

F E R G U S

FEATURES

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



MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Carson Sweeney

AFTER a warm and open beginning, winter certainly found its way to the Lewistown area. The current snow conditions make it difficult to access our powerlines for maintenance or pole replacements. We appreciated the February moisture, and hope that March weather will be friendlier to our ranchers for the duration of calving season. Our engineers are busy ordering material and prepping for an active spring construction season with several MDT Highway relocate projects, distribution pole replacements, and mainline conductor replacement for new load growth. If you have a new electric service project in mind for 2025, I encourage you to get on the list soon.

Generac generators

This month I have exciting news for those of you who are interested in investing in a Generac generator. We recently had the opportunity to purchase Generac Generators in bulk at a reduced price to save our members even more money. We will be selling these generator packages on a first come first-served basis. The package includes a 22kW Generac Generator and a 200-amp automatic transfer switch for a purchase price of \$4,514 as compared to our standard price of \$6,153, for total savings of \$1,639. Generac generators can run on either natural gas or propane. We have several local electricians that we work with regularly to install these units for our members. If you are interested in purchasing one of these packages or are just looking to learn more about the products and setup, please contact Staking Engineer Scott Olson.

Lighting options

For decades, Fergus Electric Cooperative has provided several options for lights to illuminate driveways, corrals or calving pastures. In the last five-years, LED technology has dramatically improved the reliability and color spectrum for lights of this type. We offer monthly rental options, and we sell complete setups based on what solution is best for our

2025 is looking to be a busy year for Fergus Electric

members. If you have non-functional yard/corral lights or you are interested in adding light to an area, please stop by to speak with our Operations team. They will be able to help determine what light style best meets your needs.

Dale Rikala retirement

Lastly, I'd like to thank Dale Rikala for 33 years of service and congratulate him on his upcoming retirement. As line superintendent, Dale has been an integral member of our leadership team and is as reliable as the morning sun. Bret Ophus will soon be our new line superintendent, and we recently named Tyson Ruff as our new assistant line superintendent in Lewistown. If you happen to see any of these employees, be sure to thank them for their dedication and commitment to Fergus Electric and our membership. RM



From left, Fergus Electric Cooperative Assistant Line Superintendent Bret Ophus, Line Superintendent Dale Rikala and Assistant Line Superintendent Tyson Ruff review invoices. | **FEC PHOTO.**

Reflecting on my thirty-three-year career journey at Fergus Electric

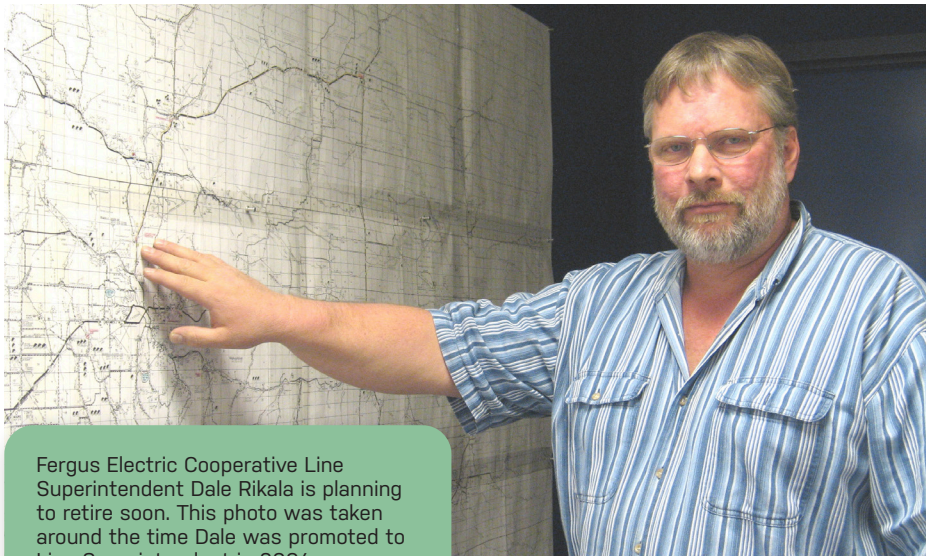
Column by **DALE RIKALA** | *Fergus Electric Line Superintendent*

I laugh when I think of how many times in the last couple of years I have been asked the question, have you retired yet? Soon, when someone asks me, I will say, “yes, I have.”

