

F E R G U S

FEATURES

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

General Manager Scott Sweeney to retire after more than 40 years with Fergus Electric

Story and photos by Charlie Denison | Contributing Writer

IT was 1979. A 23-year-old Scott Sweeney set foot into the Fergus Electric Cooperative, Inc. office. He sat down with then-manager Dick Peck, who hired him as a staking engineer.

Sweeney had just graduated from Montana State University with a degree in civil engineering, and a



Scott Sweeney studies a map with (L) Steve Balster and (R) Dave Lankutis.

job working at Fergus Electric appealed to him, especially since his father had worked there as engineer from 1956 to 1964.

It may have been 41 years ago, but Sweeney can still picture Peck at the desk in the old office, located where the Gem Casino is today.

There was one line in particular that made the meeting so memorable.

“[Peck] told me if I memorized the specification book, I’d be the manager of this place some day,” Sweeney said, laughing. “I thought, ‘there is no way I’m going to be manager.’”

Although he didn’t completely memorize the spec. book, Sweeney knew it well enough to excel as a staking engineer. He continued to move up. In 1991, he moved to system engineer. By 1994, he was supervisor of construction, operations and maintenance. In 2004, he was promoted to assistant manager, and by December of that year he took over as general manager.

Sweeney said he enjoyed all these positions, but staking engineer was probably his favorite.



General Manager Scott Sweeney and staff are shown Fergus Electric Cooperative’s new solar array by Tony Boniface, installer.

“I loved getting out in the field and meeting the members,” he said. “I also had a great time with my co-workers. I always have. We are a small enough group where you really get to know the people like a family.”

Being manager has been a blessing, Sweeney said, albeit harder than all the other jobs he’s had at Fergus Electric.

“It’s also the most rewarding,” he said. “It’s been fun to hire younger staff and see them continue to grow with the company.”

The sense of family at Fergus Electric has never waned, Sweeney said, and its one of the elements he will miss the most.

“There is so much I’ll miss,” he said, “even the challenges – whether it’s building a new transmission line out to Hilger, switching from our old ‘turtle’ meters to our new system or restoring power.”

Most of all, Sweeney said he will miss the people.

“I’ll miss the staff and I’ll miss the

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MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Scott Sweeney

Employees keep co-op equipment operating and jobs scheduled

Jason Deffinbaugh is the cooperative's top-notch mechanic who works hard to keep all the trucks operating properly for our 14 lineworkers. One guy keeping equipment working for 14 workers!

David Dover is the cooperative's assistant general manager. I hired David as the assistant GM in February 2018, and he has been assisting me for the past two-plus years.

Last, but certainly not least, is our engineering team. Monte Obert, a Montana Tech mechanical engineer, works half-time for the co-op, mainly updating our system maps. Melanie Foran, a Gonzaga civil engineer, has been working extensively on our new metering system. Scott Olson, a Montana Tech electrical engineer, and Dan Balster, a Montana State University electrical engineer, have been staking power lines and helping to keep work scheduled for our line crews.

In summary, Fergus Electric Cooperative currently has one part-time and 28 full-time employees who are excellent workers, and they all do their best to provide the finest electrical service that the co-op can to its 3,800 members!

Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Rural electric cooperatives across the United States and across our glorious state of Montana are struggling to come up with the safest, most efficient way to operate during this pandemic. I can definitely say that during my 41 years of working at Fergus Electric, this is one of the toughest challenges we have faced. It is hard to know how to handle this invisible virus. The co-op's biggest priority is to be able to restore power outages and to keep the lights on. To do this work we need healthy linemen able to go to work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Several changes have been implemented to try to help. Our offices in Lewistown and Roundup are closed to the public. Three employees are working from home.

We are now working four days per week, Monday through Thursday, 7 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and all employees are working diligently to maintain six feet or more separation. Our after-hours answering service is now answering phones on Fridays as well as weekends and nighttime. I ask for continued patience and support from members of the cooperative, the board of directors and the employees.

We are more accustomed to dealing with thunderstorms, snowstorms and high winds than dealing with an invisible coronavirus. Still, I am confident that Fergus Electric personnel will figure out a way to work together (six feet apart) and keep the lights on for everyone!

Annual Meeting – June 4 ????

