



A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 
The power of human connections®

698 12th St. SE Suite 210
Salem, OR 97301

(503) 585-9988
www.oreca.org

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Case in Point

I first realized the power of the sun one hot summer day at Lake of the Woods outside of Klamath Falls when I was a kid. All day, I waved off calls to put on sunscreen. I was having too much fun.

That night, nearly 40 years ago, I suffered from severe sunstroke. I will never forget the pain.

Dealing with the sun is tricky, and Oregon's electric cooperatives have learned that firsthand. The community solar programs featured in this month's magazine are a testament to years of hard work and due diligence by the co-ops' boards and staffs.

Oregon's electric cooperatives are committed to renewable energy, as evidenced by our reliance on the federal—and renewable—Columbia River hydro system. But developing community solar projects was stepping into the unknown, with countless regulatory and financial decision points.

Would members sign up for the program? What would the business model look like? Where do we build the facility? What incentives make it more affordable for members?

These are just a sample of the issues that Central and Lane electric cooperatives grappled with as they explored potential community solar programs.

However, the programs made business sense. Ultimately, ground was broken, solar panels were set and member interest appears strong. These electric co-ops should be commended for blazing a trail for others to follow.

Blazing a trail is something we do well. I will be watching this program with interest, as will the Oregon Legislature and officials who have extolled the virtues of community solar.

Now, the sun will have to do its part. I have no doubt it will, for I witnessed its power as a boy on a lake without a shirt or a care in the world.

Please pass the sunscreen.



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Case in Point

The Oregon Legislature is in full swing, which rarely allows me the opportunity for a coherent thought, much less a pithy declarative sentence. But I do have some random observations I want to share about life in the legislature and the electric cooperative world in which I live. So here goes:

- We are fortunate to have a group of rural legislators in Salem who look out for the best interests of electric cooperative consumers. Politicians get a bum rap, but the legislators I know work hard and are there for the right reasons. I know this is a minority opinion, but I stand by it.

- This month, we will see the retirement of another electric cooperative CEO as Steve Eldrige of Umatilla Electric Cooperative retires after 44 years with UEC. We wish Steve the best in his new endeavors, and look forward to working with his successor, Robert Echenrode, who served as UEC's engineering manager. Since I took over as ORECA executive director in 2009, 11 of the 18 electric co-ops have changed managers. The generational shift is alive and well in Oregon.

- ORECA is moving its headquarters to Wilsonville. Our new address is listed at left. Come by and see our new digs, starting in mid-March.

- I am pleased to announce that ORECA's edition of Ruralite won the 2016 Haggard Award for the best rural electric co-op statewide magazine. The award honors George W. Haggard, a former statewide editor who was killed in a plane crash in 1951. I want to thank my editor, Jennifer Brown, for her outstanding work on our magazine. She is a joy to work with, and rarely yells at me when I miss yet another deadline. Congratulations to Ruralite for winning this prestigious award.



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Case in Point

I started to write this column from the gallery of the Oregon State Senate as it began debate on the most sweeping energy bill in the history of Oregon.

The bill, technically dubbed SB 1547, will double Oregon's Renewable Portfolio Standard to 50 percent for the state's investor-owned utilities and essentially end coal-fired generation in the state.

It is a complex, contentious issue not ideally suited for the 35-day short session of the Oregon Legislature. There was a fierce urgency to act to head off a more punitive ballot measure from a coalition of environmental and renewable organizations. The ballot measure—which would have affected electric cooperatives under the renewable energy credit provisions—forced the IOUs to the table according to one observer “by the tip of a bayonet.”

ORECA is neutral on the bill, but we admit it is far superior to the ballot measure. But even the most ardent supporters of the legislation concede it is the kind of legislative sausage-making they don't teach you in civics class.

New versions of the energy bill were unveiled and voted on within a blink of an eye. Sleight-of-hand parliamentary tricks were needed to keep the process alive. But it reached the final destination, the Senate floor, where I watched undermanned Republicans who oppose the bill toss out a bevy of procedural motions, all of which were defeated. SB 1547, they argued, is too costly and too controversial for the short session.

The proponents took their medicine, confident of the outcome.

Besides, there was little time to prolong the debate. The Legislature had a deadline, and speed was what mattered. The measure cleared the Senate 17-12, a landmark energy bill law passed in the legislative equivalent of the speed of light.



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Case in Point

“What do we do with the Oregon Department of Energy?”

That is the fundamental question asked this year by a Joint Interim Committee on Department of Energy Oversight. House and Senate leaders—tired of bad headlines about dysfunctional policy and a revolving door at the director’s office—decided to take a hard look at the department.

We support the decision.

