



THE FUTURE IS  
*COOPERATIVE*

# 20 24

**YEAR IN REVIEW**

**Cooperative**  
 **Network**<sup>TM</sup>

# 2024

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## Welcome

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Welcome to Cooperative Network's *2024 Year in Review*. Cooperative Network exists by, and for, the cooperative support of its members. Through our work in government affairs, public advocacy, communication, and education and training, Cooperative Network ensures the continued success of the cooperative community.

Structured as a cooperative, Cooperative Network follows the same cooperative governance as our members. We remain committed to upholding the Seven Cooperative Principles. Under the guidance of our member-elected board of directors, and through the dedicated work of our staff, Cooperative Network has been *The Trusted Voice for Cooperatives* for decades in Wisconsin and Minnesota, while joining cooperatively with national associations.

Over the past year, Cooperative Network has maintained a daily presence in both state capitols, ensuring that the cooperative voice is heard as programs and policies are decided. Through countless hours of committee meetings and conversations, Cooperative Network has advocated for the good of the cooperative model.

As times change, cooperatives change. Cooperative Network helps our members adapt through our communication, advocacy, and education programs. We have increased our cooperative presence on social media, through our printed and online communication platforms, and through our virtual education platform which addresses the key challenges and opportunities our members face.

Cooperatives hold a successful record of meeting emerging challenges and working toward the future success of the communities they serve. Over the past year, Cooperative Network has advanced cooperative involvement in energy, healthcare, agriculture, insurance, and many other areas tasked with solving complex issues in a changing world. The cooperative model is uniquely positioned to address these issues, just as Cooperative Network is uniquely positioned to lead the cooperative community.

Our work is only possible through the continued support and engagement of our member cooperatives. Thank you for your participation in our programs, resolutions process, and governance. It is an honor, and a responsibility, to serve cooperatives of all types and sizes.

This year's Cooperative Month and our annual meeting theme was *The Future is Cooperative*. A strong heritage coupled with our current commitment to cooperative success, the future is indeed bright for Cooperative Network and the members we serve.



# EVENTS, COMMUNICATIONS & eLEARNING



## 01

### Co-op Communicators Virtual Workshop

Four professionals from various communications fields shared strategies and tips for becoming better communicators during the virtual workshop. Presenters discussed how to develop an integrated communications plan; how to reduce the stigma surrounding farmer mental issues; offered news gathering and news writing tips; and offered tips for producing top-notch local news pages and newsletters, as well as information about a national reading program.

## 02

### Engage with Agriculture series

Cooperative Network teamed with the Wisconsin Agricultural Coalition and numerous agricultural cooperative members to host *Engage with Agriculture*, a series of cooperative and on-farm educational and relationship-building visits. Held over the summer and fall at about a dozen locations throughout the state, the non-partisan site visits gave attendees, including political candidates, an opportunity to learn more about agriculture and important issues before election day.

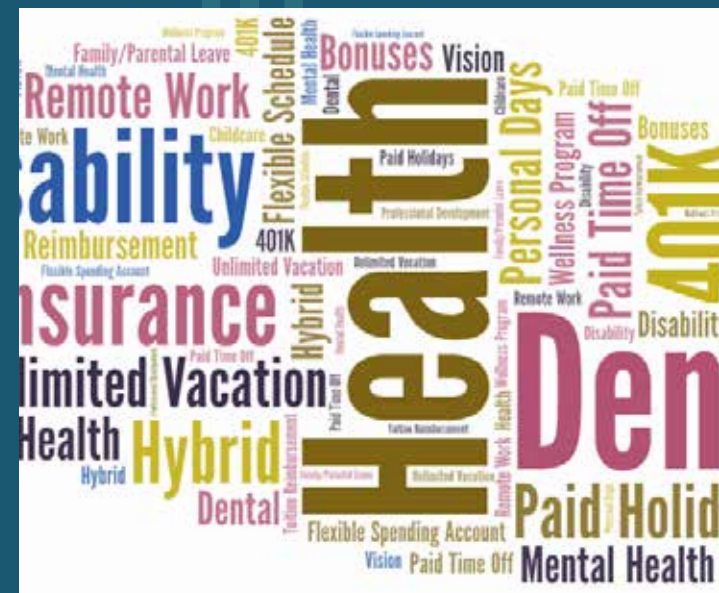


## 04

### Insurance Coverage Challenges and Changes: What You Need to Know and Why

A panel of insurance industry experts examined the cost and availability of insurance in today's changing insurance industry.