The District 2 and District 4 nominating committees were scheduled to meet on March 26 at Little Montana Café in Grass Range and Eddie's Corner Café near Moore, however on that same day Governor Steve Bullcock issued the stay-at-home order closing restaurants, etc. Representatives from each nominating committee put Plan B into effect and drove to the designated locations and sat in their vehicles in the restaurants' parking lots, with a Fergus Electric Co-op sign prominently displayed, ready to meet any co-op members from their districts who might show up and say they were interested in running for the board. No members appeared. Incumbents Brett Maxwell, District 2, and Cathy Kombol, District 4, had announced to their respective nominating committees that they were interested in running for the board again, so this year, Brett and Cathy are our two candidates for the board positions to be voted on by the membership at the 2020 Annual Meeting, scheduled for June 4th at the Fergus County Trade Center.

My gut feeling and best guess is

that the cooperative will be rescheduling the Annual Meeting to another date later in the summer or fall because of COVID-19. We will be making that decision sometime during the month. Sometimes things happen that are beyond our control. COVID-19 certainly fits that description! We are learning that even our best-laid plans are subject to change and that we must be flexible and willing to make modifications necessary to keep everyone as safe and healthy as possible. We will continue doing our best to do just that!

Temporary suspension of disconnects and late fee waiver

Fergus Electric will not disconnect any member's electric service due to non-payment while the governor's order is in place, allowing those experiencing financial challenges additional time to provide payment. Late fees will also be waived during this period.

Electric bills will not be forgiven at the end of the temporary disconnect suspension. Members should expect continued delivery of billing statements, as usage readings will continue. We are urging members to pay what they can to avoid falling behind on their account and facing a large future balance, as well as to allow Fergus Electric to continue to pay its ongoing expenses.

It is very important that you call our office at (406) 538-3465, so staff can work with you to set up a payment plan, if you are having difficulty paying your electric bill.

Congratulations to copper mine on receiving record of decision

Sandfire Resources America announced that the Black Butte underground copper mining project near White Sulphur Springs in Meagher county has received a record of decision for operating the mine. The operating permit has been issued by the Montana Department of Environmental Quality to Sandfire. The mine's CEO, Rob Scargill, said that now they are looking forward to completing the Black Butte Feasibility Study. We congratulate Rob, Todd, Jerry and Nancy on the mine clearing this hurdle and wish you much success as the mine moves forward.



Scott Sweeney staking for new FEC building.



Scott Sweeney and Melanie Foran inspect AMI equipment.



General Manager Scott Sweeney shows solar monitor data to members.

Sweeney retires

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board,” he said. “I am grateful for the employees I have underneath me who can really take care of the co-op, and I’m grateful the board has supported the employees.”

Sweeney said he’s also grateful for the members – all 3,800 and counting.

“This is their co-op,” he said. “They own it. Every member has a vote and, by paying for their monthly energy bills, they pay our wages. They are supportive and understanding, even under the worst circumstances. I will say, however, I won’t miss the calls at 2 in the morning telling me they’re out of power...when you put your home phone number in *Rural Montana* magazine, that’s what happens.”

A fourth-generation Central Montanan, Sweeney said he’s always felt connected to this community, and it means a lot to be embraced by it. Understanding the culture of the community, he said, factors into this success.

“Being a rancher helps me understand the trials and tribulations people go through around here, whether it’s the fluctuation of the price of livestock or a good hay year versus a bad hay year,” he said.

Farming and ranching have always been a passion of Sweeney’s, and he’s proud to take on the family ranch, which his great-grandfather home-

steaded in 1889. This is all the more reason why he and his wife, Vernie, plan to stay on the ranch and “enjoy many years together in retirement, ranching and visiting our children Ben, Evan and Emily.”

Married in 1981, Sweeney said he’s tremendously grateful for Vernie, as she’s always been there for him through the good times and the hard times.

“I appreciate Vernie being supportive of my job and fielding phone calls when I wasn’t home,” he said. “I also appreciate her being a sounding board. She’s very patient.”

Sweeney admits this is a strange time to be talking about retirement, as there is so much else on people’s minds with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

“My biggest concern is keeping line crews healthy so we can restore power,” he said. “We are doing our best to keep our employees safe, and we are doing our best to ensure they are able to work and provide for their families.”

Sweeney said he is also looking out for members, especially when it comes to potential financial hardships.

“I am concerned about our members being able to afford a power bill if they have lost jobs,” he said. “I’d like to see things wind down ... it’s kind of a dramatic time to be looking forward to retirement.”



Scott Sweeney prepares staking sheets for Donny Tomlin, retired Roundup foreman.

