESTconsin Credit Union recognized for financial education efforts**

WESTconsin Credit Union was recognized for its financial education efforts by the Credit Union National Association (CUNA). Through CUNA's Alphonse Desjardins Awards program, WESTconsin won first place in the Youth Financial Education and second place in the Adult Financial Education award categories for credit unions with \$1B+ in assets in Wisconsin.

The Youth Financial Education Award was given to WESTconsin for its use of Banzai, an interactive financial education resource that uses online courses to teach basic and advanced financial concepts. In partnership with Banzai, WESTconsin has served over 600 teachers and educated over 55,000 students in 208 schools across 18 counties in Wisconsin and Minnesota. In the 2022-2023 school year alone, students spent over 10,000 hours in the program engaging in and learning financial concepts and life skills that often are not taught in the traditional classroom setting.

## Debertin appointed to Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis Board

CHS President and CEO Jay Debertin has been appointed to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis Board of Directors. His three-year term began Jan. 1, 2024.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis is one of 12 federal banks in the U.S. It helps determine U.S. monetary policy by monitoring the economy in the Ninth District, which includes Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, 26 counties in northwestern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The branch is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minn.



Debertin is one of nine directors who represent a variety of business sectors. As a Class C director on the board, he was appointed to represent the interests of stakeholders in the Ninth District. "Given the strong agricultural presence in the region, I am honored to represent the interests of farmers, ranchers and cooperatives in the area," said Debertin. "Rural America needs to have a voice in economic policy."

## Centra Sota Cooperative unveils new logo

Buffalo, Minn.-based Centra Sota Cooperative, which celebrated 100 years in business in 2022, unveiled a new logo in October. According to the cooperative's newsletter, "The job of a logo is to help tell the story of who a company (or cooperative) is. Our former logo was created more than a decade and a half ago and had served us well over the years. But it was time for an update to better tell the story of who Centra Sota is today – an innovative and thriving cooperative."



"Our past logo has always had the shape of Minnesota. The most recent one showed a sun, the sun's rays, and fields to depict our proud agricultural background. Our new one includes the same features to honor our past while helping us shift toward the future and has one notable addition, which is the word 'Cooperative.' This means that we are owned by our customers, and our member-owners have a voice in how we run our business."



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# Electricity comes to the farm

Cooperative Network member East Central Energy got its start as the PICK Cooperative following the establishment of the Rural Electrification Act

by **Sam Klocksein** Executive Director, Isanti County Historical Society

**R**ural life on the farm in Isanti County has gone through many changes over the decades. Everything from the implements to crop type has seen change since the land was farmed on a large scale. One improvement may top the list that many of us may not even consider, and that is electricity. As many villages and towns throughout the county enjoyed the benefits of power as early as the 1900s, the backbone of the county – the working farm – went without.

That was at least until the 32nd President of the United States Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 7037 on May 11, 1935. The order established the Rural Electrification Administration which in turn created the REA Act of 1936. The Rural Electrification Act promised to bring power to rural farms across America.

Understanding not only the importance but the necessity of rural electrification, area businessmen and proponents led the charge at the local level. As early as 1935, a gentleman by the name of Beauford Johnson became the driving force behind rural electrification. His letter to the local paper in the fall of

1935 encouraged local citizens to consider supporting the idea of forming a local electrical cooperative. Further realizing the potential of rural power, Beauford traveled the rural countryside trying to recruit farmers into the fledgling program. After a series of meetings with area farmers and other investors, citizens from Pine, Isanti, Chisago, and Kanabec Counties formed what was known as the "PICK" Electric Cooperative.

Officially recognized on January 13, 1936, the PICK Cooperative campaigned around East Central Minnesota to help secure the first REA funding in the state.

Before the REA, farms relied on basic lighting in the form of lanterns to aid in the necessary tasks of farm life. Not only were lanterns cumbersome to use, they were dangerous.



