

A leader shaped by

people

and driven by

people

Harper closes his time at Basin Electric

By Tracie Bettenhausen



When this magazine hits Ron Harper's mailbox, he will have been retired from Basin Electric a little more than a month. He will be in Fort Collins, CO, enjoying a view of the foothills, and time with his wife, Joy, and grandkids, Caleb and Grace.

The first post-Basin Electric decision, he joked he will have made, was which box to start unpacking. After that, he says, smiling, Joy will tell him what to do for the rest of his day.

He won't be managing a cooperative with a revenue stream of more than a billion dollars. But after more than 11 years at the helm, managing a relaxed retirement may be a whole new challenge.

Harper, Basin Electric's third CEO and general manager in its 50-year history, turned over the keys to a new CEO on Dec. 15, 2011.

"I'm leaving with obviously mixed emotions," Harper says. "I'm leaving with comfort that I gave it as much as I could, and I think we've done a good job accomplishing a lot for the membership."

"That which you commit, you must perform."

A look at Harper's tenure at Basin Electric reveals major growth. (See sidebar on pg. 13-14.) He says each major decision was backed by the values the cooperative has held high for decades. And, for Harper, his time can be summed up in a quote: "That which you commit, you must perform."

Harper says he ran across the quote when Basin Electric was negotiating with FPL Energy (now NextEra Energy Resources) on a wind project to be built near Edgeley, ND. "The guys would negotiate late into the evenings, early mornings and they finally walked in one day and said, 'You know, we can't get past this point.' And I said, 'Fine, cancel it.'"

Harper says it didn't take long for Bob Bergstrom, executive director at FPL Energy, to schedule a breakfast meeting with Harper and others at the Ramkota Hotel in Bismarck. "We talked through the finer points of relationships and integrity – all those things I believe to be fundamental in Basin Electric's core philosophies," Harper says. "I told him about my position, 'That which you commit, you must perform.' He committed to me that day – at that breakfast table – to perform. I remember I stood up, and I still remember which wall I was facing, and we shook on it. He had to come up to Headquarters to meet with some of the guys, and so I went back to my office, typed out that quote, and took it to him. He said, 'Would you sign it?' And I said, 'Yes I would. Why don't you sign it?' So he signed it, and that was the bond that set the stage for the relationship that exists between our two organizations today."

Basin Electric has since partnered with NextEra Energy on several more projects, most recently the Day County Wind Project in South Dakota. Other negotiations and deals with some organizations fell through because potential partners "did not follow what I considered to be the rules of proper relationship building, and the integrity aspect of things."

Shaped by people, driven by people

Harper says life experience and mentors helped him make decisions in trying times. "I've truly been blessed to have mentors, bosses and friends who have allowed me to succeed or fail." He noted three from a list of many that he considers as friends and mentors: Bob Wenande, former Basin Electric director representing Powder River Energy Corporation, and Wayne Child and Reuben Ritthaler, current Basin Electric directors representing Tri-State G&T and Powder River Energy, respectively. "I've known those guys since the early 1980s. Since becoming a general manager in the cooperative program, I have had the privilege to work for extremely good boards, men and women, who are truly focused on that person at the end of the line. For that I am thankful."

Harper says he thought about the implications of every decision he made. "Each significant decision impacted cooperatives, employees and public officials. I did not take this lightly, but I owned up to my decisions, and I was straight-forward in my resolve. With some of the decisions I've had to reach out, whether it was John (Hoeven, former governor of North Dakota, current U.S. Senator) or Jack (Dalrymple, current governor of North Dakota), for example, and say, 'Hate to tell you about this and you're not going to want to hear it, but it's a decision I have to make.' Although they didn't necessarily like it, they understood and respected it, because we had that type of relationship."

Harper says while his ability to make big decisions evolved over time, his leadership style remained the same. "Understanding people is critical," Harper says. "When you get into a job like this, it's all about people. So, if you're not a people person, don't even go for it. The old days of, 'my way or the highway,' don't work. I surrounded myself with good people – bright and intelligent – so we could move the ball. That's the challenge of leadership."

Harper led Basin Electric by people and for people. While the cooperative philosophies were his basic leadership tenets, one particular principle rose above the rest: integrity. "I always make the joke, I play business golf. If you're cheating me on the golf course, you're going to be cheating me on a business deal. I have proven that to be true. It has come from experience and from watching people and seeing how they conduct themselves in different arenas," Harper says.

Career highlights

2000 March – Board of directors names Ron Harper the third general manager of Basin Electric.

October – Dedication ceremonies held for 205-mile carbon dioxide pipeline.