In 1984, I took my father’s advice and chose to follow in his footsteps, pursuing linework as my career. I attended the linemen course at Bismarck Junior College, located in Bismarck, North Dakota. After graduation, I sent out more than 80 applications and was hired by Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), located in Bakersfield, California. I served my apprenticeship with PG&E and became a journeyman lineman in 1989.

The Bakersfield weather was extremely hot, and the population was greater than I desired, so when my father retired from Fergus Electric, in 1992, I applied for and was awarded the open lineman position at Fergus. I worked as a journeyman lineman for 12 years, with most of my time spent on the pole-changeout crew. The crews were great to work with and we enjoyed the challenges that each day presented. Our service territory is vast and has some beautiful scenery that is all part of just another day’s work.

There was one day in January 1998 that I hope will not be just another day’s work for anyone. Our job for the day was a new service located in the foothills of the Little Belt Mountains. The day was cold. There was about six inches of snow, single-digit temperatures with sunshine and intermittent clouds. The job required a pole to be set on a sidehill. I was standing on the digger and as I started to dig the pole hole, the digger truck hit a rock and shifted itself forward, missing the outrigger pads that leveled it. The digger truck began sliding and it hit



Fergus Electric Cooperative Line Superintendent Dale Rikala is planning to retire soon. This photo was taken around the time Dale was promoted to Line Superintendent in 2004.

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The time I have served as line superintendent seems to have flown by quickly and is loaded with great memories of our talented staff that made my job seem easy.

– Dale Rikala,
Line Superintendent

”

the service pickup and pole trailer, and all the equipment started to slide down the snow-covered slope. From where I was standing, I was not able to jump off on the upside. There was only direction for me to go. I jumped off the digger on the same side that it was sliding and ran down the hill, but I stumbled

and fell in the ditch at the bottom of the hill. When all the machinery came to a stop, I was underneath the service truck with a broken hip. I was flown by helicopter from the job site to Billings, and had surgery that added three screws to repair my hip. Recovery time included six weeks off work and an additional six weeks of light duty before returning to full duty.

In 2004, Fergus Electric’s manager, Steve Balster, announced his plans to retire and said that Line Superintendent Scott Sweeney, would take the reins of the general manager’s position. As a result, I applied for and was offered the line superintendent position. This was quite a change to my workday from being outside in nature’s beauty, focusing on the task that was presented to me as a lineman, to being in the position of deciding what the linemen will do every day. I based my work schedule decisions on weather conditions, hay crops and wheat harvest, fire danger, availability of equipment, employee vacation schedules, available material



ABOVE: From left, Fergus Electric Cooperative Assistant Line Superintendent Bret Ophus, Line Superintendent Dale Rikala and Assistant Line Superintendent Tyson Ruff pose for a photo. Bret is set to take over as line superintendent when Dale retires.

BELOW: Bret Ophus, left, and Dale Rikala. Photo taken in the 1990s. | **FERGUS PHOTOS**



and unplanned outages. Other tasks on my schedule included ordering poles and material, overseeing the rotation of selling and purchasing trucks and equipment, approving purchases for fuel, poles, materials and other daily purchases. Much of my day was spent on the phone answering questions and listening to member issues. I miss being part of the line crew during storm damage restoration. The linemen are total rock stars.

A few of Fergus Electric's bigger projects that I was able to see completed include the addition of two oil pumping stations in 2005,

and Signal Peak Coal Mine in 2009. Combined, these loads make up over half of Fergus Electric's electric load. We have also seen many new services in recent years, with the highest number of connects in a single year being 154 new services in 2022. Even though it won't be from the same perspective as when I was involved in the work day-to-day, I am looking forward to future co-op projects being completed, such as the co-op replacing overhead powerlines in heavy tree areas with underground line, and the addition of the copper mine in the White Sulphur Springs area.

In more recent years, there have been improvements to the co-op that make us more efficient. Fergus Electric's mapping system is the biggest improvement. Our former mapping system was a paper map that was updated annually. Now, thanks to the effort of our engineering team, Melanie Foran, Scott Olson and Dan Balster, the maps are updated monthly, and they include valuable information such as the member's name, phone number and transformer size. Having updated mapping records is a huge time saver. I am pleased and impressed with the talent this group consistently brings to the table. I have enjoyed sharing ideas on the multitude of projects that cross their desks daily.

