

COOPERATIVE *FOCUS*

WINTER 2025

Engaging with Agriculture

Candidates gain first-hand knowledge on tours of ag facilities

New Era funding

Great River Energy,
Dairyland Power Cooperative
receive sustainable energy funding

'Green fertilizer'

Process eyed as
a potential renewable
energy source



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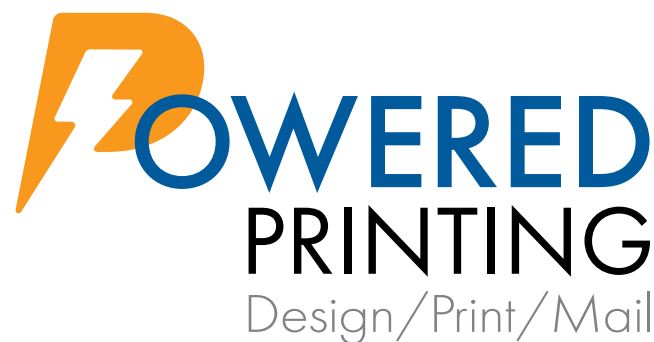
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ON THE COVER:
Candidates for the November 2024 State of Wisconsin election toured Country Visions Cooperative as part of the "Engage with Agriculture" series. (Rick Hummell photo)



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'Cooperatives Build a Better World'



by **Sadie Frericks** Cooperative Network Board Chair

Welcome to 2025! This is going to be a big year. 2025 has been designated the International Year of the Cooperative and we have a lot happening here at Cooperative Network.

To start, we recently had a leadership change at Cooperative Network. Jennifer Wickman, who has served as our Government Affairs Director since 2019, is now serving as our Interim Executive Director. Jennifer brings a strong commitment to cooperatives and enthusiasm to the position.

I can't thank Cooperative Network's dedicated staff enough for keeping our organization moving forward during this transition. I'm looking forward to our in-person Cooperative Day at the Capitol events in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Helping our lawmakers understand the policy needs of cooperatives is one of the ways Cooperative Network serves our members best. I hope you'll join us!

We also welcomed two new directors to our board: Mike Golat, who represents Eau Claire Energy Cooperative, and Jason Olsen, who represents Minnesota Power Employees Credit Union. We also recognized the service of two outgoing directors: Marie Barry, from Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, and Roger Hildebrandt, from United Cooperative.

I continue to consider it a privilege to serve with the individuals who have been elected to our board and to work with Cooperative Network staff. Every member of the Cooperative Network team brings a

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- Shawn Redman, Director**
Heartland Credit Union

deep connection to the cooperative business model, energy, and new ideas to the table.

We are tapping into this energy as we consider the best path forward for Cooperative Network. This month, we began work on a new strategic plan for Cooperative Network. I believe it's fitting that we are clarifying Cooperative Network's purpose and mission in 2025, since this year is the International Year of the Cooperative. Across America and around the world, the cooperative community will be celebrating the ways in which "Cooperatives Build a Better World."

I appreciate your cooperative's continued membership during this year of celebration and discovery.



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The glass is more than half full!



by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

As part of its Cooperative Month observance, in early October, 2024 the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) released results of its annual survey of the nation's agricultural cooperatives for fiscal year 2023, with survey results showing that the nation's ag co-ops were doing very well financially.

The USDA's annual survey of the nation's 1,647 farmer, rancher and fishery cooperatives showed that for FY 2023, cooperatives achieved total gross business volume – the aggregation of sales, service receipts and other operating revenue, patronage received, and non-operating income – of \$296.7 billion, the second highest revenue year on record! That total was about \$3.9 billion lower than 2022's record-breaking year, but still extremely healthy.

All in all, despite a few dips in business volume, income, and assets, especially given the record-breaking financials of the previous year, survey results for 2023 showed it was a great year for ag co-ops:

- Marketing sales by co-ops dropped 2.2 percent from 2022 to \$182.6 billion, and supply sales fell slightly, but statistically rounded to the same \$106.1 billion in 2023 as they were in 2022.
- Gross operating revenue dropped by 1.5 percent to \$293.7 billion.
- Total expenses dropped by 0.8 percent from \$27.2 billion to \$27.0 billion in 2023, and wage expenses increased just ever so slightly (ag co-ops paid \$13.3 billion in wages in 2023!).
- Patronage received from other cooperatives increased by \$451 million to \$1.2 billion and non-operating income also increased slightly and rounded to the same \$1.8 billion as in 2022.

These factors together resulted in a 3.2 percent drop in net income before taxes, but the amount was still significant at \$12.1 billion. Net income is important as it allows co-ops to return earnings to members in patronage and equity redemption, strengthen balance sheets, and/or to invest further in operational assets for continued prosperity and service to members.

Given the severe economic and social disruptions experienced at home and around the world following the Covid 19 outbreak in 2020, including a global recession, widespread food and labor shortages and supply chain disruptions, some of which continue to this day, the USDA's 2023 numbers are testament of the strength and resiliency of the nation's cooperative agricultural sector.

Looking ahead, the ag sector, and the rural communities served by the sector, still face challenges in a myriad of areas such clean energy regulations, telecommunications, healthcare, child and elder care, food access, and housing. We face challenges due to issues such as avian influenza and other highly transmittable diseases, an increasing number of product recalls, rising production costs and declining profits margins, unpredictable commodity prices, inflation among consumer goods, high prices for services, and ongoing labor/immigration issues.

Nevertheless, cooperatives are uniquely positioned to address these challenges. By working together, we raise the customer experience through improved services, new technologies, and go-to market strategies. Collectively, through the work we do, we support sustainable development for the communities in which we work and live through thoughtful

leadership and the policies and programs provided by our membership. Our unique cooperative ownership structure allows us to do that because we have the ability to pivot and address our challenges thoughtfully and effectively.

Just as we persevered through the challenges posed by the pandemic, our cooperatives will meet any and all new challenges. When asked, "How are things going?", it's common to respond that the glass is either half-full or half-empty. C'mon cooperators . . . surely we all can agree it's **MORE** than half full!

Concerned about workforce housing in your community?

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Cooperative Network: 'Our passion is advocacy, education, and awareness'

by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

They're big and small. Some consist of a handful of members and others represent tens of thousands. They're cooperatives, and in Minnesota and Wisconsin – where nearly 2,000 cooperatives across both states make up the largest concentration of co-ops in the nation – their interests are represented by Cooperative Network (CN).

Known as *The Trusted Voice for Cooperatives* and structured as a cooperative itself, CN provides its member-cooperatives with a broad range of services, including world-class legislative and regulatory advocacy, a wide range of learning and development opportunities, and creative leadership in public awareness. CN has a proud history of bringing together and strengthening cooperative businesses by providing a means for co-ops from all business sectors to collaborate on issues of importance to the cooperative business model.

Turning back the clock, the cooperative movement dates to the 1840s when a group of weavers from Rochdale, England who'd been facing poor working conditions and unfair wages established the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society. The Rochdale pioneers are credited with developing the "Rochdale Principles," which became the standard cooperative principles of success for cooperatives around the world for generations. The principles, which have been refined, adapted and reinterpreted over time, are now known as the *Seven Cooperative Principles* (see back cover).

The Minnesota Association of Cooperatives was founded in 1945 to advance public perception of the cooperative movement in the North Star State, while the Wisconsin Federation of Cooperatives was formed

in 1969 by two politically divergent organizations, the Wisconsin Association of Cooperatives, which primarily served consumer co-ops, and the Wisconsin Council of Agricultural Cooperatives. The Minnesota association entered into a management agreement with its Wisconsin counterpart in 1998. The two organizations became one in 2004 after members voted in favor of formal unification; the merged organization was renamed Cooperative Network in 2009.

Cooperatives have long been a part of the self-help tradition of America, and Cooperative Network is proud to represent cooperatives across a wide variety of sectors including farm supply, grain, health, dairy processing and marketing, consumer, financial, telecommunications, electric, housing, insurance, and more.

A cooperative is a business voluntarily owned and controlled by its member-patrons and operated for them on a non-profit basis. Each cooperative member has an equal voice in the affairs of the organization. Profits earned by co-ops are returned directly to member-owners as dividends, or are reinvested in business operations. Either way, this money finds its way back in to the local and regional economies, supporting businesses and creating jobs beyond the cooperative itself.

Governed by a board of directors made up of cooperative leaders from throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin, board and CN members help identify the organization's legislative and educational priorities, and develop and guide its strategies.

The benefits of CN's daily presence in the Minnesota and Wisconsin state capitols is evident

in the organization's track record of legislative accomplishments, earned through countless hours of attending committee meetings, public hearings and conversations with policy makers. CN makes certain "the voice of cooperatives" is heard when important decisions are being made.

In recent legislative cycles, CN worked with state legislatures to establish grant programs to help finance new and expand existing co-ops, expand farm service CDLs, advocate for historic investments in broadband infrastructure funding, allow for self-service dispensing of propane autogas, streamline the process for housing co-ops seeking to start in Minnesota, provide funding for programs designed to rebuild and repair rural roads used primarily by the agriculture industry, as well as support state and federal exporting initiatives.

Membership in Cooperative Network provides cooperatives with an array of benefits at no additional cost, including access to a stock photography collection of nearly 2,000 royalty-free photos for use in marketing, communications, and advertising.

Two electronic newsletters – *Co-op Connection* and *Capitol Connection* – provide members with up-to-date information on member services and news, and Cooperative Network also publishes *Cooperative Focus*, a bi-annual magazine featuring news and feature stories about CN members and the greater cooperative community. The organization also shares timely editorials, opinion pieces and news articles with media outlets, and through social media.

Throughout the year, CN hosts a variety of online webinars and forums on state and national issues, as well as an annual Cooperative Communicators Workshop designed to improve member cooperatives' marketing and communications skills.

Members also have access to a collection of six online Cooperative Director Education Videos on subjects vital to cooperative leadership, which can be played in the board room or office to instruct directors and staff. Topics include: "Toad Lane and the Seven Cooperative Principles," "Best Practices in Cooperative Governance," "Planning for Tomorrow: Cooperative Success and Talent Recruitment,"

"Cooperative Finance: Understanding the Numbers," "Roles and Responsibilities for Cooperative Directors," and "Best Practices in the Cooperative Board Room"

Members also have free access to graphics, logos and other materials to help celebrate National Co-op Month, held annually in October. Members can post job openings on CN's Co-op Careers page, and they also have access to many other resources including a 'Co-ops are Everywhere' animated video and a coloring book.

In March, CN teamed for the first time with the National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International to present the 2024 Cooperative Legislative Forum, a virtual discussion of federal and state issues important to cooperatives of all sectors and sizes.

Over the past year, CN also organized and hosted a series of webinars, often on a monthly basis, on a variety of topics including co-op credit issues, director recruitment and onboarding strategies, cooperative insurance, and cooperative mergers and acquisitions.

In partnership with FCCS Consulting, in January, 2025 CN launched its *Excellence in Governance* virtual webinar series, a new series consisting of three webinars designed to provide new and existing cooperative directors and staff with the information they need to perform their duties in today's complex and often changing business environment. The first webinar in the series, "Choosing Your Next Leaders," was held January 29. The second, "Maximize Board Effectiveness: Guide to Meetings and Fiduciary Responsibilities," will be held February 19, and the third, "Shape Tomorrow with Strategic Boardroom Planning," is scheduled March 12.

