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YEAR IN  
REVIEW

Cooperative  
 Network™

# 20 25



## Welcome new Executive Director Ben Nelson

In November, Cooperative Network welcomed Ben Nelson as the organization's new executive director. Nelson has more than 20

years of executive leadership experience driving strategic growth and organizational transformation across both public and private sectors, including most recently as executive director of the Kewaunee County Economic Development Corporation.

A seven-time recipient of leadership awards, Nelson is recognized for his ability to build partnerships, deliver measurable results, and lead with vision and integrity.

"Joining Cooperative Network is an honor," said Nelson. "I see tremendous opportunity to build on our shared history and advance our impact across Wisconsin and Minnesota. Our greatest strength lies in the partnerships we build, and I look forward to working closely with our board, membership, and collaborative partners to amplify the impact of cooperatives and champion the values that make this network so vital."

## 2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

Welcome to Cooperative Network's *2025 Year in Review*. Cooperative Network exists by, and for, the support of our members, with much of the work we do day in and day out reflected in the theme of this year's successful Summit & Annual Meeting, *Cooperative Connections*. We know, however, that *Cooperative Connections* is more than just a theme – it's the heartbeat of our movement. When cooperatives come together, we create something powerful: shared strength, new opportunities, and a united voice shaping the future.

Cooperative Network is where Wisconsin and Minnesota cooperatives organize their collective power – across sectors – to enhance profitability, unlock investment, and solve policy and operational challenges no single co-op can tackle alone.

One of our priorities over the past year was to increase our level of connection and collaboration with other networks and organizations who work in the greater cooperative movement. We accomplished this by increasing our level of participation and co-sponsorship of events and activities hosted by partner organizations, signing on as co-sponsors of their legislative priorities and initiatives, and serving as a lobbying resource for them. This priority was fully realized at our annual meeting and summit in December, where well over a half-dozen leaders and representatives of organizations from the greater cooperative community were present as attendees, presenters, moderators, and panelists.

Over the past year, Cooperative Network advanced cooperative involvement in health care, ag road improvements, reauthorization of a cooperative development grant, agricultural programs, food security, and many other areas tasked with solving complex issues in a changing world. The cooperative model is uniquely positioned to address these issues, just as Cooperative Network is uniquely positioned to lead the cooperative community.

As in past years, Cooperative Network maintained a daily presence in both state capitols, ensuring the cooperative voice was heard as programs and policies were decided. Through many hours of committee meetings and conversations, Cooperative Network continued its mission of advocating for the good of the cooperative model. We also continued to increase our presence on social media, through printed and online communication platforms, and seminars and webinars which address challenges and opportunities our members face.

Our successes would not be possible without the support and engagement of our members. Thank you for supporting the need for a "cooperative for cooperatives." And thank you to the Cooperative Network board of directors, who contribute their time, experience, and expertise toward the success of the association.

# EVENTS/INITIATIVES & eLEARNING



## 01 Excellence in Governance

Cooperative Network teamed with FCCS to host a three-part *Excellence in Governance* webinar series to provide new and existing cooperative directors and staff with the information they need to perform their duties in today's complex cooperative world. The three webinars were: "Choosing Your Next Leaders," "Maximizing Board Effectiveness: A Guide to Meetings and Fiduciary Responsibilities," and "Shape Tomorrow with Strategic Boardroom Planning."

## 02

### Strategic Plan

Cooperative Network's Board of Directors and staff worked with an outside consultant to develop a strategic plan called *Cooperative Network 2030*. The plan identified a list of priorities moving forward, including Engagement and Connection; Lobbying and Advocacy, Learning and Development, and Cooperative "Cross-pollination."