The joint committee is comprised of eight superb legislators with high levels of expertise on energy issues. They are asking the right questions. We hope they examine the department’s energy supplier assessment. Like other energy providers in the state, Oregon’s electric cooperatives pay the energy supplier assessment to help pay for ODOE’s activities. We witnessed the ESA increase dramatically this past year. ORECA members who pay the assessment—or tax—often ask me, “What are our consumers getting for our money?”

It is a fair question, and one I have struggled to answer.

I am not impugning the professionals at ODOE. The department’s director, Mike Kaplan, has made a concerted effort to reach electric cooperative leaders, traveling to far-flung places in the state to listen to our concerns.

The conversations have been frank. One electric cooperative leader told him, “I’ve been in the electric utility industry for 20 years and have no idea what ODOE does for my cooperative.” Most electric cooperative leaders have never been invited to the Oregon Department of Energy office in Salem, nor have they had any interaction with those who work there. That is starting to change.

We will continue to learn more about ODOE’s activities and tell them what electric cooperatives are doing in the areas of renewable energy and energy efficiency. Meanwhile, we will engage with the Joint Committee on Department of Energy Oversight to help it make constructive decisions about the future of the department.

We enter the debate with an open mind, but are close-minded about 70 percent increases in the ESA. That policy is simply not sustainable. The department must get its costs under control and show a value proposition. Otherwise, there may not be a Department of Energy for electric cooperative leaders to someday visit.





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Case in Point

You've seen them on CSPAN at committee hearings, whispering into the ear of the member of Congress and then disappearing into the background. They are not in front of the camera, but usually toil in a workspace more appropriate for a call-center in India than for a House office building.

This month, I want to pay homage to the most important behind-the-scenes players in the legislative branch of government: congressional staff.

Last month, Oregon electric cooperative leaders participated in the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. Our timing was not ideal—Congress was out of session—but it gave us a chance to meet with legislative staff in a relaxed atmosphere and discuss important issues without the frenzy of a traditional day on Capitol Hill.

Long ago, I informed our group that while meeting with members of Congress is important, the heavy lifting is done by the underpaid and overworked Hill staff. I was once among them—a lifetime ago, it seems—a 20-something kid with more idealism than I have now and lots more responsibility than I deserved. It was the most exciting time of my three-decade career, and it gave me an appreciation of the incredible level of talent in Washington, D.C. An eager legislative aide named Paul Ryan worked down the hall from me. I'm not a bit surprised about his career trajectory.

I am always impressed with the Oregon congressional delegation staff. They are knowledgeable, ask good questions and legitimately seem interested in our issues. I know from experience that each day a revolving door of special interests comes calling for their 20-minute appointment, armed with white papers and talking points.

Then there are memos to write, calls to return and legislation to research. Buried in paper and often overwhelmed, they eventually leave for greener pastures. They will make more money off the Hill, their office several times more spacious. But few things they ever do will match those halcyon days on Capitol Hill, when a member of Congress depended on them for advice, working in government was considered cool, and all seemed possible. I always treat the staff with respect, not only out of kinship, but because one of them could be speaker of the house someday.



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Case in Point

Recently, I was having breakfast with some political operatives when, from across the table, James Carville crunched on a piece of bacon and told Karl Rove he thought Donald Trump would drop out before the convention. Going to the buffet for another cinnamon roll would have to wait. Something told me this moment wouldn't come around again.

The venue was the Cooperative Finance Corporation forum in Seattle. Later that morning, I was to moderate a breakout session with Rove. He and Carville were on the main stage early that morning, and we had to hash out last-minute details. The details didn't take long, and I found myself at a small table talking politics with arguably the two top political strategists in the country—men who rarely agree on anything.

Since my most consequential victory as a campaign consultant was for a local school board, I did something uncharacteristic. I shut up and listened. Their insights were fascinating, but it became apparent that even two men with razor-sharp political instincts—who consume polling data like I consume waffles—were as befuddled by this election as the rest of us. It is an election with enormous consequences, and I thought to myself, “If these guys can't make sense of it, what about the rest of us?”

But there was something else about their discourse that made me take note. Two men who have been known to play political hardball were engaging respectfully about an election that is roiling a deeply divided country. There was no name-calling or finger-pointing. They disagreed without being disagreeable. And then I had another thought: *If these guys can have a civil conversation about politics, why not the rest of us?*

The soundman came in the room to give the men their microphones, and my political science lesson came to an end. Their debate would continue in front of a large crowd. This time the volume was louder, their rhetoric much sharper. The crowd, of course, loved it, cheering for their guy as if they were battling in the Coliseum. But I witnessed that a civil contest between political gladiators on different sides of the aisle was possible—even if it was behind closed doors—far from the cameras and with the smell of cinnamon rolls in the air.