Cooperative Network is committed to our communities. To the community of the cooperatives we represent, to the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and to the local communities we serve. Our passion is advocacy, education and awareness, and our mission includes providing resources to enhance this business model for future success. Every program we administer, every experience we provide, is designed to provide our members with top-notch service.

Co-op leaders receive distinguished Cooperative Builder Award

Three longtime leaders of cooperatives from diverse fields – health care, the credit union industry, and agribusiness/farm supply – were bestowed the 2024 Cooperative Builder Award during Cooperative Network’s Annual Meeting in November.

Receiving the award were: Dr. Mark Huth, president and CEO of Group Health Cooperative of South-Central Wisconsin (GHC-SCW); Brett Thompson, president and CEO of the Wisconsin League of Credit Unions; and Bill Zuhlke, vice president of member services for United Cooperative, and former director of business development for Land O’ Lakes, Inc.

Cooperative Network’s highest honor, the Cooperative Builder Award has been awarded annually since

1976 to individuals who have made outstanding contributions at the local, state or national level to advance cooperative philosophy and ideals. A committee selects up to three distinguished individuals to receive the award each year, and honorees are celebrated during Cooperative Network’s Annual Meeting.

View video biographies of the 2024 award recipients at <https://cooperativenetwork.coop/2024-cooperative-builder-award-videos/>

More information about the award, including a list of past recipients, is posted on Cooperative Network’s website: <https://cooperativenetwork.coop/cooperative-builder-award/>



Dr. Mark Huth
Group Health
Cooperative-SCW



Brett Thompson
The Wisconsin
Credit Union League



Bill Zuhlke
United Cooperative

Grassroots advocacy in action: Co-op Day at the Capitol dates announced

Known for world-class legislative advocacy for cooperatives, Cooperative Network (CN) annually invites its members to participate in Co-op Day at the Capitol, day-long events held on separate dates in Minnesota and Wisconsin at which cross-sector teams of CN members meet face-to-face with state legislators to lobby for legislation important to cooperatives. In 2025, Wisconsin Co-op Day at the Capitol is scheduled for March 19; Minnesota Co-op Day at the Capitol will be held April 1.

Designed to build relationships with legislators and agency officials, and help explain the role cooperatives play in both states’ economies, Co-op Day at the Capitol also positions and brands CN as the authority on cooperative issues in the legislative arena in both states. Many of the issues Cooperative Network members discuss with legislators during Co-op Day at the Capitol are determined during CN’s annual Resolutions Review process. Each year, one-third of CN member-approved resolutions are reviewed. Existing resolutions are reviewed and/or edited, and new resolutions are created in response to current issues. New resolutions are approved by CN members during the organization’s Annual Meeting held every November.

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

October is Co-op Month

For more than half a century, cooperatives across the nation have recognized October as Co-op Month, an opportunity for cooperatives to educate others about what can be accomplished through cooperation. Individual cooperatives reflect on their history, cherish their achievements, and recognize the principles shared with cooperatives both domestically and around the world.

The governors of many states, including Minnesota and Wisconsin, help commemorate Co-op Month by issuing proclamations declaring October as Co-op Month. October Co-op Month proclamations for Minnesota and Wisconsin are drafted annually by Cooperative Network’s communications staff.

About Co-op Month

- Co-op Month has deep roots in Minnesota, with the first official State proclamation signed by then Minnesota Governor Luther Youngdahl in 1948, and the celebration turning national in 1964 when former Minnesota Governor Orville Freeman – then U.S. Secretary of Agriculture – proclaimed a national Co-op Month.
- The first national theme in 1964 was “Cooperatives: USDA Helps Build a Better America.”
- The U.S. Government sponsored Co-op Month from 1964-70.
- Since 1971 cooperatives, statewide associations, and the National Cooperative Business Association have fueled their own events and promotions.



2024 Co-op Month Theme

'This is rural power, for rural America'

by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

Two major electricity generation/transmission cooperatives serving millions of people in the Midwest were awarded almost \$1.4 billion in combined funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Empowering Rural America (New ERA) program.

On January 15, 2025 Maple Grove, Minn.-based Great River Energy announced the cooperative and a consortium of member-owners had secured \$812 million through the New Era program. On September 5, 2024 at a ceremony attended by President Joe Biden and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, it was announced that nearly \$573 million had been awarded to La Crosse, Wis.-based Dairyland Power Cooperative through the New ERA program. Dairyland was the first cooperative to sign an agreement with the USDA under the program.

The Inflation Reduction Act, signed into law by Biden on August 16, 2023, provides \$9.7 billion in New ERA program funding aimed at helping rural electric cooperatives transition to clean, affordable and reliable energy. The IRA seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent below 2005 levels by 2030 by making significant investments in climate and environment programs and providing tax incentives to boost the development and deployment of clean energy.

In announcing the \$812 million award to Great River Energy, the USDA also noted it now had awarded roughly 90 percent of total available New ERA

funding to rural electric cooperatives, obligating approximately \$9 billion of the program's \$9.7 billion budget authority.

Great River Energy secures \$812 million in Empowering Rural America (ERA) funding

Great River Energy's January 15 announcement that the cooperative had secured \$812 million in funding marked the culmination of nearly two years of effort by the cooperative and its member-owners. The achievement represented the largest New ERA award to date.



Great River Energy's \$812 million award will enable the cooperative to procure 1,275 megawatts of renewable energy from rural areas. (Great River Energy photo)

In a press release, the company said the funding is "a monumental step forward for Great River Energy and its member cooperatives, furthering their commitment to providing reliable, affordable, and sustainable energy solutions."

"Our consortium laid out an innovative portfolio of

projects and power purchase agreements that will benefit cooperative members across Minnesota," said Great River Energy President and Chief Executive Officer David Saggau. "The projects in our New ERA proposal will allow us to procure more than 1,000 megawatts of renewable energy while creating over 1,500 new jobs, saving our members \$30 million on average annually, reducing carbon dioxide emissions by over five million tons and creating a host of benefits across the communities we serve."

The \$812 million investment will enable Great River Energy to procure 1,275 megawatts of renewable

energy from rural areas across Minnesota and North Dakota. The projects will include large-scale wind energy, distributed renewable energy and other innovative energy solutions aimed at advancing sustainability across the region.

"This funding represents a once-in-a-generation investment for rural electric cooperatives. Our member-owners have presented a robust, complex, and ambitious collection of projects and initiatives that not only help reduce carbon dioxide emissions but also provide tremendous, long-term value for our membership," said Great River Energy Director of Member Services Jeff Haase. "The funding ensures enhanced reliability, rate stability, and creates new educational and job opportunities that will have lasting positive impacts on our communities."

Great River Energy is a not-for-profit cooperative that provides wholesale electricity to more than 1.7 million people through 27 member distribution cooperatives in Minnesota, covering roughly 60 percent of the state, as well as parts of Wisconsin.

Dairyland Power Cooperative awarded \$579 million through the ERA program

President Joe Biden joined U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack for a Sept. 5, 2024 event celebrating the awarding of a \$579 million New ERA grant to Dairyland Power Cooperative to accelerate the cooperative's clean energy transition. State and local elected officials, including Governor Tony Evers; renewable energy, rural advancement and education representatives, and Cooperative Network representatives also attended the event held at one of Dairyland's 24 electric cooperative members, Vernon Electric Cooperative, in Westby, Wis.

Dairyland said the funds will develop projects totaling 1,020 megawatts (MW) of power purchase agreements for solar and wind energy installations in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, North Dakota and Wisconsin. Projects include 593 MW of wind, 427 MW of solar and 60 MW of energy storage.

In a press release, Dairyland said the New ERA funding will accelerate Dairyland's carbon profile goals, resulting in a 3.3 million metric tons carbon reduction for an over 70 percent decrease in carbon emissions. Dairyland has already retired 579 MW of

coal generation since 2014 and reduced its coal generation investment by 60 percent since 1999. "One in five rural Americans will benefit from these clean energy investments, thanks to partnerships with rural electric cooperatives like Dairyland," said Vilsack. "Put simply, this is rural power, for rural America."

Dairyland submitted a Letter of Interest (LOI) for New ERA funding in September 2023 and received an invitation to proceed with the full application process. The extensive portfolio of clean energy projects was cultivated to deliver significant carbon emission reductions while supporting economic growth in Dairyland's rural service territories.

"Dairyland is honored to receive the New ERA award, which provides an incredible opportunity to accelerate deployment of renewable energy investments, facilitate economic growth and job creation, promote environmental stewardship and justice, all while lowering energy costs for rural communities," said Dairyland President & CEO Brent Ridge.

As part of its overall sustainable power supply plan, Dairyland is exploring small modular nuclear reactors to support the increased investment in intermittent energy resources. "Nuclear will drive the transition by providing reliable, carbon-free power to support the integration of wind and solar," noted Ridge.

A generation and transmission cooperative, Dairyland provides wholesale electric for 24 distribution cooperatives and 27 municipal utilities that supply the energy needs for 700,000 people in a four-state area (Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois).



President Joe Biden was on hand for the announcement that Dairyland Power Cooperative had been approved for \$579 million in New ERA funding. (Dairyland Power Cooperative photo)

Department of Labor seeking input on how to support co-ops through Employee Ownership Initiative

To celebrate the end of October 2024 Co-op Month, on October 30 the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Employee Benefits Security Administration (ESBA) detailed the DOL's implementation of the new Employee Ownership Initiative. Over the previous year, the ESBA and Division of Employee Ownership team visited employee-owned cooperatives and other businesses across the U.S. ranging anywhere from eight to over 14,000 employee-owners to hear from them directly. (To learn more about the initiative, visit <https://blog.dol.gov/2024/10/30/worker-ownership-creating-commitment-and-community>)

ESBA and the Division of Employee Ownership are now calling on cooperators to provide additional ideas and input on how to implement the initiative most effectively. They are specifically seeking feedback on the following questions:

- What type of resources do you want ESBA to offer?
- What techniques have you seen that effectively encourage worker voice and employee engagement?
- If you are a workforce or economic development professional who is interested in promoting employee ownership, how do you think the government, at the State and Federal level, can help?



Cooperative Network (CN) and the National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International (NCBA CLUSA) encourage cooperators to share their ideas and input on the DOL Employee Ownership Initiative by emailing ownership@dol.gov.

The DOL Employee Ownership Initiative was created as part of the Worker Ownership, Readiness, and Knowledge (WORK) Act passed within the FY 2023 Federal Appropriations and Funding Bill.

The initiative will help educate workers and employers about the potential of worker ownership through outreach, training, technical assistance, clearinghouse development, and by supporting new and existing programs to facilitate employee ownership.

Bills seek to improve cooperative access to SBA lending programs

In November 2024, Ranking Member of the U.S. House Small Business Committee, Rep. Nydia Velázquez (D-NY-07) introduced two bills: the Main Street Employee Ownership 2.0 Act of 2024 (HR10242), and the Improving SBA Engagement on Employee Ownership Act (HR 10244).

Both bills reflect longstanding priorities for the cooperative community and would increase access to key lending programs within the Small Business Administration (SBA).

The Main Street Employee Ownership 2.0 Act of 2024 (HR 10242)

The Main Street 2.0 Bill would level the playing field by prohibiting the SBA from requiring cooperatives to provide a personal or entity guarantee for a 7(a) loan. It would also prohibit the SBA from requiring that the seller of a business being purchased with a 7(a) loan for conversion to an employee-owned cooperative provide a seller guarantee. Additionally, the legislation would codify cooperative eligibility for SBA's disaster assistance programs.