*Circa 1946 photo of workers "planting" a power pole along the East Central Electric service line.*

Catastrophic loss due to fire was high on the list of farm-related tragedies and mishaps. Although convenient, not everyone was sold on the idea of having a phantom source of power running their farm. There was apprehension about being bound to anything that required enrollment or payment considering the country was deep in the Great Depression. Interestingly enough, it was often the

farmwife who championed the idea of bringing power to the family farm. Daily chores and lifestyle promised to be greatly improved with the help of electricity.

The first inkling of rural electricity and positive strides towards local availability occurred on August 22, 1936, when PICK was awarded an REA loan for \$81,000 for the construction of 80 miles of electric line. Beauford's determination had paid off.

As plans developed and routes were laid out, the first stake to denote the route was driven into the ground eight miles west of Dalbo. The line made its way back east through Day and finally into Braham. Once the intended course of the line was set, the first pole was driven into the ground at the George Henschel farm in Dalbo Township. As additional lines were mapped and a sub-station was built in Braham, things began to ramp up through East Central Minnesota, and by June of 1936, there were approximately 325 farms signed up for rural electric contracts. An early Christmas gift came to many farms on the grid including Rock Creek's Carl Peterson and Swan Hammer when power was connected at the Braham substation in the early morning hours of December 23, 1937.

The *Braham Journal* reported: "The second farmer to receive 'juice' on the east section was Swan Hammer, but he was unaware of his good fortune until he and his family returned home at midnight from a party. During their absence, Russell Nyberg, accompanied by Manager Beauford Johnson and several businessmen from Braham visited the Hammer farm, closed the transformer, turned on the radio and every light in sight, including all those in the barn,

chicken house, and house. Upon turning on the radio they were met with the announcer's cheery greeting, 'Here comes Santa Claus', and many of the area farmers receiving power for the first time were of the same sentiment! Needless to say, the Hammers were quite overcome when they returned home to find every building blazing with light and the radio going full blast!"

As the 1930s came to a close, electricity continued to arrive at farms throughout East Central Minnesota and areas served by the PICK Cooperative. In areas south of the PICK Cooperative, farmers in Isanti County received their power from the Anoka County Cooperative Light and Power Association. Much like its northern counterpart, the Anoka Cooperative originated around the REA as well, which started in 1937. In 1946, the PICK Cooperative was officially changed to the East Central Electric Association and by the early 1950s, both sectors covered by ECE and its southern counterpart Anoka Electric Cooperative began to broaden their rural power service areas. By this time, lights dotted the formerly darkened rural landscape as nearly 80% of Minnesota farms received power. This revolutionary change may not have been as big as the internal combustion engine and the use of tractors on the farm but certainly brought significant improvements to lifestyle and livelihood.

*(Reprinted with permission. The Isanti County Historical Society is located in Cambridge, Minn.)*

# Early cooperative stores: A weapon for the working class

by Eric Dregni

The cooperative store should not be a mere business institution, but should be a factor, a weapon, in the struggle for the emancipation of the working class, proclaimed a Michigan co-op member in 1925.

The initial allure of early co-op stores, however, was to avoid the ribbing by “Yankee” distributors and retailers. The first cooperative stores were probably in Swedish settlements in Lansing, Iowa and in Minnesota at Vasa, Marine-on-St. Croix, and Goodhue County. In promoting these “union stores” or cooperatives in 1870, John Schoenback, who was a Swedish-American farmer, told of a “union league” store back in his town in Sweden that thrived and didn’t gouge customers. Even though Schoenback’s thick Swedish wasn’t understood very well, a reporter from the St. Peter Tribune commended him saying that he’d “rather hear such men talk than one of your smooth-tongued Yankees who would talk half an hour and say nothing.”

Norwegians as well took up the co-op cause, as shown by an immigrant who wrote that the farmers “are entirely dependent on the businessmen, and their meetings and conferences have indicated that they are bound to take as much advantage of the farmers as possible.” Therefore, he suggested establishing a Farmers Union Store with fellow Scandinavian farmers in Lake Prairie, New Sweden, Bernadotte, and Granby, which was based on the farm associations of Vasa, Goodhue and Lansing, Iowa.

