

F E R G U S

FEATURES

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

FERGUS ELECTRIC EMPLOYEE SPOTLIGHT

LINE SUPERINTENDENT IS WELL SUITED FOR THE JOB

Story by JANINE RIFE DIDIER | *Fergus Electric*

By the time the employees arrive for work, Line Superintendent Dale Rikala has unlocked the gates, made a pot of coffee, returned a couple of phone calls, caught up on his email and reviewed plans for the day. In the winter, you can add snow removal to the list of tasks Dale begins to work on before staff arrives. It is his nature to lighten the load for others when he can.

After graduating from Fergus High School, Dale thought he might like computer programming, so he moved to Missoula, attended Missoula Vo-Tech Center, and began learning DOS commands. It did not take him too long to realize that writing and testing code were not the right fit for him. At the time, Dale's dad, Norm Rikala, was working as a foreman for Fergus Electric Cooperative. Norm enjoyed his job and the work he did, and asked Dale if he would ever consider following in his footsteps by becoming a lineman. As a boy growing up in Lewistown, Dale saw his dad respond to outage calls through the years. Regardless of the hour or what Norm and his family were doing, when he received the call saying members were without power, it was time to



Fergus Electric Line Superintendent Dale Rikala, far right, speaks with co-op members. | **FERGUS ELECTRIC PHOTO**

go to work. He quickly gathered what he needed, grabbed a jacket or his coat, and out the door he went in response to the call. Dale knew that his dad enjoyed the friendships with his coworkers, and that they all took pride in their work. He knew that his dad made a decent living and felt good about the career he had chosen.

Given his deep respect and admiration for his dad, Dale acknowledged that he was ready for a change. His dad's influence guided him to make the decision to enroll in lineman school.

As a young apprentice lineman, Dale landed a job with Pacific Gas

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MANAGER'S MESSAGE

From Carson Sweeney

THE heavy moisture that we received in late June and early July seemed to disappear as quickly as it arrived. Similarly, Fergus Electric Cooperative had a full schedule of new service installations to complete in July, and with the arrival of August, new construction requests came to a halt. I suppose the increases in interest rates and inflation have finally started to slow things down.

With the decrease in new service requests, we are taking the opportunity to complete line maintenance on our powerlines. We have our crews trimming trees throughout the service territory, while other crews are fixing maintenance items identified from recent aerial drone inspection footage. We are impressed with the quality of video and level of detail our drone operator provides to our linemen. Line maintenance is targeted to decrease the risk of fire, improve system reliability and increase the longevity of our vast electric system.

We are already in the process of building preliminary capital and expense budgets for 2023. Our capital investments in 2023 are expected to be above normal as we begin construction of a new 24-mile 50 kilovolt transmission line to Winifred, as well as breaking ground for the new shop/office facility in Roundup. Our operations team and I recently interviewed several general contractors who are interested in this building project. Our goal is to select a firm that is trustworthy, reliable and professional. We look forward to partnering our design team with the general contractor to provide our membership with a facility that will last multiple generations.

We are constantly working to maintain and improve the co-op's complex electric system that has been built across the last 84 years. I am proud of the effort our teams put forth, and I have no doubt that you will be impressed with our small group of 29 employees. I would encourage you to stop by sometime, say hello, and check in on our progress. RM

WORKING TO MAINTAIN THE CO-OP'S COMPLEX ELECTRIC SYSTEM



Groundman Dylan Rickman holds a handline while Lineman Andrew Reuterskiold (on pole) removes the ground in preparation for energizing the powerline on a new service in the Roundup area. | **FERGUS ELECTRIC PHOTO**

Labor Day CLOSURE

Fergus Electric Cooperative's offices in Lewistown and Roundup will be closed Monday, September 5





Bret Nellermoe, left, was promoted to fill the Roundup assistant line superintendent position, held by Don Criswell, who retired.



Bret Ophus wears many hats in his role as assistant line superintendent. | **FERGUS ELECTRIC PHOTOS**

RIKALA

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and Electric (PG&E), a large power company in California. Dale found that he liked linework and was good at his job. He also learned a great deal about the industry. However, the weather was hot, the work was hard, and the bosses were both hard and tough. Dale says on those occasions when he may want to grumble about having a tough day, he is quick to remind himself how good he has had it at Fergus Electric for the last 30 years.

In 1992, Norm told his son that he planned to retire and there would be a job opening at the co-op. He suggested Dale send his application to Fergus Electric, if he was ready or wanted to return to Montana. Dale was ready and, once again, he followed his dad's advice. Line Superintendent Steve Balster thought that if Norm's son were anything like his dad, hiring Dale would be a wise decision. Dale happily accepted the offer and, in November 1992, the proverbial baton was handed from father to son. The co-op was bustling, and Dale joined the team building new powerline, changing out poles, trenching underground wire and, just like his dad, Dale responded to power outages with the same commitment his dad had throughout his years as a lineman. "Our first



Dale Rikala helps with fire cleanup. | **FERGUS ELECTRIC PHOTO**

priority is to get the members' power restored," Dale said.

