

F E R G U S

FEATURES

Member Newsletter ♦ Fergus Electric Cooperative, Inc., Lewistown, MT ♦ www.ferguselectric.coop

A Helping Hand

Peak Season Labor brings workers to farmers, ranches

Story and photos by Charlie Denison / Contributing Writer

Twelve years ago, after selling their advertising business in Bozeman, Diane Thibeault and her husband, Mark, were ready for a change. They took a job south of Ennis assisting with Sun West Ranch.

"There was a shepherd there from Peru, working with 1,600 sheep," Diane said. "We took him under our wing. He asked me for help finding another job, then his brother needed a job, and his brother-in-law needed a job. I started calling ranchers and calling every place I could think of to help them. Then one day I just said, '(that's) it. I'm just going to do it.'"

Diane was soon turning her idea of helping workers find employment into a new career.

"I didn't even really think of it as starting a business early on, I was just following my heart," she said.

Right away Diane was busy, as she found herself placing foreign and native-born workers at U.S. farms and ranches. Before she knew it, Peak Season Labor (PSL) was born, an enterprise that works with the Department of Labor and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services to attain temporary seasonal H-2A workers.

Currently, Diane places workers in 12 states around the West, including Montana. Workers primarily come

from Mexico, Peru, New Zealand and South Africa.

"South African workers are becoming more common because they speak English," Diane said.

How does it work?

Peak Season Labor consists of two parts, Diane explained, as they do the paperwork required to get the workers to their employers and also handle the recruiting aspect.

At this time, PSL has approximately 150 clients, a number that continues to rise. This being the case, Diane relies on help from partners Naomi Leifson and Ruth Boedecker.

"Naomi is an instrumental person on our team, handling much of the work involving the Department of Labor," Diane said. "We met when she was working for the Job Service in Polson. She was going to send someone over for me to interview, and I told her, 'really, I need someone who can speak Spanish,' and she said, 'I can speak Spanish.' She quit her job the next day and has been with us ever since."

Boedecker, a longtime family friend of the Thibeaults, primarily handles the Homeland Security particulars. She started working for PSL two years ago, and has enjoyed the new challenge.



A Peruvian shepherd works on the Sun West Ranch south of Ennis, where Diane and Mark Thibeault came up with the concept of Peak Season Labor (photo courtesy of Diane Thibeault)

"I was ready for a change and kept squawking in Diane's ear about it," she said, laughing. "That's how I got here."

Boedecker said she couldn't be happier with the new position, as she admires what Diane does and is honored to be part of the team.

"I think Diane has set a standard for going above and beyond to take care of her clients," she said.

This standard emphasizes recruiting, as Diane is a certified recruiter through the Department of Labor. She takes a lot of pleasure in traveling and is amazed by the interest expressed in PSL when she's abroad.

"When I go to Mexico and Peru, just about everybody wants to come here," she said. "One time I was at a wedding in Peru and guys were lining up to talk to me."

Mark is amazed by how warmly Peru has received Diane and PSL.

"The American consulate in Peru ended up bringing Diane in to sit and

Continued on page 5



MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Scott Sweeney

Congratulations to Jim Richter

Four decades of working in a career as lineman and foreman ended on January 25, 2020, as Line Foreman Jim Richter officially retired. Quite an accomplishment, Jim! I wonder how many power outage callouts you responded to since you began work on May 5, 1980. I know that during the years you have worked on



Jim Richter

many, many outages, and have restored power in all types of weather conditions – bundling up to work in 40-degrees-below-zero days and nights, with a howling wind speed of 40 mph, to the other extreme of working in 100-degree days with not a whisper of wind! Lightning storms, tornadoes, hail, microbursts and even the occasional outage on a sunny 70-degree day with our Montana weather at its finest! You've experienced it all!

Both Jim and I were hired in the early days of Dick Peck being the general manager of Fergus Electric Cooperative. Jim and his wife Jeane moved here from North Dakota, and quickly made the transition and settled into enjoying living in central Montana, and raising their two daughters here.

I have enjoyed working with Jim since his arrival at the co-op in 1980, and I admit that it is quite hard for me to believe that he and I have been privileged to work at Fergus Electric for 40 years. Amazing! They say that time flies when you're having fun, and I guess in this case it's true!