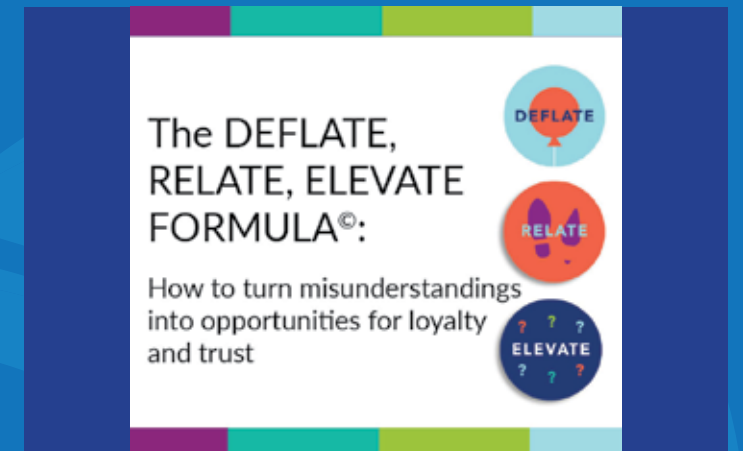
## 03 Cooperative Communicators Virtual Workshop

Communication professionals shared strategies and tips for becoming better communicators. They discussed best methods for including video in marketing plans; shared strategies for communicating the "cooperative difference"; and provided an overview of the Cooperative Communicators Association (CCA) and the work the association does to support cooperative communications professionals working to tell the cooperative story.

## 04

### Relate, Deflate, Elevate Virtual Workshop

Attendees learned how to apply the Deflate, Relate, Elevate Formula<sup>®</sup> to reach true understanding, create connection, and rebuild strong relationships—without having to take on more responsibility or give away the farm. They also discovered how disconnections and misunderstandings provide an opportunity for greater understanding, cohesion, and alignment.



### Cooperative Network Cooperative Connections Summit & Annual Meeting

Held December 2-3, Cooperative Network's Summit and Annual Meeting included a variety of speakers, leadership reports, budget updates, board elections, legislative updates, the introduction of new Cooperative Network Executive Director Ben Nelson, and the presentation of the prestigious Cooperative Builder Awards. Under the theme "Cooperative Connections," the event provided an opportunity to build connections, spark collaboration, and celebrate the values that make cooperatives stronger together.

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



# MINNESOTA LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY



**A Historically Tied Legislature** – The Minnesota Legislature in 2025 was marked by an even 67-67 tie in the House and a nearly even split in the 34-33 DFL controlled Senate. There was more political drama – from resignations, to removals, to deaths – packed into the first six months of 2025 than some St. Paul political reporters will encounter in a 25-year career covering the Capitol. Yet even after a leadership dispute and House DFL boycott of the legislature that lasted over a month, progress was made after legislators returned to work together and write a state budget for the 2026-27 fiscal biennium. While legislative victories for cooperatives weren't as numerous as in some recent years, there also weren't many legislative setbacks in the closely divided legislature. House and Senate leaders reached an orderly conclusion after a special session was called to pass a \$700 million Capital Investment Bonding Bill and all other remaining budget bills on June 10, 2025. With no functional majority in the House, legislation that became law had to be thoroughly negotiated and mostly bipartisan.

**Bipartisan Permitting Reform** – Cooperative Network staff participated in the working group advocating for improved permitting, especially in the agriculture, biofuels, and industrial development sectors. While no stakeholder got everything they wanted, important progress was made toward faster, more predictable permitting for new development.

Key provisions of the bill signed by Governor Walz (SF3/HF8) include provisions to eliminate outdated or unnecessary regulations that slow approval processes, enhance transparency through increased accessibility of information for stakeholders and the public, and ensure reforms balance increasing efficiency in permitting processes while maintaining rigorous environmental standards and protections.

**Data Centers Legislation** – Cooperative Network government relations staff had the ability to provide input on the special session data center legislation (SF19/HF16), and legislators were receptive to some of that input, but came into the session with determination to reduce state assistance and increase state scrutiny toward data centers as a rapidly growing sector of the economy in Minnesota. Key legislators were committed to repealing the existing tax exemptions for data center electricity, but strong advocacy extended the payments for sales and use tax exemptions for an additional 15 years to 2042 for data centers. Language requiring mandatory Environmental Impact Statements/Environmental Assessment Worksheets was kept out of the final bill.