While explicitly eligible to access SBA business lending programs, under current law cooperatives are effectively barred due to a personal guarantee requirement that must be provided by individuals who own 20 percent or more of a small business to access financing.

In 2018, Congress passed the Main Street Employee Ownership Act, which required the SBA to explore meaningful alternatives to the personal guarantee requirement. However, the agency has yet to propose a solution. In May 2023, the SBA finalized new regulations for its loan programs. The final rule

stated the agency will require a personal guarantee from cooperatives "unless otherwise prohibited by law." This bill would accomplish that by waiving the personal guarantee requirement for cooperatives and providing entrepreneurs, lenders and retiring business owners with the necessary tools to preserve small businesses.

Improving SBA Engagement on Employee Ownership Act (HR 10244)

This legislation would improve SBA's outreach and engagement on employee ownership and cooperative development by requiring the administrator to attend meetings and working groups on cooperatives and employee ownership hosted by the federal government, including Interagency Working Group on Cooperative Development meetings. The bill also requires the administrator to establish a small business employee ownership and cooperatives promotion program through the network of Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) to offer technical assistance and training on the transition to employee ownership through cooperatives and qualified employee trusts.

The Main Street Employee Ownership 2.0 Act and the Improving SBA Engagement on Employee Ownership Act propose important changes and reaffirm the commitment to leveling the playing field and increasing access to capital for cooperatives.

The National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International (NCBA CLUSA) strongly supports these bills. Cooperatives or organizations wishing to demonstrate support for these bills can submit this form: <https://tinyurl.com/36m3cyd6>

Minnesota Farmers Union awards grants to climate-focused cooperatives

Three projects supporting cooperative development in Minnesota received funds through the Minnesota Farmers Union (MFU) Foundation's "Cooperatives for Climate" grant program in 2024, the second year of a program aimed at providing financial assistance to cooperatives responding to climate-related challenges and opportunities.

"These projects showcase the many ways that farmers can respond to the need for climate solutions," said Gary Wertish, MFU Foundation president. "From livestock to specialty crops, our members are building cooperatives that will have a positive impact on farm families."

The second round of Cooperatives for Climate grants, totaling \$90,000, were awarded to:

- **Summer Kitchen Cooperative**, based in North Branch, is a farmer-led marketing cooperative focused on building a local food economy and promoting climate-resilient farming practices. Summer Kitchen is utilizing the grant funds to build organizational capacity, including a comprehensive business plan, to better serve their membership and community.
- **East Central Livestock**, a group of regenerative livestock farmers in east central Minnesota are working to address accessing reliable, year-round cold storage infrastructure. The grant is funding a feasibility study to support the livestock farmers' efforts in strengthening their local and regional food system.
- **Get Bentz and Salt of the North**, owners of sustainable lamb and wool businesses based in Northfield, are using the grant funds for a market



Theresa Bentz, who operates Get Bentz Farm in Northfield with her husband, spins wool from sheep on an old-fashioned wheel under the eye of her daughter, Opal. (Agweek photo)

analysis, operational development of the wool landscape fabric, and potential development of a wool cooperative in Minnesota.

"As we cope with climate change, we have to work together to find solutions. This grant opportunity further demonstrates Farmers Union's commitment to cooperative education and business development," said Kelsey Love Zaavedra, who is co-organizing the Summer Kitchen Cooperative. "As a young cooperative, these funds will help us increase our organizational capacity so we can better serve our farming community. Nobody understands the needs of emerging farmers better than emerging farmers and we are so happy to have resources to formally organize."

Grants are aimed at supporting technical assistance and business development services. Selection criteria included climate impact, results, support for emerging farmers, work plan and budget. A committee of MFU members reviewed applications and made recommendations on funding.

Minnesota grant program provides financing for new ag cooperatives

A new Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) grant program is offering funding to support the development of agricultural cooperatives in the state.

Through February 20, 2025 the Cooperative Development Grant (CDG) Program is accepting applications from new cooperatives looking to finance business development strategies that will aid in the successful production, processing, or marketing of agricultural commodities, products, or services.

The CDG provides essential financing to new cooperatives seeking to process agricultural products or market agricultural services in Minnesota. It awards up to \$160,000 in total. Applicants may request funding ranging from \$2,500 to \$50,000 for each proposed venture.

To qualify, cooperatives must be organized under Minnesota Statutes 308A or 308B on or after January 1, 2020, and maintain complete control by eligible agricultural entities actively involved in commodity production.

Interested applicants should submit their proposals by 4 p.m. (CST) on February 20, 2025. Proposals need to address the program's guidelines and eligibility requirements. To fully understand these criteria, applicants are encouraged to review the Fiscal Year 2025 Request for Proposals document, which clarifies the program's aims and application procedures. Program info available at: <https://www.mda.state.mn.us/business-dev-loans-grants/cooperative-development-grant-program>

Wisconsin grant program supports development of new, existing co-ops

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 having to make 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 set aside up to \$200,000 for 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/explore-our-regions/>) or the WEDC Office of Rural Prosperity (<https://ruralwi.com>) to get started. More info: <https://wedc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/CoopOnePager-digital-062624.pdf>

William J. Nelson: A legacy of leadership and innovation in the Co-op Movement

by **Megan Webster** Outreach Program Manager, UW Center for Cooperatives

To commemorate a cooperative career spanning over 30 years, William J. Nelson of the Ralph K. Morris Foundation spoke with the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC) to reflect on his extensive history in the cooperative world. This brief summary can only touch on the many contributions William has made over the years. Anyone who has had the privilege of working with him would attest to his remarkable influence. UWCC has been fortunate to benefit from William's guidance for over two decades, through his participation on UWCC's advisory committee.



William J. Nelson

William's journey to the cooperative movement began much like many others – by chance. As a college student, he was simply looking for a place to purchase snow tires for his 1963 Chevrolet Impala. Little did he know that this mundane errand would spark a lifelong interest in cooperatives. After purchasing the tires, he unexpectedly received a \$5 check from the local farmer cooperative. Intrigued, William met with the store manager, who introduced him to the cooperative model – a moment that sparked a passion that would define his career for decades to come.

The cooperative business model left a lasting impression on William, leading him to connect with several cooperative leaders, including some of the founding members of The Cooperative Foundation (now part of the Cooperative Development Foundation). While pursuing graduate studies at the

University of Houston at Clear Lake City in Texas, he undertook a research project on the future of cooperatives, which gave him the opportunity to work more directly with cooperatives, particularly in the agriculture sector. Though he described his cooperative work as “a small part” of his role, William took the initiative to identify the cooperatives that provided scholarships for students. He then organized a luncheon that brought together scholarship recipients and their cooperative benefactors. The event not only strengthened ties but also spurred an increase in scholarship offerings, revitalizing the focus on cooperative education for young people.

From there, William's career took off, and his involvement in agriculture cooperatives expanded. As a professor at the University of Minnesota - Waseca, he encouraged students to engage with cooperatives on a “real world” level, beyond what could be found in a textbook. Throughout his career, William has served on many boards of directors, but his contributions went beyond mere involvement. He transformed the organizations he worked with, relentlessly revitalizing, adapting, and growing each one.

William's work with The Cooperative Foundation and the CHS Foundation challenged the idea that these organizations existed simply as financial resources. He emphasized the importance of leadership programs and education, elevated both, and took the organizations to new heights.

Over the years, William has provided important leadership to cooperative organizations. While serving as a director at the Association of Cooperative Educators (ACE), William identified declining membership and recognized its crucial role within the cooperative ecosystem. He was a critical part of creating the ACE Institute, a national conference that is still bringing cooperative educators together today. Additionally, William was the primary architect behind the growth and evolution of the Ralph K. Morris Foundation, taking it farther than ever expected.

In 2010, when William was nominated for the Cooperative Builder Award, his colleagues expressed deep admiration for his unwavering commitment to cooperative leadership development and education. William was also described as a visionary, with the exceptional ability to see connections between organizations, anticipate their future potential, and strengthen relationships. His foresight has shaped many of the programs we continue to participate in today. William's list of honors is long. Being recognized with such prestigious honors, including the Cooperative Hall of Fame induction and the VIP Citation by the National FFA Organization, speaks volumes about his contributions to both the cooperative community and the agricultural sector.

UWCC has been honored to have William sit on our advisory committee, where he has brought perspective that is both innovative and deeply rooted in a profound understanding of cooperative businesses and their importance in our world. His connections with many of us run deep, and we are grateful to have witnessed his remarkable skills in action.

(Editor's note: One of the highlights of Cooperative Network's Annual Meeting, held in November, is the Ralph K. Morris Foundation/Tom Lyon Family Leadership Symposium. William J. Nelson, the foundation's board chair, serves as the emcee of the symposium, which has featured speakers of national prominence, including former Vice President Walter Mondale, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, American Farmland Trust President Ralph Grossi, and many others.)

UPCOMING STUDENT CONFERENCES

NFU College Conference on Cooperatives | February 13-16

National Farmers Union's annual College Conference on Cooperatives invites college, university, and technical school students from around the country to Minneapolis each year, where attendees learn about cooperative business economics, gain insightful co-op career information and leadership development, and hear from farmers and agribusinesses about how cooperatives support agriculture across the country. The Conference will be held at the Embassy Suites by Hilton Bloomington/Minneapolis

Interactive workshops allow participants to collaboratively work through problems that co-op boards often face, and a day of Twin Cities co-op tours offer real world examples of the unique realities of co-ops.

Registration is \$85. This cost includes shared lodging, most meals, and tour activities. Registration information: <https://www.eventcreate.com/e/ccoc>

WECA Youth Leadership Conference | July 15-17

The Leadership Conference (YLC), a unique opportunity for youth across Wisconsin to develop their leadership skills while learning the purpose, operation, and scope of cooperative businesses, will be held at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie Falls.

A key component of WECA's educational programming for young people, the three-day Youth Leadership Conference (YLC) has been held each summer since 1964. The 2024 YLC attracted more than 60 students sponsored by 16 cooperatives. Activities focus on maximizing leadership potential, understanding cooperatives, and co-op governance – the students organize and operate a functioning cooperative during the event – effective communication, and turning mistakes into stepping stones for success.

Who should apply: high school students with family members who belong to a Wisconsin electric cooperative; students active in their school and community.

How to register: Contact your local participating electric cooperative to request sponsorship and registration forms; complete the co-op required form(s) and return them to your sponsoring co-op no later than Friday, June 27, 2025.

Engaging with agriculture

Candidates learn about Wisconsin agriculture through series of site visits

Story and photos by **Rick Hummell** Cooperative Network Communications Specialist

Candidates running for office in November, 2024 had an opportunity to deepen their understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Wisconsin agriculture, as well as the significance of the \$166 billion ag sector to Wisconsin's economy, thanks to an innovative "Engage with Agriculture" series developed by the Wisconsin Ag Coalition (WAC).

One of the stated goals of the coalition, a collaborative group of more than two dozen agricultural organizations representing an overwhelming majority of Wisconsin's agriculture industry, is to inspire legislators and policymakers to champion legislation and actions that foster a vibrant, sustainable agricultural landscape and support rural communities across the state.

In an effort to deepen their understanding of the agriculture sector's complexities, the coalition hosted a series of site visits and tours at farms, agribusinesses, and processing facilities for more than a dozen prospective candidates – as well as incumbents not up for re-election in November – at 10 locations around the state this past summer and fall.

