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New Report Shows Minnesota Rural Electric Co-ops Websites Come Up Short

A Minnesota rural advocacy group recently released a report showing that Rural Electric Co-ops (RECs) in Minnesota fall short of providing basic online information for their member-owners. The Rural Electric Cooperative Report Card documents what information is made available to co-op member-owners on the websites of the 43 Minnesota Rural Electric Cooperatives. The report, produced by CURE, can be found on its Minnesota Local Energy Project website at www.mnlocalenergyproject.org

One in three Minnesotans (1.7 million people) gets their electricity from a rural electric cooperative (REC). These Minnesotans aren't just customers—they actually own the electric utilities that provide their power. Because they are part of a co-op, REC member-owners have the opportunity to play a key role in how the utility that they own is run – this is the co-op principle of democratic governance. Exercising the role of a member-owner requires access to basic co-op information. But getting the information necessary to become an informed member-owner can be difficult at best. Many REC members-owners have voiced real concerns about how hard it is to gather information and get connected in their co-ops. This difficulty in accessing necessary information and a perceived lack of transparency on the part of REC leadership led CURE to look at what information REC websites do provide to their member-owners. Basic information about co-op operations, management, and co-op governance should be available on every RECs website for every member-owner, but many co-ops fail to provide easy access to information for members online.

Longtime co-op supporters and members like Jim Nichols, a farmer from Lake Benton who also served in the state legislature and was the Commissioner of Agriculture from 1982-1990, are genuinely concerned about the current state of Minnesota's RECs. "I'm a co-op guy, I try to do almost all my business with farmer-owned co-ops," commented Nichols, "But some of our co-ops have totally lost touch with what it means to be a cooperative."

According to Erik Hatlestad, CURE's lead on the Report Card project, the findings of the Rural Electric Co-op Report Card indicate that REC leaders in many co-ops fail to inform and educate

their member-owners in the most up-to-date and transparent possible way. “Co-op websites are likely the first place where REC members search for information about their co-op including monthly meeting schedules, co-op elections, or how to make sense of utility bills”, Hatlestad said. “For REC leaders to claim that co-ops in Minnesota are truly democratic, member-owners must have easy access to the information needed to fully participate in the business of the co-op and make informed decisions. There is no downside here for co-op leaders or member-owners. The basic information identified in the REC Report Card should be made available on every REC website without exception and RECs should make those website improvements as soon as possible.”

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For further inquiries about the Minnesota Local Energy Project, please contact CURE’s Energy Democracy Organizer Erik Hatlestad, at erik@cureriver.org or (320)-269-2984.

CURE is a rural organization made up of people who care about the well-being of their neighbors, the health of the land and water, and the legacy we leave for future generations. For the past 27 years, CURE’s work has grown to include water, energy, climate, and healthy rural communities with the thread of civic engagement, social justice, and democracy connecting all projects. To learn more about all of CURE’s projects visit www.cureriver.org.

The Minnesota Local Energy Project (MNLEP) is a project of CURE. MNLEP strives to transform the energy landscape across Minnesota by giving people the knowledge and power to advocate for their own energy future and to help build an equitable energy system that is clean, local, and democratic.