In 2004, Dale was promoted to his current position as line superintendent. Although he really enjoyed his years working as a lineman, he met the challenge of his new job with enthusiasm and interest. The 12 years he spent working as a Fergus Electric lineman helping to maintain the co-op's expansive service territory have been a huge benefit to Dale in his role as line superintendent. When he talks to the crews and the engineers about the different jobs they have scheduled, he can picture the area

and the powerline. He knows if they will be dealing with big rocks, gumbo, bogs, hayfields, and steep or sloped terrain. When the crews say they need to change out a pole at French's, Gacke's or Gliko's, Dale is familiar with each area, and can discuss any additional safety measures or material requirements that they may need to consider.

It used to be that sending out crews might mean you would not hear from them for hours. Dale said that keeping the line crews and engineers safe is of the utmost importance, and he very much appreciates the improvement in the communication equipment the co-op uses. When Dale first started working as a co-op lineman, there were many areas where the two-way truck radios did not work, and communication was even less dependable during his dad's career.

When it was stormy, the line superintendent during that time took it on faith that the crews were working safe and would heave a sigh of relief when the radio call finally came in from the crew saying they had finished and were back in an area where they could communicate.

Dale said staying connected has not been an issue for years, thanks to the co-op's satellite radio system the crews can stay in contact with

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Fergus Electric Co-op posts list of unclaimed capital credits

FERGUS Electric Cooperative, headquartered in Lewistown, issued capital credit refund checks in October 2021 for the years 1995-1997. Fergus Electric has posted the list of returned unclaimed capital credits on our website at www.ferguselectric.coop and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ferguselectric. Please contact Erika at 406-538-3465 with information regarding any of the people listed. RM

RIKALA

Continued from previous page

headquarters during the day. After hours when they are out restoring outages, they can radio into the after-hours service center from pretty much anywhere on the system. Plus, cell-phones work in more areas now, too.

Dale said that he sees the co-op as having a positive work culture and he likes that it makes a continuous effort to improve service to the membership. He stated that in recent years, the co-op has implemented changes to streamline the workflow to better meet the needs of the membership.

In 2018, Bret Ophus transitioned from his foreman position to assistant line superintendent. Bret's promotion allowed him to take on new responsibilities and a variety of new tasks, which is helpful to Dale to have someone else in the role who knows and understands the obligations and duties of the job. In 2021, Don Criswell announced he was retiring from being the assistant line superintendent in Roundup. To fill the position, Dale promoted foreman Bret Nellerhoe to supervise the line crews and direct the work in the Roundup area. Like Rikala and Ophus, Mr. Nellerhoe is well suited for the job and is an asset to the co-op.

Dale is pleased to have competent, experienced teammates. Their qualifications and knowledge are as important as their skills and attitudes. The role of line superintendent is diverse. The co-op serves more than 4,000 members in 14 counties. The

transmission, overhead and underground powerlines that the operations staff monitor stretch across approximately 4,000 miles. Of the co-op's 29 employees, Dale is one of 15 who are members. They look at things from the perspective of both a co-op member and a co-op employee, which is a benefit to the co-op's management.

When asked about renewable energy projects or projects in general, Dale said, "We installed two solar arrays in recent years: a standard ground-mounted solar system and a rooftop installation that the members own, and the co-op maintains. As for other projects, we are all looking forward to the construction of the new shop and office building in Roundup that the membership approved during the 2022 annual meeting, and the co-op has plans to build a new transmission line between Hilger and Winifred. The co-op added 112 members from June 2021 to June 2022," Dale said. "New members mean we have had a lot of new services to build. It's been a challenge for our material vendors to fill and deliver our orders with the shortages the suppliers are experiencing, but we are managing. Hopefully, the supply shortages will begin to ease."

Dale arrives early to work and looks forward to his day. He knows the schedule is full, but he also knows that he supervises 21 reliable and dependable employees who will arrive prepared to put in a full day's work. He enjoys his staff, the work and the members, and he is grateful he took his dad's advice 38 years ago to follow in his footsteps. RM

IDENTIFY ACCOUNT NUMBER*

WIN A \$32.50 CREDIT

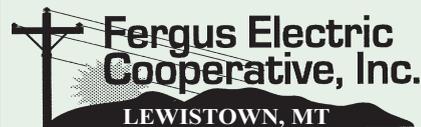
If one of the following account numbers is yours, call Fergus Electric (406-538-3465) and identify yourself and your account number and you will receive a \$32.50 credit on next month's statement.

**Account 366438, Account 319550
Account 396935, Account 396169
Account 396785, Account 390394**

CONGRATULATIONS!

Kimberly Hansen of Hilger was last month's winner!

*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

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