Lawmakers commonly learn about issues facing Wisconsin's agriculture sector from a plethora of stakeholders, including coalition member Cooperative Network, who hold "Ag Day at the Capitol" events to lobby for legislation important to their respective organizations. In a unique twist,

the Engage with Agriculture series brought the prospective lawmakers to the farmers and their facilities, rather than the other way around.

Two of the coalition's site visits were to cooperatives who are members of Cooperative Network: Country Visions Cooperative, located in Wrightstown, and the Insight FS facility in Brodhead. Other site visits included Milwaukee Vincent High School (Agriculture Education Program) and two nearby farms; Maplewood Meats, Green Bay; K-Lund Angus, Woodville; Bayer Crop Science, DeForest; and Haag Dairy, Dane.

"The series was well-received, with bipartisan participation from candidates across various districts," said Jason Mugnaini, executive director of government relations for the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation (WFBF), the state's largest general farming organizations. The WFB, which has farm "bureaus" in 61 of Wisconsin's 72 counties, serves as host and organizer of the coalition.

"We tried not to push candidates or lobby them too hard in any direction (during the site visits) and really let the farmers or businesses share the challenges of their industries," said Mugnaini. "Every participant expressed a newfound appreciation for the industry's role in the state's economic and social fabric. Of the issues that were discussed, there was certainly a concern about over-regulation of agriculture and how that translates directly into higher input

costs and lower commodity prices. Additionally, attendees showed particular interest in infrastructure improvements, recognizing that well-maintained roads and bridges are vital for transporting agricultural products efficiently."

Added Mugnaini, "What I personally saw as the greatest benefit from the series was the knowledge that candidates who attended gained about the inner workings and complexities of agriculture. The series really helped to 'peel back the curtain' of why farmers and agriculture does what it does, and also to showcase the deep connection that these farms and businesses have to the land, their livelihood, and their community."

"It was a very successful series, not only for the candidates who attended at locations all around the state, but also for the participating agriculture cooperatives and other host sites," said Jennifer Wickman, Cooperative Network's interim executive director. "Cooperative Network was very pleased to be a part of it. There were a lot of wide-ranging discussions and Q&A sessions between the candidates and the site hosts about many of the issues, both longstanding and emerging, facing Wisconsin agriculture such as food security, rural development and resilience, and improving rural livability through policies supporting access to broadband, healthcare, education and training, affordable housing, and land access."



Assembly candidate Brienne Brown (left) participates in an FWA event in Brodhead, Wis.

Brienne Brown, who was a Democratic candidate running for the 43rd Assembly District seat when she attended a tour at the Insight FS facility on August 6, said the visit provided her with plenty of insight.



Jason Mugnaini (left) with the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, and Ben Huber, with Insight FS, fielded questions from attendees at Insight's Brodhead plant.

Brown (who was successful in her election bid and took office on January 6, 2025) said, "A few things stood out to me at the event . . . that there is a huge need for affordable (probably subsidized) internet so that a farm doesn't have to make a \$250,000 investment to make sure that their GPS-reliant machines are working at maximum efficiency; and that Wisconsin farmland is some of the richest in the world, and we need to make sure there are some safeguards in place that prevent good farmland being taken over by solar arrays. Tangentially and equally important, is that the installation of solar arrays are making farmland more expensive.

"Co-ops that are working to provide agronomy expertise need to be better supported," added Brown, "and, honestly, I was blown away by how



Insight FS staff provided information about the cooperative.

much farmers use the latest science to create efficiencies and cost-savings in farming. This has nuance, but some of it is figuring out supply chains and access to nutrients that come from overseas."

Shae Sortwell (R-2nd District), an incumbent legislator who attended an event at Country Visions Cooperative on October 2, said one of the issues that stood out for him was "how quickly ag is affected by foreign trade and ports of entry. I, of course, knew that our farmers sold a significant amount of goods overseas. What I did not know was how much raw materials come through our ports to support the production of that food through fertilizers and feeds. I (learned) even a week shutdown of the ports could have a huge impact on the production side of the business. Thankfully, that crisis seems at least delayed for now, but the ports issue will be coming up again ... and will be something we need to watch closely."

He said another discussion that stands out centered on "how much the reckless federal spending has impacted equipment cost. Like everyone else, my family has felt the pinch of costs at the grocery store. What I did not understand is how much more that was impacting our farmers as it relates to farm equipment costs. I always knew equipment was expensive, but when a gentleman on the tour pointed to a large sprayer and said it cost \$350k four years ago and now costs \$750k, that almost blew me away. It was about a 100 percent increase in cost!"

Added Sortwell, "One issue I championed last session and will continue to do so is proper labeling of 'food.' In recent years, companies have begun to use



Senator Andre Jacque (left) and Assembly members Joy Goeben and Shae Sortwell attended an Engage with Agriculture event at Country Visions Cooperative.



The Country Visions tour included visiting a large shed containing fertilizer and other ingredients.

cloning to produce 'meat.' Now, I'm a free market guy; if you want to put something so disgusting into your body, then go for it. But the consumer has a right to know it was made in a lab rather than raised on a farm. So, I will continue to push that anything produced in that way needs to be labeled as such. And I believe proper labeling of meat will ensure that most people purchase the real thing from our farmers and not the Frankenstein lab meat."

Steve Zutz, CEO of Country Visions Cooperative, said the co-op has participated in "education events" in the past and welcomed the opportunity to share the cooperative's story and discuss ag issues with the political candidates.

"It's very important for agribusinesses such as ours to participate in these events to educate and bring awareness to our industry. Our employee group is very proud of the value they bring to our customers and are eager to show off our modern facilities and what they do on a daily basis," said Zutz. "The event gives cooperatives a chance to educate attendees about our cooperative principles: open membership (and) democratic control with profits going back to those who purchase from the co-op are important differences with our business model. Educating the public and our involvement within our local communities is very important."

Zutz said events such as the Engage with Agriculture series often are "eye opening for many of the attendees that are not familiar with our business. I think the size and scale of what we do on a daily basis surprises them. The economic impact with the number of employees we employ and the millions of dollars of patronage that is returned to our members is valuable. Our utilization of technology in the business also interests (attendees). Many people don't view agribusiness or farming as being on the cutting edge of technology. Cooperatives need to embrace new technologies to address labor shortages and even attract new young talent. We did get some good questions regarding policies that effect our business – questions around regulation, road conditions, education of labor force and effects of inflation on our industry. I believe overall every attendee learned something about our business and agriculture."

Mugnaini said the Wisconsin Ag Coalition "was formed to help unify the advocacy of the agriculture industry in Wisconsin and work to advance policies that bolster Wisconsin's farming and agribusiness sectors. By presenting a cohesive front, the coalition aims to more effectively work on state legislation and budget allocations to support the state's agricultural and rural economies."

Added Wickman "The coalition's biggest success, certainly in terms of dollar amount, is the newly enacted ARIP (Agricultural Roads Improvement Program). The idea came about during an Ag Coalition meeting, when coalition members were brainstorming about initiatives that could help agriculture in Wisconsin and how those initiatives could be included in the Wisconsin State Budget. Everyone started talking about the fact that our \$116 billion agricultural industry travels on rural roads. These rural roads, and especially those subject to seasonal weight limits, dramatically impact the speed and cost of delivering the food we grow to the people who consume it. It is a testament to the effectiveness of the group that we were able to get a \$150 million request passed during the last session."

Said Wickman, "The coalition has been preparing for the next biennial budget. We will certainly be



The tour at Country Visions Cooperative gave attendees an opportunity to learn about the century-old co-op's extensive agriculture operations and other services.

asking for ARIP to be funded again and we will ask for continued funding of other key agricultural programs, such as agricultural export expansion grants and continued funding for the state Nitrogen Optimization Grant Program. We will also ask for new funding to help develop and train new CDL drivers."

The Wisconsin Ag Coalition includes: AgCountry Farm Credit Services, Compeer Financial, Cooperative Network, CropLife America, Dairy Business Association, GreenStone Farm Credit Services, Growmark, Insight FS, Wisconsin Agri-Business Association, Wisconsin Association of Meat Processors, Wisconsin Association of Professional Agricultural Consultants, Wisconsin Biomass Energy Coalition, Wisconsin Biofuels Association, Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association, Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association, Wisconsin Corn Growers Association, Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, Wisconsin Hemp Alliance, Wisconsin Horse Council, Wisconsin Pork Association, Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association, Wisconsin Soybean Association, Wisconsin State Cranberry Growers Association, and the Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association.

With both legislative chambers tied, the 2025 budget process will require compromise

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

On November 5, 2024 every member of the Minnesota House of Representatives was on the general election ballot, and Minnesota voters made a historic choice to send a tied (67-67) House to represent them at the Capitol in St. Paul. The House tie, which had only occurred one other time (in the 1979 session), put an end to the DFL “trifecta” controlling the House, Senate and Governorship since 2022. The tie result created what many thought would be a unique opportunity for both parties to work together to form a power-sharing agreement to operate the chamber, which requires 68 votes to pass any legislation. This work is extra important in 2025, since the legislature is required to pass a new state budget for fiscal years 2026-2027. The current state budget ends on July 1, 2025.

Both former DFL Speaker Melissa Hortman (DFL-Brooklyn Park) and GOP Leader Lisa Demuth (GOP-Cold Spring) began to negotiate the terms of a power-sharing agreement and announced bipartisan committee co-chairs and a tied committee structure in December. Negotiations stalled on December 20, however, when a district court judge agreed with GOP appellants against a new DFL representative-elect in Roseville whose residency was in question. The GOP alleged that the new representative didn't live in his district before election day (as required by law). Instead of appealing to the Supreme Court, the DFL representative-elect vacated his seat with a letter to the governor before the session began, leaving the House with a 67-66 GOP plurality until a special election determined the final make up of the House for 2025.

Meanwhile, both DFL and GOP lawyers battled in court about a razor-thin election night victory for a DFL incumbent in Shakopee who won by 14 votes. Incumbent Rep. Brad Tabke (DFL-Shakopee) prevailed in the mandatory recount, but during that process it was discovered that 20 ballots cast before election day had been accidentally destroyed by an election clerk before they had been counted.

After a lengthy trial, with evidence that included sworn testimony from the voters whose ballots were destroyed, a judge determined that no new election was required and that Rep. Tabke had won the election and recount, beyond any doubt.

The one seat 67-66 GOP plurality caused by the absent DFL Roseville member, and the inability of DFLers to prevent the GOP from denying Rep. Tabke, led House DFLers to take drastic action as January 14, the first day of the new session, neared. They announced they would be boycotting the session on the first day, and every other day until an agreement was reached, to prevent the chamber from having a quorum of 68 members so that body could not organize itself and elect a speaker. Starting January 14, DFL legislators stayed away from the Capitol and meetings with constituents and interest groups in their districts in order to deny quorum. The GOP proceeded to ignore calls for quorum on the first day of session and claimed they were legally in charge of the chamber with their 67 members, and threatened to begin recall efforts against absent DFL members.

The leadership dispute culminated in cases at the Minnesota Supreme Court on January 23. The Supreme Court ruled the next day that a quorum of the chamber is 68, nullifying the GOP's actions over the prior 10 days. The court did not require any specific actions to be taken to force the parties to reach agreement, and negotiations resumed in an effort to reach a power-sharing agreement.