They also explained what changes in the insurance industry mean to cooperatives, farmers, and consumers as a whole.



## 03

### Becoming the Employer of Choice: Strategies and Trends in Employee Benefits

During this innovative webinar, attendees learned how important an attractive, fully compliant and cost-effective benefits program is to becoming the "employer of choice." Professionals in the employee benefits field set the stage for roadmap discussions by covering the trends in the marketplace and the solutions that need to be considered to overcome a cooperative's unique challenges, all while controlling costs within the benefits program and reining in one of the fastest growing components - prescription drug prices.

Throughout the year, Cooperative Network hosted a series of webinars on a wide range of issues facing cooperatives, such as changes in the credit union and insurance industries, employee benefits and retention, and cyber-security. Cooperative Network also partnered with National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International to host a webinar related to state and national issues.

Cooperative Network continued to offer a robust communications portfolio, including distributing news releases and opinion pieces about the organization's news, events and priorities; frequent social media posts across several platforms; advocacy/promotion of October as *National Co-op Month*; and the publication of *Cooperative Focus*, a biannual magazine featuring news, feature stories, columns/editorials about Cooperative Network members and the cooperative industry.



# MINNESOTA LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY



## Minnesota Cooperative Housing Act

Cooperative Network was part of a coalition whose efforts led to the passage of the bipartisan Minnesota Cooperative Housing Act. The coalition of partners was assembled by the team of professionals at North Country Cooperative Foundation. After many years of legislative efforts, the legislation passed overwhelmingly (House vote: 128-1; Senate vote: 53-12) and was signed into law by Governor Walz in May, 2024. The legislation consolidates and streamlines the process for housing cooperatives incorporating in the State of Minnesota. The new law also establishes, for the first time in Minnesota law, “housing cooperatives” as their own corporate form, separate from agriculture and utility cooperatives. Going forward, this effort created a section of law that can continue to be modified to best fit the unique needs of housing cooperatives, in addition to seeking more financial resources specifically for the cooperatives that fall under these statutes.

## Protecting cooperatives from unnecessary red tape

While 2024 wasn't technically a budget year, Cooperative Network was active on the ground at the Minnesota Legislature during the 2024 legislative session fighting for the priorities of our members. Cooperative Network worked to prevent new burdensome regulations for agriculture cooperatives that would have required duplicative data reporting to state agencies that is already required and available under state and federal law to the public and cooperative members. Cooperative Network also joined efforts to oppose unnecessary requirements that were seeking to overcomplicate rural electric cooperative elections and would have required more time and resources to conduct the already strong democratic cooperative process.

## Expanding rural broadband to all Minnesotans

The 2024 legislative session saw continued expansion of broadband in Minnesota, and included legislative changes to allow the Office of Broadband Development to more easily transfer funds between the Low-Density and Border-to-Border broadband programs. These changes will give state government the flexibility to meet the need of providing broadband service to all Minnesotans, even in the hardest to reach locations. In 2024, the Office of Broadband Development has awarded tens of millions of dollars to internet providers to expand affordable access that Cooperative Network helped pass in 2023, as a part of a coalition that asked for and received a historic investment in broadband funding.

## Your ears on the ground

Cooperative Network staff have been monitoring state agency rulemaking and working groups during this non-budget year on behalf of our members. For example, Cooperative Network is taking part in the Cooperative Financial Disclosure Workgroup and the Grain Advisory Taskforce at the Minnesota Department of Agriculture along with farmers from our member co-ops. Cooperative Network staff are also watching progress of legislative initiatives and communicating with lawmakers even when the legislature isn't in session, from broadband grant awards to economic development grant awards, to agency rulemaking on a variety of other issues – we have your back.

# WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY



## Initiatives supported by credit unions become law

Cooperative Network supported our friends at the Wisconsin League of Credit Unions and helped three initiatives they have long supported become law. As a result, today's high school students (who graduate in 2028 or later) must have one-half credit of personal financial literacy to graduate. Additionally, financial institutions now have tools to protect vulnerable adults from scams and financial exploitation. Finally, we were pleased to help update statutes governing credit unions, so that credit unions can enjoy the same lending opportunities as other financial institutions. For example, credit unions can now place ATMs at brick and mortar locations, as well as purchase real estate.

## Telecom funding, utility vehicle safety legislation approved

Cooperative Network helped push the passage of several bills benefiting telecom and electric cooperatives. Under the new legislation, telecoms will receive fair reimbursement for the expenses of Next Generation 911 services, and electric utilities, like public utilities and municipalities, can now employ ATVs and UTVs on freeways to conduct emergency repairs. Under the legislation, both telecoms and electric cooperatives can now equip their ATVs/UTVs with flashing green lamps indicating the vehicle is being used to restore or maintain utility service.

## Health care cooperatives benefit from numerous new laws

Health care cooperatives, supported by Cooperative Network and other lobbying groups, were instrumental in passing legislation that ultimately will improve the health of Wisconsin citizens. With the passage of new licensure provisions for dental therapists, who are akin to physician assistants, there is now increased access to providers who offer common dental services such as oral exams and fillings. By petitioning for a federal waiver for Medical and Mental Health Assistance, more adults between the ages of 21 and 64 have access to short-term acute care in a psychiatric hospital or residential treatment facility. And by joining a multi-state Counseling Compact, Wisconsinites can access more professional counselors.

## Legislation allows for self-service of propane autogas

In March, Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers signed legislation making propane autogas available for self-service dispensing by the general public. Previously, autogas could only be dispensed by trained and authorized employees of a bulk storage plant, container charging plant, service station or entity operating a commercial fleet of motor vehicles. Those restrictions have been removed and now devices used for self-service dispensing of liquefied petroleum gases need only display signage providing step-by-step directions for fueling a vehicle. Propane powered vehicles are becoming more popular with many school bus fleets, law enforcement vehicles, and the general public.

# FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY

## Investing in Rural America

Pursuant to Cooperative Network's participation in the federal "Communities in Action" initiative, our organization was on hand when President Biden traveled to Westby, Wis. in September to announce \$7.3 billion in grants and loans to 16 rural electric co-ops nationwide, including \$580 million to Cooperative Network member Dairyland Power Cooperative.

The financing will help rural electric co-ops transition to clean, affordable, reliable energy for more than five million rural households and businesses across 23 states, while also creating at least 20,000 good-paying jobs.

The National Institutes of Health estimates the clean-energy investments will reduce 43 million tons of greenhouse gas pollution per year, the equivalent of removing pollution from more than 10 million gas-powered vehicles. The investment also is anticipated to save more than \$256 million in health care costs because of better, cleaner air quality.

Dairyland Power Cooperative plans to utilize the funding to develop and purchase solar and wind power and for energy storage for Wisconsin and other areas in the Midwest.

This significant federal investment is intended to be on par with that of the New Deal era, which led to the creation and growth of more than 800 rural electric co-ops across the country which today provide electricity for some 40 million Americans in 48 states. Equally as important as the funding is a change in law that allows nonprofit co-ops to benefit from clean energy tax credits, just like for-profit utilities have enjoyed for decades.



# MEET OUR TEAM



**Dawn Bausch**  
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**Rick Hummell**  
Communications Specialist



**Jennifer Wickman**  
Government Affairs Director-WI



**Bennett Smith**  
Government Relations Specialist  
Fredrikson & Bryon P.A.

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Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative

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Dairyland Power Cooperative

**Amber Horn-Leiterman**  
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**Bridget Petersen**  
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## Friend of Cooperatives





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