

# F E R G U S

## FEATURES

Member Newsletter ♦ Fergus Electric Cooperative, Inc., Lewistown, MT

## On-site meetings help engineers design projects to accommodate customer needs

Story and photos  
by Judy Bryne

“Nothing new happens around here without us,” claims Guy Johnson of Fergus Electric Cooperative. Along with Monte Obert, Johnson is a staking engineer.

“We take the initial call, meet with the customer on-site, determine how best to meet their needs, and design the project,” Johnson explains. “Then we turn things over to the crews. Our job is to get things ready to build.”

Johnson, a Lewistown native, has worked at Fergus Electric for over 20 years. After graduating from Fergus High School, he enrolled at Montana Tech in Butte. Next, he landed in Nevada working in a gypsum mine and wallboard plant. Three years later, when a reduction in force cost his job, his father encouraged him to apply for an opening at Fergus Electric.

“My dad, uncle, and brother Steve all worked for Montana Power, so I guess we kind of have electricity in the blood,” he laughs. “I like what I do, live where I want to live, and most of the bills get paid on time.”

Johnson enjoys outdoor activities, especially at the family cabin, but he likes to play indoors as well, shooting pool. His wife Dawn, who works at Montana Paint and Glass, cheers him on.

This marks Monte Obert’s sixth year



*Guy Johnson says that typically an engineering project lasts about a week from first contact to turning it over to the crews. However, there are exceptions. One job lasted almost six months.*

with the Co-op. A Roberts native, he earned a degree in general engineering from Montana Tech and came to Lewistown when he was hired at Fergus Electric. He also works part-time in drafting and design for Spika Welding.

Recently, Obert moved his young family to Hobson. With two girls involved in school activities and one still at home, he has little time for his own interests. Wife Barbie looks after their four-year-old while getting their household settled. Coming from a farm and ranch background as he does, Obert eventually hopes to run livestock on his land.

While their backgrounds differ, both men love working in the field. They appreciate having a job split evenly

between outdoor and indoor work. “If it’s nice outside, the girls in the office know we’re gone,” Johnson laughs.

“There is no single way to install a power line, so we work together trying to accommodate the customer,” he continues. “For instance, we position power poles off the corner of a house. We don’t want a pole right outside the kitchen window. We can also run lines underground if the customer prefers. That usually costs about 50 percent more, however, and our goal is efficiency and cost savings for our members.”

Typically, an engineering project lasts about a week, from first contact to turning it over to the crew.

Some projects take longer. “The highway project west of Lewistown was kind of strange,” says Johnson. “The new bridge placement affected the Glengarry substation, and we had to relocate about two and a half miles of utility line. That job lasted about six months.”

In addition to laying out the plans, Johnson and Obert collect the fees and complete the paperwork involved with each new installation. This might include working with several state, local, and federal agencies. Some projects require clearances from the Department of State Lands, the Forest Service, or the Bureau of Land Management, for example.

“Our job includes everything from

*Continued on page 5*

# MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Scott Sweeney



## Budget 2010

For 2010, we reduced the co-op capital budget by 20 percent, slightly over \$1 million, from \$5.16 million to \$4.09 million. This decrease includes cutting back on replacing trucks and reducing our budgeted junk pole replacements from 850 in the past year to 600 poles in 2010.

Stabilizing electric rates is very important to the Board of Trustees and they believe that keeping rate increases to a minimum is a primary goal. The co-op's employees and trustees will work together to keep expenses down

throughout 2010.

Please keep in mind that certain expenditures are beyond our control. We watch the weather reports and Washington, D.C., to get the latest forecasts for the days ahead. We, then, make preparations for any changes coming our way all the while doing what we can to keep expenses to a minimum. Heavy, damaging, spring snowstorms can be costly. Likewise, carbon taxes and other political issues might turn out to be expensive.

I sincerely hope that we have plenty of moisture and that the farmers and ranchers receive fair prices for their labors, that Express Pipelines continues pumping oil at the two pumping stations that we serve, and that Signal Peak Coal Mine expands and has a productive year mining coal.