In the largely Norwegian town of Thief River Falls, Minn. the huge People’s Cooperative Store on Main Avenue advertised that “It pays to trade with us” since year-end dividends were often paid out to

members. Some of the co-ops would offer credit to struggling farmers without predatory lending rates that many of the stores and banks owned by the Yankee businessmen did.

The later wave of Finnish immigrants pushed the co-op movement to new levels, both economically and politically. In 1903, 13 local farmers from Menahga, Minn. established the Sampo co-operative allowing members to buy on credit, and nearby Sebeka opened a cooperative creamery in 1908. On the Minnesota Iron Range, Floodwood, Ely, Orr, Embarrass, Virginia, Gilbert all had co-op stores; many were established when the 1907 strikes raged and Finns were barred from stores. Finnish socialists pushed this movement as no other single group, but the Finns didn’t have a monopoly on co-ops nor were all of those run by socialists, by any means.

To extend buying power for all co-ops, Finnish immigrants set up the Cooperative Central Exchange in Superior, Wis. and by 1917 more than 27 cooperative stores on the Range belonged to this exchange. A political storm struck when communists attempted to take over the Socialist co-op exchange in Superior, but the Workers’ Party of America was voted out of the Cooperative Central Exchange. The more practical socialists retained control since they outnumbered the communist-leaning members.

The more rational Finnish socialists saw the co-ops as serving a community need rather than a political tool and sought to open the exchange to more outsiders. The Finnish language gradually decreased and the ratio of Finns went down. New Scandinavian immigrants that didn’t speak English could get down to business in a jiffy at the co-op store where like-minded shopkeepers could communicate and help.





*Early cooperatives provided not only groceries and other goods, but served as meeting places to discuss politics and social issues.*

The Scandinavian-American farmers' combination of their shared religion (usually Lutheran), language, class, and outsiders to this new country united them to achieve the co-op stores.

Many non-Finns viewed these co-ops as some sort of "Finnish clubs" where everyone spoke that language. Along with the ethnic halls, these co-ops became important gathering spots and an economic essential for the community. When the Fires of 1918 killed 538 people and devastated Cloquet and Moose Lake, Minn. the first major reconstruction project was the Cloquet Cooperative Store, which became the largest co-op for its sales in all of North America by 1937.

These co-ops were so popular in the 1930s that a Finnish vaudeville troupe toured Finnish halls across the Midwest and kicked their long legs in a dance-line as they sang songs to extol the virtues of the cooperative movement. Sociology Professor Craig Upright at Grinnell, Iowa said, "In the 19th century

co-ops were mostly a Scandinavian phenomenon, but by the 20th century they had become intrinsic in Minnesota culture, so it didn't matter if you were Croatian, Italian, or anything else. Co-ops shifted to urban centers with an explosion from 1970 to 1976.

This new wave of (food) co-ops was a combination of political ideology and whole food awareness. They saw the co-op as a new way of living; they were questioning everything: the food that was being hoisted upon them, the distribution, the quality, everything."

Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan proved to be ideal breeding ground established by the Scandinavians with "the cultural and legal environment because there was legislation in place to protect co-ops."

(Reprinted with permission from *Vikings in the Attic: In Search of Nordic America*, by Eric Dregni.)



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# THE SEVEN COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES

## **1 Voluntary and Open Membership**

Cooperatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

## **2 Democratic Member Control**

Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary cooperatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and cooperatives at other levels are also organized in a democratic manner.

## **3 Member Economic Participation**

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their cooperative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the cooperative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their cooperative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

## **4 Autonomy and Independence**

Cooperatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their cooperative autonomy.

## **5 Education, Training, and Information**

Cooperatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public – particularly young people and opinion leaders – about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

## **6 Cooperation among Cooperatives**

Cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

## **7 Concern for Community**

Cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.