

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) is the national organization for electric cooperatives serving members in 47 states from coast to coast that includes Alaska and Hawaii. They provide coordinated medical benefits, 401Ks, retirement plans and life insurance products for literally thousands of employees. For individual cooperatives and the members they serve, NRECA provides education, marketing tools, training, research and legislative support.

The legislative support is assisted by a political action committee called ACRE. ACRE stands for Action Committee for Rural Electrification. All of the funds it receives come out of the pockets of electric cooperative employees, directors and in some areas electric cooperative members can make contributions. It is a grassroots PAC that can't accept checks from electric cooperatives. ACRE doesn't have endless millions like some of the larger PACs in Washington but it does have a track record of being very effective with small, targeted donations distributed by dedicated NRECA employees passionate about the cause of rural electrification and keeping rates affordable.

NRECA has more than 700 employees nationwide and is governed by a cooperative representative from each of the 47 states served by its member cooperatives. Some of the national board members are directors at their local electric cooperative and others are General Managers like me.

Recently, I was fortunate enough to be elected to represent Michigan on this national board of directors and general managers. While this does mean some weekends away from family and also some days out of the office, more importantly it means that Michigan has a seat at the table and a voice in setting policy at the national level.

We are entering an era of change and rising prices in the electric industry. The global warming debate is over and now we must focus on how to lower our carbon dioxide emissions while keeping rate increases to a minimum. In a nut shell, we must add more renewable energy, balance it with increases in nuclear power, build cleaner coal plants, encourage people to conserve, educate others on using electricity efficiently, develop new technology AND deliver you a bill that you can afford. As you can imagine, all sides are lobbying for their respective issues and agendas. The electric cooperatives need to be united and at the head of the table now more than ever.

The electric cooperative issues and agendas all flow through the 47 member board and out to the 700 employees who handle the day-to-day tasks of this huge undertaking. Debate, discussions and disagreements are hammered out in the NRECA hallways, committee meeting rooms and ultimately the national board table. After two meetings now, it has been very refreshing to discover that there are few predetermined outcomes. The board truly has open discussion, staff does listen to suggestions and the member at the end of the line is considered a priority.

Like every board should, after the votes are counted, every national director leaves the board room supporting the decision. We all certainly have our opinions and ideas but we only get progress after a debate when we support the final decision. After 25 years in the business, I consider my time on this board to be an honor, a great learning experience and at times an eye opening responsibility that can keep one awake at night.

Behind your local cooperative, the table is set by a national organization that understands its mission, who it is working for and what is at stake. I will continue to do my best to more than just warm the chair as I make sure Michigan's voice is heard.