When Jim first started his job at

Fergus Electric as a young lineman in his 20s, he was taught by the co-op's senior linemen of the day – Slim Wise, Lynn Rector, Norman Rikala, Wally Schedel, Clarence Ingalls, Kenny Wise and Merril Klakken, and in the amazing circle of life, since that time, Jim has done his part to share his years of first-hand knowledge, helping to teach oodles of younger linemen the nuts and bolts of the trade!

I greatly appreciated Jim's willingness to tackle tough jobs and his willingness to go on outage calls. Many times, I have called Jim and asked if he could go out, and prior to his last couple years as senior lineman, his response was nearly always YES! Jim, thank you for your dedication and commitment to excellent service for all the members of Fergus Electric Cooperative.

We all wish you the very best in your well-deserved retirement. Happy fishing. We hope you catch the biggest walleye! We all want to wish both you and Jeane a very happy retirement having fun with the grandkids and taking pleasure in simply enjoying the day!

Employees work to provide the best service

Last month I told you that I want to provide an overview of all the superb employees at Fergus Electric who work hard to provide top-notch electric service to the membership. This month, I am putting the spotlight on the co-op's foremen, servicemen, serviceman/meter tech and transformer repairman.

Dean Lawler is the Roundup foreman and Richard Anderson is the Roundup serviceman. Dean began working at the co-op in 1991, as an apprentice lineman then journeyman lineman in Lewistown,

and after a period was promoted to his current position as foreman, putting him in charge of the Roundup line crews. Hired in 1989 as an apprentice lineman in Roundup, Richard has received promotions during his career, culminating with his promotion to serviceman.

Lewistown's foremen are Louie Hould, who joined the co-op as a lineman in 2001, and Tyson Ruff, who began working at the co-op as an apprentice lineman in 2004. Lewistown's serviceman is former lineman Ryan d'Autremont, hired in 1999. Brian Godbey, who was hired in 2001 as a lineman, is the co-op's serviceman/meter tech. Mark Schwomeyer was hired as an apprentice lineman in 2011, became a journeyman lineman, and worked in that position until September 2019, when he was promoted to transformer repairman.

The co-op's foremen, servicemen, meter tech/serviceman and transformer repairman work very hard to coordinate with the line crews, line superintendents and engineers to construct new services in a timely manner. Their jobs come with a lot of responsibility. They make sure power outages are restored as quickly as possible while keeping our members, linemen and themselves safe. They are responsible for the maintenance of our power lines, i.e., power line equipment, pole replacements, tree trimming, etc. Prior to their current positions, each of these employees worked as a journeyman lineman for years. They have a wealth of knowledge, skill and ability that they bring to their jobs. I applaud and thank them for the excellent work they do to provide great service to all of the co-op's members!



Helping Hand

Continued from page 3



A South African employee works cattle on a ranch out West.



Diane Thibeault, right, and Ruth Boedecker operate Peak Season Labor from Lewistown. Diane and her husband Mark started the company to help farmers and ranchers find reliable help.

talk with their board, and, since then, Diane has established a heck of a relationship with those people," he said.

"What surprised me was the consulate told me I was the first agent to come see them," Diane added.

Despite the success, Diane said there are still many challenges when it comes to recruiting, communication being at the forefront.

"So many of the workers are Spanish speakers, and I have to use a translator," she said. "Fortunately, Naomi speaks fluent Spanish, and we have a gentleman in Miles City who also speaks fluent Spanish and conducts many of the interviews."

A juggling act

One of the hardest things about the job, Boedecker said, is having "so many balls in the air."

"There is a certain point in the process where you have a five-day response period, and if you don't have your ducks in a row it gets to be a little hairy," she said.

There is much attention paid to

matching workers and employers. This is done with much consideration and with respect to American applicants, as U.S. residents are top priority for available jobs.

"This is not a program to take jobs away from U.S. workers," Boedecker said.

"We are very much pro hiring U.S. workers," Diane added, "But in these 12 states we serve we hear the same thing: that they cannot find reliable help."