As spring approaches, I am looking forward to a good year for the co-op and all of the members that we serve.

## Highwood Generating Station

While the Highwood Generating Station has required patience, positive progress is being made on finalizing the financing for Phase 1 – a 40 MW natural gas-peaking plant.

## Roundup crew

Seventy-five miles from Fergus Electric's Lewistown headquarters, four dedicated employees report to work each weekday at the cooperative's satellite office in Roundup.

Assistant line superintendent Don Criswell directs operations and oversees the three-man line crew. Line foreman Dean Lawler, service lineman Richard Anderson and apprentice lineman Tyler Hodge work hard to provide quality service to all of our members in the Roundup, Ryegate, Lavina and Musselshell areas.

I compliment our fine crew in Roundup. These four men rely on one another – building line, restoring outages and meeting member's electrical requirements.



Don Criswell



Dean Lawler



Richard Anderson



Tyler Hodge

## Power surge protection

By Line Superintendent Dale Rikala

With advancements in technology, everything from ovens to clothes washers contains some form of electronic equipment.



Although, today's products are more efficient than products of the past, electronics are more vulnerable to damage by power surges.

Even with Fergus Electric's aggressive maintenance plan, power surges will still affect your home. A power surge is a type of electrical power disturbance. Power surges occur for a variety of reasons, the most common being lightning.

Surge suppressors provide the greatest protection against damage to your electronic equipment. There are many different products to choose from ranging from whole-house surge protection to individual plug-in devices. If you own a computer, you may be interested in purchasing a combination surge suppressor/battery backup unit. In the case of a power interruption, the battery backup prevents the loss of unsaved information on your computer.

Fergus Electric sells a surge protector that safeguards the whole house. In addition to installing whole-house surge protection, I recommend that you also install individual surge protectors on electronic equipment. There is a snowballing effect associated with surge protection; more arrestors equal more protection.

If you have any questions, please contact me from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday – Friday at 406-538-3465.



Examples of surge protectors are (L) Surge protector with battery backup and (R) Whole house surge protector.

# Engineers

Continued from page 3

tromping through ankle-deep manure to striding through the halls of the Legislature.”

Although the landowner normally acquires any necessary easements, both agree this can be the hardest part of their job. Prior to 1979, Fergus Electric filed no easements with the County Courthouse. The forms were collected, but the process is much more complex today.

Now, Johnson and Obert ask co-op members to practice a good neighbor policy. Talking with neighboring landholders one-on-one usually results in rapid easement acquisition. Once the easement is gained, it allows both ingress and egress to the line forever.

Since Obert's arrival, his biggest task has been getting the maps into the AutoCad system. “This requires continual updates,” he says, “but the linemen now have a working set of maps on laptops they carry in their trucks.” This mapping system helps crews pinpoint an outage and restore power quickly.

Besides direct customer service, these engineers also help educate consumers. Publications they provide help members monitor their usage and determine how to improve energy efficiency. “We almost always recommend that people tighten up the house to control energy loss,” Johnson explains. “Using a timer on your head-bolt heater is one of the best things you can do. Those 1500-watt heaters use a lot of electricity if they're plugged in overnight.”



*A project that Monte Obert is working on is mapping the cooperative's system on AutoCad – a program used by both office personnel and linemen. It requires continual updates.*

Johnson also responds to inquiries about wind and solar energy and stays current on issues surrounding renewable energy sources. He receives numerous calls from individuals interested in wind turbines, but he says most are not economically feasible for small-scale residential use. If someone is considering wind power, he recommends doing a lot of homework beforehand.

“I tell them to get an anemometer and measure their wind speed at their proposed site for about a year. It seems like the wind blows every day, but that isn't the case. Even the Judith Gap Wind Farm only operates at optimal efficiency about 35 percent of the time.”

Both Johnson and Obert welcome customer calls and strive to provide the best solution to every request. “If we don't get it right, the crews can't do their job.”