Work on a state budget will begin in earnest when these leadership disputes are resolved. As this issue of Cooperative Focus went to press in late January, how legislators would find ways to work together and find compromise on the governor's proposals remained unclear.

Stay tuned to bi-weekly Cooperative Network Capitol Connection updates for more information during this historic and tumultuous legislative session.

Cooperative Network's priority issues for the 107th Legislative Session

by **Jennifer Wickman** Cooperative Network Interim Executive Director

“The more things change, the more they stay the same.” The internet tells me that quote is from French writer Jean-Baptiste Karr, but I know it better from the Bon Jovi song. In any case, the quote rings true for the new legislative session and for Cooperative Network's priority issues this year.

Certainly, in national politics, Wisconsin changed. We swung from a “blue state” to a “red state.” However, with only 29,400 more votes for Donald Trump than Joe Biden – or less than one percent of total votes – Wisconsin really remains “purple.”

At the local state level we saw dramatic change in the last year. We had Supreme Court fights over our legislative maps, which led to new and different legislative districts, and political shakeups, including two long-term incumbent senators voted out of office, and a total of 30 new fresh-face legislators sworn into office on January 6, 2025. However, so many aspects of this session feel remarkably familiar:

First, we have a surplus. This session, Wisconsin starts off with a \$4.5 billion positive balance! While this is less than the \$7 billion surplus we had at the start of the last session, it still means we are set up for the standard fights between Democrats and Republicans. Historically, Democrats want to spend surpluses on more services. For example, State Education Superintendent Jill Underly proposes increasing per student revenue limits by \$427, totaling \$1 billion more over the biennium “to provide sustainable funding for Wisconsin public schools.” By contrast, Republicans typically want to return surplus dollars to taxpayers in the form of rebates, refunds, and tax cuts. In fact, Senate Majority Leader Devin LeMahieu recently stated, “The number one issue we heard from voters was the effect of rising costs and inflation. Senate Republicans' top priority will be returning the state's surplus to hardworking families.”

Second, it is the “Year of the....” Governor Tony Evers uses his State of the State Address to dedicate the

year to a specific cause. Evers declared 2019 the Year of Clean Drinking Water. Now, he has declared 2025 to be “The Year of the Kid.” That means his proposed state budget will include significant funding for day care; all-day kindergartens; more public school free lunch and breakfast programs for low income students; as well as school safety initiatives.

Third, Republicans remain in control of the legislature. Their margins are smaller, but their resolve remains strong. The Senate majority is now 18 Republicans to 15 Democrats (down from the 22-11 majority of last session). In the Assembly, the majority is 54 Republicans to 45 Democrats (down from the 64 -35 majority of last session).

Fourth, Cooperative Network is committed to protecting and promoting you in the Capitol. Last session that meant we advocated for more broadband funding, repeal of the personal property tax, implementation of the Ag-Road Improvement Program (ARIP), and creation of the \$200,000 Cooperative Development Grant Program.

This session we will prioritize rural prosperity. Since cooperatives are often the largest employer in any rural area, this will include advocating for rural workforce housing, rural childcare, more rural maternity care, and workforce development (specifically in the form of more grants to train CDL drivers). Our sector specific work will include working with the Wisconsin Ag Coalition to advocate for permanent implementation of the ARIP program as well as increasing the cap on the Agricultural Chemical Cleanup Program (ACCP). We will work with the Right-of-First-Refusal coalition (ROFR) to convince legislators that existing Wisconsin utilities and electric cooperatives are best suited to provide low-cost improvements to the state's electric transmission system; and we will continue to support credit unions by explaining to legislators the cooperative model and how it benefits credit union members.

'Green fertilizer' gaining momentum as a renewable energy source

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

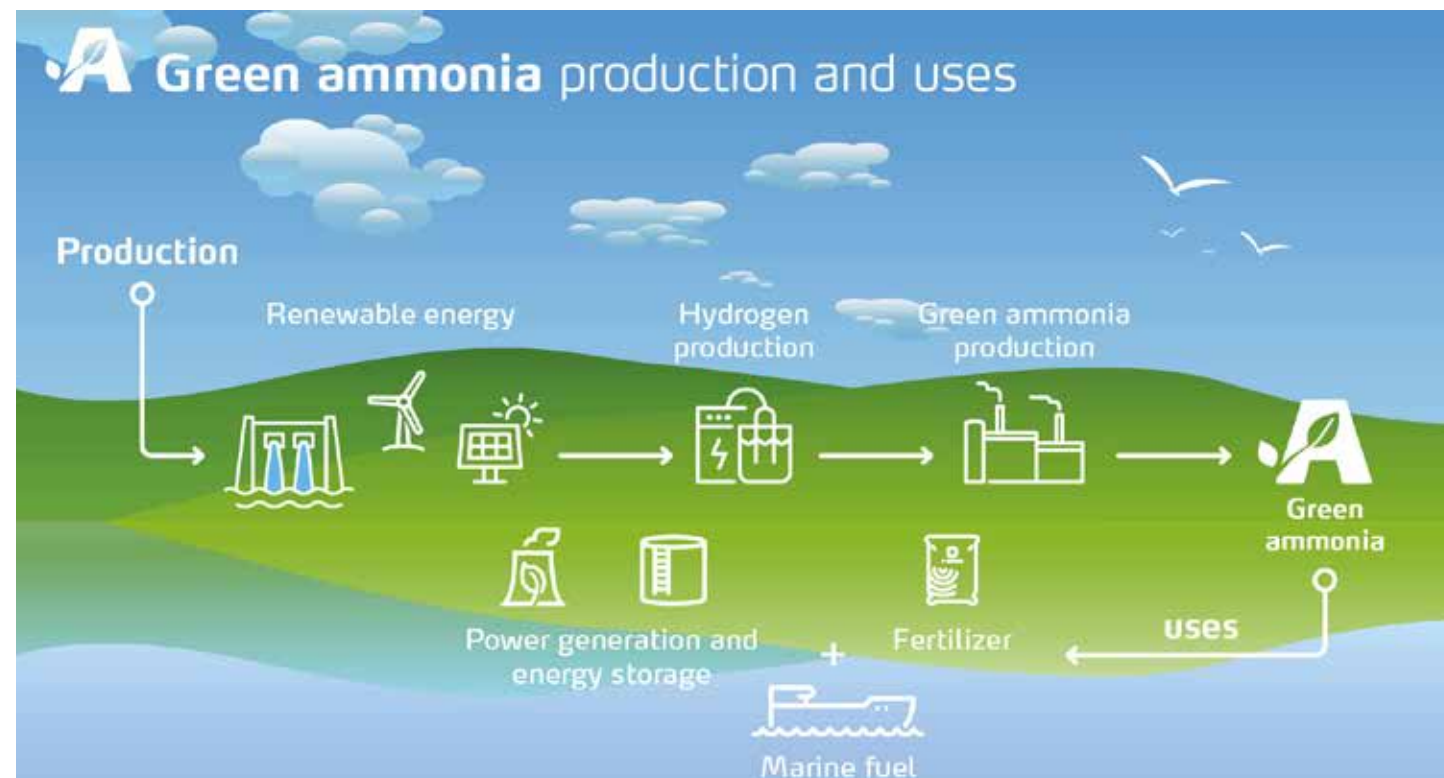
Wind turbines dotting the countryside, just one of the modern marvels of the 21st century, produce clean electricity to power our lives, and they do it without increasing human-caused greenhouse gas emissions like carbon dioxide. Many regions across several midwestern states are prime locations for producing electricity from wind, but one of the challenges that energy producers have faced since their adoption is that we can't control when wind blows, and thus can't always harness the maximum value that wind power represents.

A new effort in Minnesota that would harness wind energy and "store" it in the form of anhydrous

ammonia, also known as "green fertilizer" or "green ammonia," is gaining momentum and interest from the agricultural sector, including cooperatives.

Green Ammonia Summit

In December, 2024 a Green Ammonia Summit was convened by leaders from agriculture, energy, government, and business sectors at the University of Minnesota-Morris to discuss how this new industry could make a big impact on decarbonizing industries, promoting rural economic development, and securing an affordable domestic source of fertilizer close to the farm. A bipartisan group of legislators who chair influential agriculture committees



in the House and Senate were given the opportunity to express their support for the efforts. The event also included a special announcement by Minnesota Commissioner of Agriculture Thom Petersen, who launched the state's Green Fertilizer Grant Program at the Summit on December 10.

Importantly, Petersen took the opportunity to emphasize the importance of Minnesota's cooperatives in these efforts. The Green Fertilizer Grant will support agricultural and rural electric cooperatives so they can invest in green fertilizer manufacturing. The Department of Agriculture began accepting applications on December 18, 2024 and may award between \$250,000 and \$6,665,000 for business-ready and shovel-ready projects.

Applicants are required to have long-term off-take agreements between the cooperative and the green fertilizer production facility, while also obtaining training in best management practices in the use of green fertilizer. Additionally, green fertilizer must be produced from electrolyzers that have matched electricity consumption with wind or solar, on a basis determined by the commissioner; or are connected directly to a wind or solar facility. More information about the Green Fertilizer Grant Program can be found at www.mda.state.mn.us/green-fertilizer-program

The Green Ammonia Summit may have been the culmination of decades of work by researchers to make climate reduction efforts in agriculture commercially viable, but this moment might just be the very beginning of something big. If these efforts succeed, it will be a major opportunity to chart a course for future success in the field of rural economic development and sustainable agriculture innovation, and with committed leadership at all levels, cooperatives will be at the center of this success.

Wind-to-hydrogen origins

This wind-to-ammonia effort began nearly two decades ago at the West Central Research and Outreach Center (WCROC) of the University of Minnesota in Morris, when UM-Morris researchers received an \$800,000 grant from the Legislative Citizens Commission on Minnesota Resources

(LCCMR) to demonstrate the process by which wind energy could be used to electrolyze water to create hydrogen. Over years of fine tuning and study, that hydrogen was used in internal combustion generators set to provide peak or base load power. Staff at the WCROC also began exploring alternatives to create value-added products from wind energy and hydrogen, like anhydrous ammonia.

Farm cooperatives and producers in regions that grow major commodities like corn and soybeans know the importance of agricultural nitrogen fertilizer. Researchers developed a model in which farmers could utilize wind energy that blows across their land to create a value-added nitrogen fertilizer source which can then be applied back to fields to nourish their crops. The wind-to-hydrogen-to-anhydrous ammonia pilot plant at the WCROC in Morris was developed to demonstrate a flexible model capable of producing hydrogen for transportation fuel, electrical generation, and anhydrous ammonia as fertilizer.

The need for green nitrogen fertilizer is a key element to improving the carbon footprint within production agriculture. Traditionally, the agricultural industry consumes an immense amount of fossil-fuel in the production of food, feed, and fiber which can cause economic and environmental strains. By using green ammonia for fertilizer, fuel, and heat, farming's fossil energy footprint could decrease as much as 90% for corn and small grain crops, according to the university. This positive climate impact is especially important for food processors and retailers.

According to Minnesota Farmers Union's Climate and Working Lands Director, Ariel Kagan, nitrogen fertilizer derived from fossil fuel accounts for up to two percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and contributes up to 35 percent of the carbon footprint of corn. The fertilizer industry is also heavily concentrated, with just four companies controlling over three quarters of the market, while Minnesotans collectively spend half a billion to a billion dollars a year on nitrogen fertilizer. Regionally produced green ammonia offers the possibility of decarbonizing the agricultural sector while creating more competitive markets for farm inputs.

Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services dedicates new solar array

Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services (PPCS) celebrated a significant milestone in harnessing renewable energy with the dedication of the Trenton Solar at Truttmann Field solar array on September 19, 2024. The array will produce enough energy to power over 500 homes.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony marked the official launch of this innovative project, developed in partnership with the National Association of State Energy Officials, the Office of Energy Innovation through the Wisconsin Public Service Commission (PSC), and WEST CAP.

The event brought together local officials, project partners, and community members to commemorate the completion of the solar array. The project represents a major step forward in PPCS' commitment to sustainable energy and environmental stewardship.

During the ceremony, representatives from the National Association of State Energy Officials, the Office of Energy Innovation, and WEST CAP shared their insights and expressed their gratitude for the collaborative efforts that made this project possible.

Nate Boettcher, PPCS president and CEO, led the ceremonial ribbon cutting, symbolizing the solar array's official dedication. Attendees were given a guided tour of the solar array, showcasing its



Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services staff and representatives from partnering agencies dedicated Trenton Solar at Truttmann Field with a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

state-of-the-art technology and the benefits it will bring to the community.

The solar array is designed to provide clean, renewable energy to the local grid, reducing the community's carbon footprint and promoting energy independence. The partnership with WEST CAP ensures that low-income households can access this clean energy source.

"This is an exciting day for our cooperative," said Boettcher. "There were many struggles along the way with supply chain issues and sourcing the right switches and transformers. Bringing this clean energy to our region could not have happened without the collaboration of all the agencies involved."

The solar array sits on a plot of 16 acres, 12 of which are used for the array. It is comprised of 4,134 550-watt bifacial panels. It employs a single-axis tracking system that follows the sun.

Organic Valley creates 'Greenest Ads' with help from grazing cows

In September, leading farmer-owned organic cooperative Organic Valley unveiled an innovative way to create ads: cows grazing pasture to spell out letters. Cows on three Organic Valley farms located across the country ate pasture grasses around strategically placed fences that formed the word "BUZZ-WORTHY" and an emoji-like bee. The eye-catching ads were environmentally friendly and beneficial for the ecosystem, including providing habitat for pollinators, such as honeybees, and preventing soil erosion and water runoff.

The "Greenest Ads" campaign was the result of a collaboration between the Organic Valley farmers,

their cows, and a team of experts in grazing, fencing and aerial photography. The ads could be seen from planes flying over participating farms in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Maryland, as well as on social media. Organic Valley also created a landing page on its website, where visitors could learn more about the campaign, the farmers, and the environmental benefits of organic farming. The campaign ran until the end of October, when the pasture season ended.

Learn more about the project and hear from the farmers involved, at Organic Valley's Rootstock blog: <https://www.organicvalley.coop/blog/cows-spell-green-ad/>



Workers strategically placed fences to form the word "BUZZ-WORTHY" and an emoji-like bee.



Aerial view of a pasture where Organic Valley cows grazed to create the word "BUZZ-WORTHY" and a bee design. (Organic Valley photos)

Giving back: ALCIVIA program rewards children exhibiting at local fairs

Agricultural and energy cooperative ALCIVIA donated \$124,800 to children who exhibited small and large animals at local fairs in Wisconsin in 2024, up from \$103,700 in 2023.

ALCIVIA rewarded every exhibitor who showed an animal at a local fair and whose family is a member of the cooperative. Small animal exhibitors received a \$100 participation award and large animal exhibitors received a \$150 participation award.

In addition, submissions were up 20.3 percent in 2024. ALCIVIA received 852 submissions from youth in 30 different counties in Wisconsin and bordering states. Of the 852 submissions, six percent, or about 50 exhibitors, showed small animals with the rest showing large animals.

"It's exciting to see kids participating in their local county fairs," says Jim Dell, ALCIVIA CEO and president. "We received almost 150 more submissions than last year. This tells us that the ag industry within the communities we serve is alive and well."

Since starting the Fair Participation Program in 2018, ALCIVIA has supported more than 2,500 fair projects, totaling more than \$300,000 in donations back to the children. The Fair Participation Program accepts submissions every year, from early summer through the middle of September. To learn more about the program, visit ALCIVIA.com/GivingBack.

Support for food banks

ALCIVIA's fair program is just one of the cooperative's many programs supporting the community. In 2024, ALCIVIA also donated \$20,000 to Second Harvest of Southern Wisconsin and \$20,000 to Feed My People Food Bank to support its Farm to Food Bank Program.

The donation to Second Harvest represents the 14th year ALCIVIA has partnered with the food bank. The total given over that period is more than \$250,000.

ALCIVIA's new partnership and contribution to Feed My People Food Bank will help purchase food from local growers and cover transportation costs to distribute the products across the 14-county service area in west-central Wisconsin.

The donation will also enable the program to expand its offerings to include locally sourced meat and dairy products while increasing the quantity and quality of fresh produce available.

The Farm to Food Bank Program was developed in response to the need for stable, nutritious food sources amidst challenging economic conditions in recent years.

By partnering with local farmers, Feed My People can secure high-quality produce, meat, and dairy products, ensuring that individuals facing food insecurity have access to healthy options while also supporting local farmers and economies.

"Our new partnership with Feed My People furthers ALCIVIA's commitment to ending hunger in the communities across our trade territory," said Dell. "We're proud to partner with amazing people and contribute to the important work they're doing to provide fresh, locally sourced food to those experiencing food insecurity."

Headquartered in Cottage Grove, Wis., ALCIVIA serves farm, business, and retail customers in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, and Iowa.

GROWMARK Storm Shelters

Keeping employees safe from the threat of severe weather

by **Lucy Loftus** Environmental Health and Safety Specialist, GROWMARK

Two years ago, the South Central FS facility in Gays, Ill., was destroyed in a December tornado outbreak that killed more than 80 people in eight Midwestern and Southern states. Luckily, nobody was at the Gays facility when the tornado blew through. Further highlighting the dangers to employees from severe weather while in the workplace, in Mayfield, Ky., eight workers died at a candle factory; and in Edwardsville, Ill., six died at an Amazon warehouse when tornadoes struck.

It's important to have insurance to help cover cleanup and facility replacement costs, but insurance can't replace people. Sturdy shelters are required to protect workers in the event of severe weather. Greg Eckhart, director of energy facility operations, had a wake-up call when a tornado came near one of their locations. "There was a tornado that hit near one of our terminals that got us all thinking seriously about the safety of our employees and drivers that might be on site if a storm hit one of our terminals," he said. "Many of the facilities are located in rural areas with no storm protection."

Greg and Rob Kern, a projects and facilities operations manager, decided to take action. They researched companies that sold storm shelters and found Safe Shed Inc. in Salem, Ill. They toured the shelter units on display and saw one that had taken a direct hit from a three-quarter ton pickup truck during a storm but emerged with only paint scrapes from the truck slamming into the building's sturdy shelter. They

FACTS ABOUT SAFE SHEDS:

- Each unit holds 16 adults
- Each unit weighs 24,000 lbs.
- Units are made of steel-reinforced seamless concrete walls
- Units are anchored by two 36-inch stakes driven into the ground at different angles

WHAT'S INSIDE A SAFE SHED?

- An emergency escape port
- Motion-activated lights
- First-aid kit.
- Fire extinguisher.
- Portable toilet with privacy enclosure

The National Weather Service hosts a Severe Weather Preparedness Week in most states during March. To learn how to prepare in your area, visit www.Weather.gov.

decided to purchase that particular shelter for each of their locations.

Rob and Greg felt the investment could potentially save lives. "Our employees appreciated the emphasis on their safety, it gave them peace of mind to know they have somewhere safe to go," he said. "Since they were installed, a couple of our sites have used them during storms, so they have been well worth the investment."

All GROWMARK-owned distribution centers have storm shelters, even the Farmville location, where tornadoes are extremely rare.

(Cooperative Network member GROWMARK is a leading agricultural supply cooperative operating in more than 40 states and one operation in Ontario, Canada. Its local member cooperatives commonly use the trademark FS).



GROWMARK employees inspect storm shelters.

Hurricane relief, mergers, and new construction

Electric co-ops send lineworkers, supplies to help with hurricane relief efforts

In a shining example of cooperative spirit at the start of Cooperative Month, 18 electric cooperatives from Minnesota and 15 from Wisconsin sent approximately 125 lineworkers to help restore power after Hurricane Helene caused outages to more than 1.25 million cooperative members in the southeastern United States from Sept. 24-29. These numbers do not include outages from investor-owned and municipal utilities. Mass devastation and outages impacted cooperatives in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia. The majority of the lineworkers left Wisconsin and Minnesota Oct. 2-3, with some staying 10 days or longer.

Additionally, the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association (WECA) and numerous electric cooperative managers, with financial backing from WECA's Federated Youth Foundation (FYF), coordinated an effort to send a semi-truck full of hurricane-relief supplies to co-op counterparts in South Carolina recovering from Hurricane Helene. The semi-truck was stocked with much-needed items including power generators, bottled water, gas cans, diapers, and tarps. Rural Electric Supply Cooperative (RESCO) covered the cost of loading and trucking. Other contributions were covered by all 24 Wisconsin electric co-ops that fund FYF, as well as six non-electric FYF members, including Cooperative Network.

Many other electric co-ops stepped up, including Dunn Energy Cooperative, which worked with Sam's Club and Walmart to send another semi with supplies from the Eau Claire and Menomonie area.

United Cooperative undertaking numerous construction projects

Wisconsin-based United Cooperative is in the process of completing numerous board-approved building projects to meet the demands of the cooperative's customers. Some of the major construction projects, completed and in construction phases are:

- Waupun – New feed mill and warehouse, along with a 2.8-million-bushel/dryer grain terminal are

now operational. A soybean processing plant has begun construction, with completion scheduled for early 2026. The entire complex will have railroad service.

- Center Valley – Construction of an agronomy facility and 4.2-million-bushel grain storage facility with a 7,000 bu/hr dryer, high speed receiving pits and rail car loading. The grain facility will be completed in 2025.
- Mayville – Construction of a new agronomy facility with office and warehousing. Spring, 2025 completion.
- Coleman – Agronomy warehouse addition and liquid plant expansion. Spring, 2025 completion.
- Ripon South – Grain expansion adding three million bushels of storage with a new 7,000 bu/hr dryer and three new receiving pits, in the process of upgrading rail loading for 50 cars. To be completed in 2025.
- Hillsboro – Dry fertilizer plant expansion. Spring, 2025 completion.
- Westfield – New fertilizer blending tower. Spring, 2025 completion.
- Johnson Creek – New faster fertilizer receiving pit and leg. Completed.
- Necedah – June, 2024 purchase of the 100-million-gallon ethanol plant from Marquis Energy, creating United Energy Necedah. A 1.2-million-bushel grain bin is under construction.

Common Ground Healthcare Co-op enters affiliation with CareSource

Common Ground Healthcare Cooperative (CGHC) on January 1, 2025 entered into an affiliation with CareSource, a nonprofit health plan based in Dayton, Ohio. A non-profit nationally recognized organization with over two million members, CareSource administers one of the largest Medicaid managed care plans in the U.S., while also offering health insurance, Health Insurance Marketplace, and Medicare products.

