

# Grassroots Power

When electric cooperative members decide to engage, Congress listens.

by Brenda Kleinjan

**P**OWER COMES FROM THE PEOPLE. THIS POLITICAL reality is one long recognized by those involved in cooperatives whose basic business structure relies on people working together.

That cooperation and involvement becomes even more important in the political arena.

"Today, just as it was when the very first co-op lines were going up, the underlying strength of every electric cooperative is in its members," said Ed Anderson, director of government relations for the South Dakota Rural Electric Association in Pierre, S.D.

Grassroots – the unified efforts and voices of the nation's electric co-op supporters – has proven to be the foundation of the industry's 65 years of success in serving electric co-ops, their owners and their communities.

Electric cooperatives have cultivated a reputation on Capitol Hill as a "grassroots" organization. Legislators know that electric co-op member-owners actively get involved by writing, calling and e-mailing their legislators to have their voice heard in the political process. Grassroots advocates speaking with the same voice makes a difference on Capitol Hill.

"Ask any member of Congress and I am sure you will hear that when electric cooperative members decide to engage, Congress listens. The strength of that voice has never been more important," said Anderson.

That strength is one that cooperative leaders on counting on. Since March, cooperatives have been asking their members to get involved in the national "Our Energy, Our Future" campaign which centers on three key questions related to energy: affordability, capacity and technology. So far, co-op members in South Dakota, Minnesota and Nebraska have sent in nearly 46,000 e-mails, postcards and letters to their congressional delegations on these issues.

"NRECA will continue to emphasize the "Our Energy, Our Future" campaign by focusing on the critical issue of affordability and what our elected

representatives need to keep in mind as energy and climate change policies are debated," said Glenn English, chief spokesman for the nation's electric cooperatives as head of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association in Arlington, Va..

"America has a huge energy challenge," English warns. "Now is the time to ask some tough questions and get some real answers about what our elected officials are doing to help us meet growing demand for electricity while addressing climate change goals."

## The major questions to ask elected officials and candidates for office are:

1. Experts say that our nation's growing electricity needs will soon go well beyond what renewables, conservation and efficiency can provide. What is your plan to make sure we have the electricity we'll need in the future?
2. Our country faces a crisis as electricity use increases faster than available supply. I believe that by unleashing American ingenuity we can solve this problem. What are you doing to speed the development of new technology that will allow me to have the electric power I need while meeting national climate policy goals?
3. Balancing electricity needs and environmental goals will be difficult. How much is all this going to increase my electric bill and what will you do to make it affordable?

"For elected officials who are friends of electric cooperatives, the "Our Energy, Our Future" campaign gives them added strength to continue to fight for us. And for those who do not share our commitment to affordability and consumer advocacy, this grassroots campaign puts them on notice that we are a force to be taken very seriously," said English.

English is not alone in his view of the importance of member involvement.



# Our Energy, Our Future

## A Dialogue With America

“When co-op members get involved, they make sure that rural values are brought to the conversation,” said Mark Glaess, general manager of the Minnesota Rural Electric Association in Maple Grove, Minn. MREA represents the interests of that state’s electric cooperatives both in the statehouse in St. Paul, Minn., and in Washington, D.C.

To the west, Traverse Electric Cooperative manager Clayton Halverson brings a unique perspective to the issue. After 21 years on the co-op’s board of directors, Halverson, who farmed in South Dakota, recently became the manager of the Wheaton, Minn.,-based cooperative which serves co-op members in Minnesota and South Dakota. And, Halverson recently completed two terms representing South Dakota’s District 1 in Pierre as a South Dakota Representative.

“One of the most effective ways for grassroots involvement is through the personal contact,” said Halverson. “Every single legislator reads their e-mail on a regular basis.”

That input from local constituents is vital, he said.

“It’s real easy to get swayed by a fellow legislator presenting a bill and who is backed up by a lobbyist. But, if you get word from the folks back home on a specific issue, then you really start paying attention. The word of the folks from back home carries a lot of weight,” Halverson said.

English echoes that.

“Never underestimate the power of personal contact with your elected officials at all levels,” said English who spent 10 terms as a Member of Congress from Oklahoma before leading the nation’s electric cooperatives.

“A strong effort now to recruit consumers will also help with future legislative battles where an actively engaged citizen army will be critical to fend off the attempts of others to rush through bad policy that will hurt consumers by making electric service unaffordable and ultimately unavailable. The work we do today to prepare for these future battles will increase our chances of victory,” said English.

Grassroots has an electric co-op definition, one that reflects its importance in the industry. “Grassroots” refers to electric cooperative activists – directors, managers, employees and member-owners – who take an active role in the political

process to protect their co-op from harmful legislation and regulation, as well

as to promote the value of co-op ownership to their legislators.

Grassroots involvement can mean communicating with local, state and federal legislators on issues affecting electric cooperatives. It also can mean efforts by co-op supporters through the Action Committee for Rural Electrification® (ACRE®) to help candidates who want to protect electric cooperatives and co-ops’ mission.

### Taking action

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association’s Political Action Committee, ACRE, was formed in 1966 with the mission of making the voice of rural electric cooperative consumers heard in the United States Congress. Currently, ACRE is among the Top 100 largest PACs in the nation with more than 32,000 individuals contributing.

ACRE is truly a grassroots PAC with the average

annual contribution about \$41. When a federal contribution is made, it is done with a personal visit from a cooperative representative.

The primary purpose of ACRE is to advance the legislative goals of electric cooperatives across the country. ACRE makes campaign contributions to candidates for Congress who support electric cooperative goals, who share electric cooperative values and who want electric cooperatives to be successful. In some states where a statewide association chooses and state law allows, a portion of each federal ACRE contribution is returned to that state to assist state and local candidates who support electric cooperatives.

ACRE is meeting these challenges by raising personal, voluntary contributions from NRECA’s membership. In fact, with the recent launch of the ACRE Co-op Owners for Political Action program, we can now involve cooperative consumer-members across the nation in ACRE. NRECA chief executive officer Glenn English has set a long-term goal of reaching 100,000 ACRE members.