**Agriculture & Broadband Finance Budget** – The bipartisan ag budget included \$3 million for infrastructure needs at First District Association in Litchfield, MN that will come as a relief to at least 600 dairy farmers who sell to FDA. It also included a compromise that will increase grain buyer and storage facility license fees. Cooperative Network members advocated for changes to reduce the impact of these fees. Legislators responded by making changes to cap cost increases in the conference process, but some amount of fee increase will still go into effect in FY2026. The bipartisan budget protected previously appropriated funds that help build and scale new cooperative development, which Cooperative Network has supported for years.



# WISCONSIN LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY

2025 was a pivotal year for the Wisconsin state legislature, marked by a rare moment of bipartisan agreement on the budget. Republicans secured a \$1.3 billion tax package aimed at middle- and working-class taxpayers, including retirees, with up to \$48,000 in retirement income exemptions and the elimination of the state sales tax on household energy bills, saving Wisconsin households \$178 million.

Meanwhile, Governor Evers celebrated the budget's wins for education and child care, with major funding increases for K-12 schools—highlighted by the largest special education reimbursement in state history—and \$330 million dedicated to expanding child care access, easing costs for families, and supporting early childhood education providers.

Cooperatives had some great wins in the state budget as well, including:

The **Cooperative Development Grant Program** through the **Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC)** was re-authorized, with **\$50,000 in funding available for cooperatives** and businesses converting to cooperative models. This ongoing support, a Cooperative Network priority, will remain a critical resource for cooperative development over the next two years.

On the **healthcare front**, the budget secured \$500 million in federal funding for BadgerCare Plus Medicaid, expanding coverage and services, particularly for mental health and substance use treatment. There's also \$100 million allocated to enhance mental health services, including crisis centers and mobile units, alongside new funding for healthcare workforce development.

Agricultural initiatives in the budget included a **\$150 million investment** in the **Agricultural Road Improvement Program (ARIP)**, aimed at repairing rural roads crucial for transporting agricultural products—a win that **Cooperative Network worked to secure**. Other key agriculture-related investments include **\$10 million for food security grants**, **\$1.2 million for dairy processing grants**, and continued support for **farmer-led watershed projects** and **nitrogen optimization research**.

Outside the budget, two major legislative debates were key for cooperatives: the **Right of First Refusal (ROFR)** for utilities and **Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs)**. **ROFR legislation** aimed to grant Wisconsin-based utilities a preferential right to build high-voltage electric transmission lines but stalled amid significant lobbying and opposition. Meanwhile, **ESOP and cooperative bills** gained traction, with **Assembly Bill 17** offering **tax incentives** to support business conversions to employee ownership models – there is still hope this bill will pass before the end of session.

On environmental issues, **PFAS legislation** progressed, but no specific PFAS bills were enacted by the end of 2025. Legislative efforts focused on setting drinking water standards and funding cleanup programs, with further action expected in 2026.

# THE PLACES WE'VE BEEN



**Cooperative Development Services  
40th Anniversary Party**



**MadWorC's Regional Rendevous**



**Minnesota Cooperative Summit**



**Wisconsin Co-op Day at the Capitol**



**National Farmers Union's College  
Conference on Cooperatives**



**WI Electric Cooperative Association's  
Youth Leadership Conference**

# MEET OUR TEAM & 2025 BOARD



**Ben Nelson**  
Executive Director



**Dawn Bausch**  
Chief Administrative  
Officer



**Rick Hummell**  
Communications  
Specialist



**Jennifer Wickman**  
Government Affairs  
Director-WI



**Bennett Smith**  
Contract Lobbyist-MN

## Executive Committee



**Sadie Frericks**  
Chair  
Land O'Lakes, Inc.



**Christa Hoffman**  
Vice-Chair  
GENEX



**Michelle Gubser**  
Secretary/Treasurer  
Allied Cooperative

## Directors



**Mike Golat**  
Eau Claire Energy  
Cooperative



**Amanda Hoefling**  
Dairyland Power  
Cooperative



**Amber Horn-Leiterman**  
Land O'Lakes, Inc.



**Jason Olsen**  
Minnesota Power  
Employees Credit Union



**Bridget Petersen**  
Blaze Credit Union



**Shawn Redman**  
Heartland Credit Union





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