## Construction work completed in 2009

In 2009, 4.70 miles of overhead line, 0.12 miles of secondary services and 5.02 miles of primary underground line were built for new customers. Sixty-eight new services were added to the system.

Of the 68 meters connected, 28 were new homes, two were for new cabins, six were for stock wells, five were for ranch outbuildings, three were for new irrigation pumps, eight were for operations associated with the Signal Peak coal mine, five were for a natural gas pipeline and pumping stations, three were for Disaster Emergency Services radio sites, two were for new businesses and six were for miscellaneous telecom and other seasonal and small loads. The meters included 12 new customers relocating from out-of-state.

New poles replaced 424 junk poles in the Grass Range, Heath, Nihill, Roundup and Glengarry areas. To eliminate a hazardous tree problem in the White Sulphur area, 4.03 miles of overhead line was replaced with underground line.

The installation of Turtle® meters continued in the Roundup, Musselshell, Lavina and Glengarry substations areas.

With nearly 66,000 poles on Fergus Electric's system, an active pole replacement program is paying great dividends in customer reliability and system integrity.

*Statistics compiled by Guy Johnson and Monte Obert.*

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# Wellness program important to co-op employees

As a member-owned organization, Fergus Electric's employees work hard every day to make their customer's best interests a priority. But that dedication and commitment begins with the employees themselves. The POWER Program, Priority On Wellness Equals Results, offered by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, focuses on health and wellness in the workplace. During a recent Wellness Day, Fergus County health nurse Judy Harrison (center) conducted blood pressure checks. Fergus employee Susan Hinkley (left) had her blood pressure taken while Janine Rife-Didier (right) recorded her readings.



## How to estimate your home electronic energy use

If you're trying to decide whether to invest in a more energy-efficient appliance or you'd like to determine your electricity loads, you may want to estimate appliance energy consumption.

**You can use this formula to estimate an appliance's energy use:**

Wattage x Hours used per day x Days used per year ÷ 1,000 = Kilowatt-hour (KWH) consumption per year.

**For example:**

Personal computer (120 Watts) and monitor (150 Watts): (120 Watts + 150 Watts) x 4 hours per day x 365 days per year ÷ 1,000 = 394 KWH/year.

Then, calculate the annual cost to run an appliance by multiplying the KWH

per year by Fergus Electric's rate per KWH consumer.


394 KWH x 0.1136 (FEC current rate) = \$44.76 per year.


You can usually find the wattage of most appliances stamped on the bottom or back of the appliance, or on the nameplate. The wattage listed is the maximum power drawn by the appliance. Since many appliances have a range of settings (hair dryers), the actual amount of power consumed depends on the setting used at any one time.

**Here are some examples of the range of nameplate wattages for various household appliances:**

- Clothes washer = 350-500 watts
- Clothes dryer = 1,800-5,000 watts
- Dishwasher = 1,200-2,400 watts (heat drying feature increases energy use)
- Hair dryer = 1,200-1875 watts
- Microwave oven = 750-1,100 watts
- Personal computer Monitor (awake/asleep) = 150/30 or less, Laptop = 50 watts
- Refrigerator (frost-free, 16 cubic feet) = 725 watts
- Televisions
  - 27-inch = 113 watts
  - 36-inch = 133 watts
  - 53-to61-inch projection = 170 watts
  - Flat screen = 120 watts
- Water heater (40-gallon) = 4,500-5,500 watts





Your Touchstone Energy® Partner 

### FOR OUTAGES

**First:** Check the fuses or breakers in the building in which the electricity is off.

**Second:** Check the breaker below the meter.

**Third:** If electricity is still out, call a neighbor to see if they have electricity.

**Fourth:** Call **406-538-3465** day or night or:

Dale Rikala .....	406-538-5192
Guy Johnson .....	406-535-5132
Scott Sweeney .....	406-538-7218
Don Criswell (Roundup) .....	406-323-3426
Monte Obert .....	406-538-9705

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