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Case in Point

Each year at Christmas, my wife asks for only one thing. Instead of jewelry or some other possession, she asks that I write a semi-humorous narrative about our year as a family, along with the historical context in which it takes place.

It is going to be a tough story to write this year.

These Christmas stories are not so much for my wife, but for our kids and grandkids. And if I am true to what is happening in 2016, whoever finds this narrative will think they are reading of a world gone truly mad.

Recent events are weighing heavy on all of us. Terrorist attacks, police shootings and other atrocities make it seem as if our civilization is spiraling out of control. Of course, these tragedies are often beyond our reach.

The electric cooperatives I am privileged to work for are powerless to defeat ISIS or stop madmen who ambush police officers, but they are not powerless to do their part for their communities. There are prime examples in our feature story this month of electric cooperative leaders giving back in profound ways, whether it is driving veterans to a VA hospital over icy roads or leading local organizations committed to preventing child abuse.

I am proud of the countless ways Oregon electric cooperatives and the people associated with them are trying to make their little piece of the world a better place. These efforts will not garner headlines and attention, nor are they seeking it. But it is a story that needs to be told, and one I am proud to write.

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Like many of you, I spent an excessive amount of time this summer watching the Olympics. It is a marvelous ritual, as every four years viewers across the globe obsess over obscure sporting events that we would never bother watching any other time. My family and I planned our weekend around USA women's volleyball and the sprinting exploits of Usain Bolt, and I know for a fact we are not alone.

As I watched these incredible athletes, it got me thinking about peak performance and how the electric cooperatives I represent are not much different than those who cleaned up the gold in Rio. Now, don't get me wrong, nobody from the rural electric community is going to impress you on the uneven parallel bars. That would be a sight to behold. But they do share, in their own way, an Olympian's quest to push the edge, and make the extra effort that is the difference between good and great.

A classic example is our feature story this month on Columbia Basin Electric Cooperative's initiative to locate electric vehicle charging stations in four rural communities. The communities of Ione, Heppner, Condon and Fossil may be the last places you would expect EV charging stations. That is exactly my point.

Electric cooperatives are always doing the unexpected. Great member service has always been our hallmark. I can give you countless examples from each of my members about advancements that may not have been easy, but make the difference in being up on the proverbial medal stand or simply back in the pack.

Whether it is leading the state in the deployment of community solar, smart meters or other landmark technologies, Oregon's electric cooperatives are setting the industry standard for excellence. They will not actually get invited up to the podium to receive a medal, but they will have the satisfaction knowing that each day they are striving to improve the lives of their members.

In my book, that's truly Olympian.

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Case in Point

I am a Cub Scouts den leader, and I constantly tell my boys, “Be prepared.” I, along with my rural electric cooperative brethren, would be well-advised to take this age-old advice.

The Oregon Rural Electric Cooperative Association held its second annual Director Education Conference in September. Many of the speakers outlined a future that will require a thoughtful approach for not only success, but for our own survival.

In the spirit of the Cub Scouts, I will give you a few examples of what I learned during the two-day conference.

Roger Gray, executive director for Northwest Requirement Utilities, outlined the challenges facing electric cooperatives in the 21st century, including the increasing cost of the Bonneville Power Administration, the decline of solar prices and the prospect of advanced batteries completely upending the industry. It’s a brave new energy world out there, and Gray advised electric cooperative leaders to innovate and look beyond the horizon. In other words, Gray said, don’t be afraid to blaze a new trail—as long as you bring a compass.

We also heard from Oregon political strategist Dan Lavey, who gave a master class in the evolution—or perhaps devolution—of politics in our state and on the national level. Lavey believes both parties are changed for a generation, and electric cooperatives—because of our rare placement on the political continuum—are uniquely positioned to make our case to both Republicans and Democrats.

But it is important, in Lavey’s words, to “organize, agitate and activate.” He believes, as I do, that our journey would end abruptly without being active at the ballot box and in our state capitols.

The penultimate “be prepared” moment goes to Coos Curry Electric Cooperative CEO Roger Meader and Public Affairs Director Christine Stallard. They presented a comprehensive primer about the Cascadia Earthquake and how most of us—including me—are not nearly ready for what happens after Cascadia finishes its four minutes of shaking.

There will be 10 million people in the West without power, and I need to be prepared to help. It starts with a detailed plan, along with a satellite phone.

Of course, it is important to be prepared for all sorts of eventualities. This is a serious business, and failure to do so will have major consequences.

But in truth, we can learn a lot from our Cub Scouts, too, who teach us to laugh, not take everything so seriously and that there is nothing better in the world than s’mores over a campfire.



Ted Case
Executive Director