When I think of accomplishments, there are a couple that instantly come to mind. I am glad that the truck garage and new Roundup office and warehouse were built while I worked at the co-op. They have provided much-needed shelter and space for our trucks, equipment and materials. The Roundup employees were in such need of an improved working environment. The new facility will serve the co-op's needs for many decades to come.

The time I have served as line superintendent seems to have flown by quickly and is loaded with great memories of our talented staff that made my job seem easy. Upon my retirement, Bret Ophus will become the line superintendent and Tyson Ruff will be seated as the assistant line superintendent in Lewistown. Bret Nelleremoe, Roundup's assistant line superintendent, completes Fergus Electric's mid-management team. This group of guys share an enthusiasm for doing their best to keep electricity reliable at a reasonable cost. We have a leader in General Manager, Carson Sweeney who shares our enthusiasm for gearing our attention toward our membership and providing them with reliable power and friendly, capable service.

I appreciate how much we value our

See RIKALA, next page



Early 1990s photo. Top, (L to R) Dale Rikala, Murray Matthews, Jim Richter, Bret Ophus Bottom, (L to R) Merril Klakken, Tom Simons, Dean Lawler, (kneeling) Kenny Wise, (standing) Dave Phifer, (kneeling) Steve Balster.

RIKALA

Continued from page 7

members and how we continually work hard to communicate well with them. I have learned to listen and find something to learn from situations, even when the case does not go the way I want. Fergus Electric's membership is a true jewel, and it is my pleasure to call many of them a friend. Whether gathering information about a power outage or getting them the correct size wire and electrical parts they need for their farm projects, I truly enjoy helping our members. I have spent over half my life working at Fergus Electric with people who also come to work each day willing to do what they can to help the members of our co-op. It has been a real pleasure. I will miss the members and the employees. I will miss offering advice to members who call on me. And I will miss the excitement when the power is restored after a storm.

Given that my dad's retirement created an opening for me, by the time

I retire, there will have been a Rikala working at Fergus Electric for 60 years straight.

As I make plans for retirement, there are numerous projects waiting for me to give them some attention. I have plans to rebuild a 1959 Ford four-wheel drive, a 1964 Chevy short box, a 1978 chevy ¾ ton that has been part of the family since new, and two old Ford tractors. Some of the other projects on my to-do list include remodeling my house, building a barn, restoring old furniture and whatever else comes my way. While all the things that I want to accomplish when I retire may seem daunting, it will be enjoyable. If they all get done, fantastic, but I am not under any time constraints.

I want to give a big thank you to our membership and all the employees at Fergus Electric for your friendship and support. I have enjoyed my years as an employee of the co-op, and I am proud to be a member of Fergus Electric Cooperative. I can rest assured in knowing that I am leaving the cooperative in good and capable hands. RM

IDENTIFY ACCOUNT NUMBER*

WIN A \$34.00 CREDIT

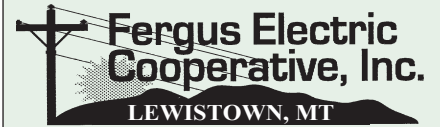
If one of the following account numbers is yours, call Fergus Electric (406-538-3465) and identify yourself and your account number, and you will receive a \$34.00 credit on next month's statement.

Account 397609, Account 396775
Account 348630, Account 398881
Account 395822, Account 398352

CONGRATULATIONS!

Jay & Janice Cota of Roundup, **John & Rita Morgan** of Lewistown and **Dan & Holly Parker** 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:

Dale Rikala	406-366-3374
Bret Ophus	406-366-7523
Bret Nellerhoe (Roundup).....	406-939-0636
Carson Sweeney	406-366-0971
Melanie Foran.....	406-462-5650
Scott Olson.....	406-366-5822
Dan Balster.....	406-366-0975

FERGUS ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.

84423 US Hwy. 87, Lewistown, MT

59457-2058

Tel: 406-538-3465

Office Hours: 7 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. M-Th.

Website: www.ferguselectric.coop

E-mail: ferguselectric@ferguselectric.coop

Facebook: www.facebook.com/ferguselectric

Carson Sweeney.....General Manager

Dale Rikala.....Line Superintendent

Sally HoracekOffice Manager

Janine Rife Didier.....Editor

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Fergus Features is an award-winning newsletter.