This is particularly the case on the Hi-Line and in eastern Montana, where many potential workers are taking jobs in the oil industry.

Why the Shortage?

According to Mark, "Farmers and ranchers are sending their kids off to educate them and not a lot of them are returning."

Furthermore, as farm and ranch properties expand, they are "harder and harder to operate," and machines can't do it all.

The Thibeaults and others affiliated with PSL take pride in their work and enjoy working hands-on with the employers and the workers every step of the way.

"We care about the employers, and we care about the workers," Diane said. "Some of the workers have even become like family."

PSL hires shepherders, livestock workers, irrigators, farm-equipment



Jaco Taute of South Africa is one of hundreds of workers Peak Season Labor has placed on a farm or ranch around the Western United States. | PHOTO COURTESY OF DIANE THIBEAULT

operators and nursery workers. Workers can stay and work as long as their visas allow, which is mainly late winter through late fall, except shepherders, who come for three years. The application process takes up to three months before workers are on the ground. Interested employers are encouraged to plan ahead.

Diane anticipates continued growth, as the need for more workers continues to increase. She plans to keep going with PSL as long as the need is there, and as long as she continues to enjoy it.

For more information, go to www.peakseasonlabor.com.

Nominating Committee Seeks Candidates

Annual Meeting set for June 4

In accordance with Section 4.3 of Fergus Electric Cooperative's bylaws, the committee for selecting board candidates has been appointed and will meet this month.

In addition to candidates selected by the committee, any 15 or more members acting together from District 2 or District 4 may make other nominations by petition not less than 30 days prior to the annual meeting. Such nominations are to be posted where the committee list is posted. No other method of nominating candidates for trustees is permitted.

Directors serve a term of three years and are elected by ballot at the annual meeting of the membership.

At least two candidates from District 2 (Judith Gap/Moore areas) and District 4 (Grass Range/Winnett areas) will be nominated. Candidates must have their principal residence in the district from which they are selected.

If you are interested in running for a position on the board, watch for meeting dates and places in local newspapers, or call the office (406) 538-3465 for more information.

Three Tips for Winter Safety

By Abby Berry, Consumer Content Manager, NRECA

It's no surprise that winter months bring increased potential for fire risks and electrical safety hazards. This makes sense because during the coldest months, consumers are using additional electrical devices and appliances, such as space heaters, electric blankets and portable generators.

The National Fire Protection Association estimates that 47,700 home fires occur each year in the U.S. due to electrical failure or malfunction. These fires result in 418 deaths, 1,570 injuries and \$1.4 billion in property damage annually. This winter, safeguard your loved ones and your home with these electrical safety tips from the Electrical Safety Foundation International:

1. Don't overload outlets. Overloaded outlets are a major cause of residential fires. Avoid using extension cords or multi-outlet converters for appliance connections — they should be plugged directly into a wall outlet. If you're rely-

ing heavily on extension cords in general, you may need additional outlets to address your needs. Contact a qualified electrician to inspect your home and add new outlets.

2. Never leave space heaters unattended. If you're using a space heater, turn it off before leaving the room. Make sure heaters are placed at least three feet away from flammable items. It should also be noted that space heaters take a toll on your energy bills. If you're using them throughout your home, it may be time to upgrade your home heating system.

3. Inspect heating pads and electric blankets. These items cause nearly 500 fires every year. Electric blankets that are more than 10 years old create additional risks for a fire hazard. Inspect your electric blankets and heating pads — look for dark, charred or frayed spots, and make sure the electrical cord is not damaged. Do not place any items on top of a heating pad or electric blanket, and never fold them when in use.

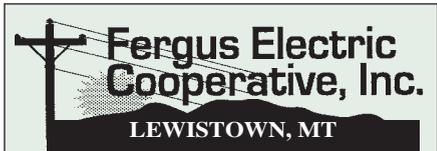
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Win a \$32.50 credit

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- Account 390794 ● Account 396598
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You will receive a \$32.50 credit on next month's statement. **Diane Cordice** of White Sulphur Springs and **Cindy Hall** of Lewistown were last month's winners! *Numbers are drawn monthly.



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Second: Check the breaker below the meter.

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

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