2001 September – Groundbreaking ceremonies held for wind project at Chamberlain, SD.

2002 September – Basin Electric announces it will purchase output of two 40-megawatt wind projects in each of the Dakotas.

2003 June – Basin Electric is the first major contributor to a career and technical institute at Bismarck (ND) State College.

2004 October – Western Fuels and Basin Electric file a complaint to the U.S. Surface Transportation Board against BNSF Railway about freight rates.

December – Basin Electric announces plans to construct a coal-based power plant near Gillette, WY.

2005 August – Basin Electric receives five-star recognition for its support of employees in the National Guard and U.S. Army Reserve in North Dakota.

2006 June – The first recovered energy generation (REG) site at St. Anthony, ND, is energized on the Northern Border Pipeline.

June – Wyoming Gov. Dave Freudenthal appoints Harper and six other community and business leaders to a council charged with developing the University of Wyoming's newly formed School of Energy Resources.

2007 June – Harper invited to and attends Carbon Sequestration Leadership Forum Workshop for the Group of Eight (G8) in Oslo, Norway.

October – Construction starts on Dry Fork Station near Gillette, WY.

Career highlights

2008 May – Following formation of the National Renewables Cooperative Organization (NRCO) in April, NRCO developers elect transitional board of directors with Harper as president.

2009 July – U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu announced the selection of Basin Electric as a recipient of a \$100-million cooperative agreement under the Clean Coal Power Initiative program to help fund a large-scale carbon capture demonstration at Antelope Valley Station

August – Construction begins on PrairieWinds ND 1 near Minot, ND.

2010 September – Groundbreaking ceremony held for Deer Creek Station in Brookings County, SD.

2011 January – Dry Fork construction work force reaches 6 million hours with no lost time accidents.

August – Dry Fork Station is dedicated, with more than \$336 million invested in environmental controls, making Dry Fork one of the cleanest coal-based power plants in the country.

September – Harper received the Craig Thomas Cooperative Service Award at the Wyoming Rural Electric Association annual meeting.

September – Surface Transportation Board decides to allow hearing on premium paid for BNSF Railway by Berkshire Hathaway.

December – Harper turns over the reins of the organization.

Governing a family

Harper knows people watch him closely for clues, too. “I learned early on, if I didn’t walk into this place with a smile on my face – and most of the time that’s not hard for me to do – it sets the stage for your people.”

It was not uncommon for Harper to know the names of employees’ children and grandchildren. He followed employees through life-changing events, both good and bad. “We were a family. Family takes care of its own. The people of Basin Electric lifted me up, and I hope to have done the same in a small way. When I think about my time in the organization, it’s not the generating facilities we built that come to mind. It’s the faces of the many people who drive Basin Electric. They’re good people, and I’m honored to have known them.”

Harper’s rule for relating to others is simple. “I want to treat people the way I would like to be treated myself. If you keep that foremost, not too many times are you going to go wrong. I don’t wake up in the morning saying I want to be treated badly. No, nor do you. You want people to see the best in you day in, day out, minute by minute, hour by hour.”

Authenticity above all

He says on the first day he was CEO at Basin Electric, he didn’t understand the dynamics of working for a generation and transmission (G&T) cooperative. “I had to adapt to a new role. Managing a G&T is much different than a distribution cooperative. For the first couple months, I worked to ‘fit the mold.’ Then one day after reading a speech written for me, I sat back and thought, ‘This is not me; if I’m going to work for the benefit of the person at the end of the line, I need to be true to myself.’ From that point on, I took this position and molded it to fit me.”

Harper admits, however, he was never good at work-life balance. “That’s something I’ve never been able to do.”

He’s worked evenings and weekends his entire career. He remembers a family camping trip in 1986 when he spent the entire time in the motor home signing capital credit checks. The signatures couldn’t be automated at the time. “Here we are, up at 10,000 feet, my wife and my two boys are fishing in the beaver ponds, and I’m sitting in the motor home signing 4,500 checks.”

Now, he’ll golf. He’ll fly fish. He’ll hunt. “I have not been able to truly hunt, whether it’s with a gun or bow, since about 1990, just because of my schedule.” He wants to go out to a place where he’s never hunted and spend time getting to know the terrain, where the animals are going and where they’ll be coming from. He has three rifles he’s won over the years that have yet to have a shell fired through them.

He’ll keep an eye on Basin Electric from a distance. “You don’t pour your body, mind and soul and your family into this job for almost 12 years and walk away from it; you just don’t. I will be extremely interested to see how Basin continues to succeed and move forward because I know everybody here. I know what they’re capable of, and it will be exciting to sit on the sidelines and just watch how they continue to grow this organization.”