In a statement to its members, CGHC said: "CGHC began offering health insurance to individuals and families in 2014, focusing on those without access to employer-sponsored insurance. Since then, CGHC has grown to become one of the largest individual and family health plans in Wisconsin. Our

mission of Putting Members First has led to members experiencing world-class service.

"Changing regulations and laws associated with the Affordable Care Act (ACA) have added volatility to this market over the past decade. To ensure CGHC's longevity, we recognized the need for a partnership. Throughout our search, we prioritized maintaining our mission of service as a member-focused, non-profit health plan. With a Board of Directors that was composed of members who purchase our health insurance, the directive was clear: find a like-minded partner that will bring value to members and ensure CGHC continues to serve individuals and families in Wisconsin without interruption."

Olsen named Minnesota Power Employees Credit Union President/CEO

Minnesota Power Employees Credit Union (MPECU) announced the promotion of Jason Olsen to the position of President/CEO, succeeding Debora Almirall, who retired on December 30, 2024. Prior to his promotion, Olsen served as the senior vice president of business lending at MPECU since 2022. He brings more than 25 years of professional experience to the position, including several leadership roles. He has been active in Rotary International, Habitat for Humanity, United Way, and several other nonprofit and community organizations. In November, 2024 Olsen was elected to Cooperative Network's board of directors.



MPECU has been serving the needs of its member owners since 1932. A full-service financial institution, MPECU serves 26 employer groups.

Minnesota celebrating 100th anniversary of first state-chartered credit union in 2025

In 2025, Minnesota credit unions will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the opening of the first state-chartered credit union in the Gopher State. It was organized for Minneapolis postal employees in the spring of 1925 with \$146.25 in assets. Today, there are over 2.2 million credit union members representing \$41.8 billion in assets.

Throughout 2025, the Minnesota Credit Union Network (MCUN) will gather, share and celebrate Minnesota's credit union history. In partnership with the America's

Credit Union Museum, MCUN invites Minnesota credit unions to be part of a project showcasing individual credit unions' unique histories through a digital collection. The initiative allows every credit union to contribute its distinctive story. (Participating credit unions are asked to complete an online form, upload their logo and up to three digital photos, by March 31, 2025. More info: <https://www.mncun.org/100years.html>)

WESTconsin makes Forbes 'Best Credit Union in Each State' list

WESTconsin Credit Union was honored to be named the top credit union in Wisconsin on Forbes 2024 America's Best Credit Unions in Each State list.

WESTconsin was listed as #1 for the first time in 2024, moving up three spots from fourth in 2023. A total of 207 credit unions out of the nearly 4,700 across the country made the list, WESTconsin being one of two recognized in western Wisconsin.

Summit leader Sponem appointed to TruStage board of directors

Insurance, investment and technology provider TruStage announced the appointment of Kim Sponem to its board of directors in September. Sponem is the president and CEO of Wisconsin-based Summit Credit Union.



Sponem brings more than 30 years of experience in the financial sector, leading Summit's growth from \$200 million to over \$7.3 billion in assets and 275,000 members.

She has been inducted into America's Credit Union Museum, the CUES Hall of Fame, and was recently named a Power 100 Leader by *In Business*. Sponem has served on the boards of the Chicago Federal Reserve (Advisory), Corporate Central Credit Union, the Credit Union Executive Society, the World Council of Credit Union Foundation, and the Credit Union National Association World Affairs and Advocacy Committees.

Committed to her local community, she has served on the boards of the Madison Area Chamber of Commerce, the Oscar Rennebohm Foundation, Society Insurance, Origence Solutions and Wisconsin Physicians Service. Sponem also is a champion of

local efforts like the Center for Black Excellence, the Black Business Hub, the Boys and Girls Club McKinsey Center trade school, One City Schools, and Centro Hispano.

GHC-SCW expands network and partners with Edgerton Hospital

Group Health Cooperative of South Central Wisconsin (GHC-SCW) announced that Edgerton Hospital's clinics, urgent care and hospital are now available as in-network health care options through the Partners HMO, Partners Plus POS and Neighbors HMO Product lines. GHC-SCW partners with local health systems, like Edgerton Hospital and Clinics, to expand access to preventive health care providers and specialists in regions outside of Dane County, Wis. The partnership took effect November 1, 2024.

GHC-SCW plan members can now access care in Rock County, Wis. from Edgerton Hospital's five locations: Edgerton Hospital and Health Services, Edgerton Hospital Quick Care, Fulton Square Clinic, Milton Clinic and Whitewater Clinic.

SouthPoint Financial Credit Union opens new location in Buffalo, Minn.

SouthPoint Financial Credit Union opened its eighth full-service location in Buffalo, Minn. in December, 2024. The new financial center offers all services of the credit union, plus its three supporting divisions, SouthPoint Home Mortgage, SouthPoint Investment Center, and SouthPoint Insurance Agency. The location also features a drive-thru with ATM, integrated teller machine, and night deposit.

SouthPoint serves more than 31,000 members and is the 12th largest credit union in Minnesota.

Premier Cooperative acquires Dickeyville Feed LLC

Mount Horeb, Wisconsin-based Premier Cooperative in November, 2024 announced the acquisition of Dickeyville Feed LLC.

Premier Cooperative's CEO Matt Severson, said "We are thrilled about this acquisition and addition of the Dickeyville team. This purchase aligns with our commitment to production agriculture and providing exceptional service to our members and customers. We look forward to the positive impact this will have at Premier Cooperative."

Located in southern Grant County (Wisconsin), Severson said "the strategic move will enhance our service offerings and strengthen our presence in the region. Dickeyville's staff bring with them a wealth of experience and expertise in livestock production. With strong local roots, they have built robust customer relationships over the years ..."

Established in 1893 as Patrons' Mercantile Cooperative in Black Earth, Premier is recognized as the oldest consumer and farm supply cooperative in the United States. Premier has five divisions (agronomy, feed, grain, energy and retail) operating in 25 Wisconsin communities.

Dairyland receives award for incorporating electric, hybrid vehicles into its fleet

Dairyland Power Cooperative has received a "Forward Fleet" award from Wisconsin Clean Cities for its strides to incorporate electric and hybrid vehicles into its business fleet, reducing overall emissions. The award was announced at the Wisconsin Clean Cities Annual Meeting held in December in Milwaukee. Currently, Dairyland's electric vehicle (EV) fleet includes a Ford F-150 Lightning, Nissan Leaf, Toyota BZ4X, Ford Transit van, and a Mitsubishi Outlander plug-in hybrid SUV.

Dairyland is a member of the Wisconsin Clean Cities Coalition. Established in 1994, Wisconsin Clean Cities is one of the U.S. Department of Energy's more than 75 Clean Cities coalitions. Member organizations support the nation's energy and economic security by building partnerships to advance affordable domestic transportation fuels, energy efficient mobility systems and other fuel-saving technologies and practices.

Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services wins statewide magazine award

Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services won an award of excellence for presentation of local news in the *Wisconsin Energy Cooperative News*, the voice of the state's rural electric cooperatives. Liz Gunderson, communication coordinator, serves as the editor of the co-op's local pages within the magazine.

Awards were presented at the 2024 Communication Power Conference in Stevens Point, Wis. in August. Pierce Pepin's magazine pages took first place in the photography category for the previous year.

Founded in 1940, the *Wisconsin Energy Cooperative News* focuses on statewide issues that affect electric cooperatives, promoting the general welfare of Wisconsin's electric cooperatives, their member-owners, and the areas they serve. Nineteen electric cooperatives throughout the state are responsible for their own local sections within the magazine.

Wainscott is new president/CEO of The Wisconsin Credit Union League

The Wisconsin Credit Union League (The League) in September selected Sarah Wainscott as The League's next president and CEO, succeeding Brett Thompson, who retired in December after serving Wisconsin's credit unions for decades, including over 23 as president/CEO of The League.



Wainscott began her career at The League in 2010 as a government affairs assistant. She continued to expand her career in other roles such as Director of Government Affairs, Vice President of Government Affairs, and most recently as Senior Vice President of Advocacy.

"Sarah Wainscott's extensive experience and dedication to Wisconsin's credit unions made her the standout choice in our national search. She brings an unparalleled passion for The Credit Union Movement and a visionary approach that will undoubtedly take The League to even greater heights," said Brandon Riechers, The League's Search Committee Chair and president and CEO of Royal Credit Union.

Allied constructing dry fertilizer plant in Plover

Construction of a new dry fertilizer plant has begun at Allied Cooperative's Plover, Wis. location. The new plant will be able to store 14,000 tons of dry fertilizer. The existing fertilizer plant was built in 1974 and has a 2,200-ton capacity. Construction is expected to be completed by June, 2025.

Allied officials said with limited storage, inadequate automation and antiquated equipment, the existing location struggled with maintenance costs and was increasingly difficult to keep up with the cooperative's growing business needs. The new plant will feature state-of-the-art mixing and high-speed blending, allowing for faster receiving, blending and shipping of product to the co-op's fleet, as well

as for customers who come in to pick up products. The building also will have more bins and product capacity.

Allied's Plover agronomy plant is situated in the heart of Wisconsin's Central Sands potato and vegetable market. This area is recognized as one of the premier vegetable-growing regions in the nation, with potatoes, sweet corn, green beans, peas, carrots, and cucumbers all ranked near the top of U.S. production. Traditional row crop growers also depend on the services provided by the Plover location.

M3 Insurance expands into Michigan's Upper Peninsula

In January, 2025 Madison-based M3 Insurance announced its expansion into Michigan's Upper Peninsula with the opening of a new office in Escanaba. The new office is located at 1615 Ludington Street, Suite B Escanaba, MI 49829.

M3 is a top insurance broker and risk management firm. The company has nine offices in Wisconsin, Illinois, and now, Michigan.

Cooperative Development Services receives Innovation and Achievement Award

At its 2024 annual conference in June, the Consumer Co-op Management Association (CCMA) awarded Cooperative Development Services (CDS) with its prestigious Innovation and Achievement Award. CDS was recognized for:

- Contributions to food co-ops, including creating and testing the "Four Cornerstones in Three Stages of Development" model for food co-op development which has been successfully used to open 175 food co-ops nationwide in the past 20 years.
- Contributing to the creation of the Food Co-op Initiative.
- Creating innovative programming for small (particularly rural) grocery co-ops.
- Creating a program of fiscal sponsorship for co-ops that has brought over \$3 million in charitable capital into the co-op community in the last three years.

CDS provides organizational and developmental guidance to communities starting new co-ops, groups planning for conversion to cooperative ownership,

and assistance to existing co-ops seeking to expand primarily in Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa.

CCMA is the national annual conference for food cooperative directors, management, staff, and sector allies. The conference is organized by the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC).

Agralite works with Reed Fund to obtain loan for ag children's museum

Agralite Electric Cooperative recently worked with the REED Fund to obtain a USDA Rural Economic Development Loan of \$300,000 for the Mini Sota Agricultural Children's Museum in Benson, Minn. The new museum is scheduled to have 12 exhibits representing the wide-ranging work roles and processes within agriculture to ignite interest in children of all ages and foster learning through play, exploration, and problem-solving.

The REED Fund works closely with state and federal agencies, local banks, and other loan funds to finance community and economic development projects. It is a community development financial institution dedicated to providing financing that promotes growth, contributes to job, business, and wealth creation, and improves the infrastructure and economic base in rural areas primarily in Minnesota and South Dakota.