Nevertheless, Sweeney said he has no plans to change his retirement, which is set for this summer.

“The board is in the process of interviewing candidates, and they seem to be on schedule with that,” he said.

Come what may, Sweeney said he believes in the future of Fergus Electric Co-op.

“I believe Fergus Electric will keep growing,” he said. “It’s a beautiful area and people will want to continue to live here. As long as that remains the case, Fergus Electric will continue to do its part.”



Meet your board candidates

In accordance with Fergus Electric Cooperative Bylaws, Article IV, Section 4.3, the nominating committees met and elected candidates for the Board of Trustees.

In addition to the procedures set forth above, any 15 or more members acting together from the district in which a trustee is to be elected may

make other nominations by petition not less than 30 days prior to the meeting, and the secretary shall post such nominations at the same place where the list of nominations made by the aforesaid committees are posted. No other method of nominating candidates for trustee shall be posted.

Brett Maxwell – District 2

Brett Maxwell is the owner/operator of a family-owned cow/calf and hay operation. He was born and raised on the same ranch that he calls home today, nine miles southwest of Lewistown. He is a graduate of Fergus High School and has a certificate in livestock technology from Dawson Community College.



Brett Maxwell

In addition to ranch duties, Brett served eight years on the Fergus County

Fair Board, he has served as treasurer and vice president of the Fergus County Livestock Association, served on the advisory board for the Lewistown branch of the Bank of the Rockies, and is currently proudly serving his fourth term on the Moore Farmers Oil Board as secretary.

His wife Jennifer works for the State of Montana at the Office of Public Assistance. They are the parents of Megan (15), Kate (13), Thomas (11), and Emmet, aka Knute (4).

Brett says, "It is an honor to be selected for this position, and I look forward to the challenges and opportunities to broaden my horizon and to preserve this great co-op."

Cathy Kombol – District 4

Cathy Kombol has served on the Board of Directors of Fergus Electric for the past three years, and is looking forward to meeting the challenges of another term. During the past term, she successfully completed the requirements for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association Credentialed Cooperative Director.



Cathy Kombol

She and her husband Terry have lived on their family ranch since 1982,

as now the third generation to do so. They raise cattle, goats and hay. Her past work experience includes 16 -plus years at the Montana Bank in Roundup, and six years assisting two CPAs during tax season. She served on the Farm Service Agency County Committee for 23 years. Cathy also works as an advocate for the elderly, doing court-appointed guardianships since 2000.

She enjoys doing 4-H interview judging at the Roundup and Billings fairs.

Cathy and Terry have two grown sons, Casey and Bo, and two grandchildren, Tyler and Kayla. Cathy enjoys quilting and is a member of Roundup and Billings guilds.

Identify Account Number*

Win a \$32.50 credit

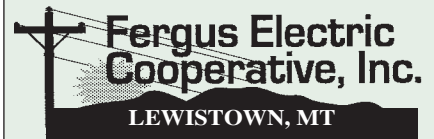
If one of the following account numbers is yours, call Fergus Electric (406-538-3465) and identify yourself and your account number.

**Account 395309 ● Account 384283
Account 318500 ● Account 319241
Account 395165 ● Account 201601**

You will receive a \$32.50 credit on next month's statement.

Joe Moline and Doug Peterschick, both of Lewistown were last month's winners.

*Numbers are drawn monthly.



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:

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Bret Ophus	406-366-7523
Scott Olson	406-366-5822
Scott Sweeney	406-538-7218
Don Criswell (Roundup)	406-366-3465
David Dover	406-366-1975
Melanie Foran	406-462-5650

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Scott Sweeney..... General Manager

David Dover..... Assistant Manager

Dale Rikala..... Operations Supervisor

Sally Horacek.....Office Manager

Janine Rife Didier..... Editor

Fergus Electric is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

District 1: Paul Descheemaeker, President, Lewistown, 428-2417

District 2: Brett Maxwell, Lewistown, 538-9002

District 3: Brad Arntzen, Hilger, 462-5555

District 4: Cathy Kombol, Roundup, 428-2202

District 5: Terry Frost, Vice President, Roundup, 323-3415

District 6: Jason Swanz, Sec./Treas., Judith Gap, 473-2462

District 7: Bob Evans, Jr., Geysers, 735-4476

Fergus Features is an award-winning newsletter.

**Fergus Electric Cooperative
Annual Meeting Thursday, June 4, 2020**