UWCC receives grants for rural co-op development, socially disadvantaged groups

The University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC) was awarded a total of \$355,000 to provide technical assistance to rural cooperatives through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Rural Cooperative Development Grant (RCDG) and Socially Disadvantaged Groups Grant (SDGG) programs. These programs exist to help rural cooperatives and small businesses expand, create jobs, and strengthen their capacity to serve rural citizens and communities.

The grants will enable UWCC to provide cooperative development services to rural clients in Wisconsin and the upper Midwest. The SDGG funds in particular will support education and cooperative projects with Latino communities in the southern part of the state and the Hmong community in counties around Eau Claire. 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 and agriculture; farmland access; forestry; housing; and the promotion of employee ownership including work with formerly incarcerated individuals.

Insight FS team receives Cooperative Communicators Association awards

At the Cooperative Communicators Association (CCA) annual institute held in Des Moines this past summer, members of the Insight FS team celebrated team wins and successes in communications. Insight FS communications team, Angie Greving (marketing communications manager) and Katie Oehm (senior marketing specialist), received first place in the Miscellaneous Promotional category for the "Hat Forge" tradeshow booth at the 2023 Wisconsin Farm Tech Show. The unique "hat-making" experience and a unique brand recognition strategy made Insight FS the talk of the show amongst attendees and vendors alike. See more about the entry at: insightfs.com/hatforge

During the awards luncheon, Ben Huber, Insight FS Retail Division Manager, accepted the 2024 CCA CEO Outstanding Communicator Award. Huber is the 28th recipient of the award, which honors a CEO's leadership toward the integration of communications into the cooperative's management process, personal communication skills, and a record of successful communications programs. "This recognition is a testament to the dedication and talent of our entire team. Communication is a team sport, and I think we are doing it right," said Huber.

Blaze Foundation curling event raises record \$150,000

The Blaze Foundation's annual curling event set a new fundraising record by bringing in over \$150,000 to support the financial well-being and development of life skills for underserved youth in the community.

This year's Blaze Foundation fundraiser was held at the St. Paul Curling Club on November 7. The event included a message from Kris Somerville, Career Pathways/Work Based Learning Teacher at Highland Park High School and a recipient of a Blaze Foundation Teacher Grant. Somerville shared how impactful the teacher grant was for her and the entire Highland Park High School, as they used

the funds to open a school store which provided a learning environment for students around marketing, running a business, financial education, and developing school spirit.

"We are humbled by the record funds raised at this year's event," said Christine Cordell, Blaze Senior Vice President of Organizational Effectiveness, and the Blaze Foundation Board Chair.

Cooperative Communicators appoint new board president and other board members

In September, the nationwide Cooperative Communicators Association (CCA) announced the appointment of its new board president and board of directors for the 2024-2025 term.

Cliff Dolbeare from GROWMARK, Inc., Bloomington, Ill., was named board president, succeeding Michelle Geans from Baldwin EMC, Summerdale, Ala. Dolbeare has been an involved and active supporter of CCA for many years.

Joining Dolbeare on the board is an experienced group of cooperative professionals:

- Dori Lichty, CentralStar Cooperative, Waupun, Wis., vice president;
- Kelly Jimenez, Carroll EMC, Carrollton, Ga., secretary/treasurer;
- Adam Buckallew, MFA Oil Company, Columbia, Mo.;
- Jennie Lacey, Roberta, Ga.;
- Anne Baehnman, URUS Group LP, Madison, Wis.;
- Brianna Wall, Oklahoma Electric Cooperative, Norman, Okla.;
- Hayley Leatherwood, Oklahoma Association of Electric Cooperatives, Oklahoma City, Okla.;
- Mallory Shoemaker, Central Valley Ag Cooperative, Beloit, Kan.

This board is composed of leaders from various sectors – including agricultural-supply, livestock-genetics, milk-testing, and electric cooperatives – and reflects CCA's mission of providing professional development opportunities for those dedicated to cooperative communication.

More than 400 U.S. co-ops complete UWCC's cooperative governance research survey

In 2021, the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives (UWCC) launched the Cooperative Governance Research Initiative (CGRI) to gather

much-needed data on cooperative governance practices in the U.S. across sectors and over time. The first wave of data collection consisted of a survey and follow up interviews with cooperative leaders. In May 2024, UWCC launched the second wave of data collection with the 2024 CGRI survey.

Over 400 cooperatives completed the 2024 survey, which closed in mid-July. Data cleaning and analysis are underway, and UWCC will begin rolling out aggregated findings from the 2024 study and tools for cooperative practitioners in early 2025.

Anyone who would like to be kept up to date as resources are released can sign up for the CGRI email list: <https://uwcc.wisc.edu/cooperative-governance-research-initiative/about-cgri>. In the meantime, reports produced using the 2021 CGRI data can be found at <https://uwcc.wisc.edu/cooperative-governance-research-initiative/#publications>

Agralite Electric Cooperative building new headquarters

The Agralite Electric Cooperative leadership team and employees, members of Gardner Builders, Mohagen Hansen Architecture, and CoBank gathered on September 13 to celebrate the beginning of Agralite Electric Cooperative's new headquarters project in Benson, Minn. Rep. Paul Anderson and Sen. Torrey Westrom also were in attendance. Agralite Electric Cooperative is replacing its current 60-year-old headquarters with a new 63,000 square foot building and a larger, secured pole yard.

"The additional space, as well as new work and storage areas, are needed to support the cooperative's growing fleet and operations now and far into the future," said Agralite General Manager Jennifer Stryhn. The new headquarters will feature infrastructure designed to improve operational efficiency and support advanced technologies. The projected cost of the project is \$16 million. Expected completion is in late 2025. The new facility will be located on the footprint west of the existing cooperative headquarters in Benson.

(Editor's note: The preceding news digest was compiled from Cooperative Network member newsletters, press releases, and media reports.)

Founded by Finnish immigrants, Mesaba Cooperative Park was scrutinized by the FBI

Regarded today as one of the Iron Range's "best kept secrets," Mesaba Cooperative Park near Hibbing, Minn. was created as a community center in 1929 by Finnish immigrants. The FBI considered the park to be a hotbed of communist activity and spied on it for decades.

One of the few remaining continuously operated cooperative parks in the country, Mesaba Cooperative Park served many of the ethnic political radicals who energized the Iron Range labor movement and Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party.

In late 1928, the Mesaba Range Cooperative Federation began securing land for a park to accommodate large Finnish gatherings. One hundred and sixty acres, including a 52-acre lake not shown on lumber company maps, were purchased for \$2,000. Forty Finnish American organizations purchased membership shares. Volunteers cleared land for a road, grounds, and building sites.

The period of the park's founding was one of anti-Finnish sentiment. Signs across the Range read, "No Indians or Finns allowed." The Finns' prominent role in the 1907 and 1916 Mesaba Range strikes had led to blacklisting. The Finnish cooperative movement was, in part, a response to this discrimination. In June 1929, as work progressed, an article in the Finnish-language newspaper *Työmies (The Workman)* announced that local Finns would celebrate in Chisholm for the last time without a progressive venue of their own.

The park opened on September 22, 1929. In the spring of 1930, construction began on a caretaker's residence and a children's school. The park's centerpiece, a dance pavilion, was completed in



Historical photo of park-goers in front of the Mesaba Cooperative Park pavilion.

June, 1930. Early festivals featured plays, track and field events, swimming, and dances. In addition to sports, students at the North Star children's camp were given an introduction to working-class thought.

The park became a gathering place for members of the Farmer-Labor Party, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and the Communist Party of America. As a boy, Iron Ranger Gus Hall, a four-time Communist Party candidate for president, helped his father and others build the dance pavilion.

Between 8,000-10,000 people attended the park's 1936 summer festival. They heard speeches from Elmer Benson and John T. Bernard, Farmer-Labor candidates for governor and congressman, respectively. A dance that summer, featuring accordionist Viola Turpeinen, packed over 1,000 people onto the dance floor in alternating shifts.

In 1938, the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee initiated the era of communist

"witch hunts," blacklisting, and guilt-by-association persecution. During this period of fear, intimidation and surveillance, whipped into a near-frenzy by the committees of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s, it was difficult to belong to the park.

FBI agents stationed outside the park collected the license plate numbers of those who entered. The park was stigmatized as the "Commie Park" and the "Red Park." This "red-baiting" atmosphere, combined with the increasing Americanization of Finnish children and post-World War II patriotism, led to a decline in membership that seriously threatened the park's survival. Opening membership to individuals as well as groups in 1959 was a necessary response.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, young people spurred the park's revival. Many had no Finnish heritage and came from the anti-war, environmentalist, and feminist movements. The original socialist and communist politics of Mesaba



Stigmatized as the "Commie Park," the FBI collected the license plate numbers of cars entering Mesaba Cooperative Park.



The park's annual Midsummer festival includes a Maypole celebration.

Co-op Park largely faded, replaced by a general spirit of progressivism. Additional land was acquired, bringing the park's total size to 240 acres. Today, the main annual event remains the Juhannes, or Midsummer, festival. It features folk dancing, guest speakers, music, a Maypole, late-night bonfire, Finnish American *mojakk* stew, and an arts camp for children.

The park also stands as a reminder of the many small Finn halls once dotting the Iron Range. As those halls closed, their contents, including lumber, chairs, a barrel stove, and stage drops and scenery, often found a new home at Mesaba Park.

(Article reprinted from MNopedia.)



Aerial view of the park's pavilion and waterfront.

La Crosse was home to Wisconsin's first meatpacking cooperative

In 1914, La Crosse was home to Wisconsin's and one of the nation's first meatpacking cooperatives.

In the 1910s, many farmers were dissatisfied with the percentage of commissions that the large packing companies were taking. They felt they received little profit for their hard work, leading to the organization of cooperative packing companies in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan and the Dakotas intended to keep more profit with the farmers.

In 1914, the Farmers' Cooperative Packing Co. of La Crosse was created. *The La Crosse Tribune* featured advertisements describing the purchase of stock in the company as "the best 6% investment ever offered to the merchants of La Crosse."

More than 2,100 farmers purchased stock in the company.

The company took over the space formerly used by the Langdon-Boyd Packing Co. at 300 S. Front St., which today is the location of the Waterfront Restaurant. The area surrounding Riverside Park was very different from what we know today, with the slaughterhouse next door in an industrial area.

At the time, revitalizing a former packing plant seemed like a wise decision for the newly formed cooperative. During the summer of 1914, the company appeared to be a great success. Each week the company slaughtered about 300 hogs, 60 cattle, 100 calves and 100 sheep.

Priority was given to shareholders, but any farmer in the area could bring livestock to the cooperative for a better price.



The Farmers' Cooperative Packing Company was located in an industrial area along the Mississippi River in La Crosse.

However, the Farmers' Cooperative Packing Co. of La Crosse closed in December, 1916.

After the purchase of the old packing plant, the cooperative found the building and its machinery were in disrepair. The new company paid nearly \$125,000 for a structure that apparently was worth less than \$30,000. During the first two years, the company spent a great deal of capital on maintenance and repairs. Their funds went dry in 1916.

In 1920, the Farmers' Cooperative Packing Co. of La Crosse sued the Langdon-Boyd Packing Co. and its significant shareholders for the cost of the plant plus interest for selling the plant at an exorbitant price.

The major shareholders included some well-known La Crosse figures: George Burton, Frank Hixon, Joseph Funke and Carl Michel. Judge Higbee of La Crosse County Circuit Court sided with the La Crosse Farmers' Cooperative.

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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.