

Iowa's electric co-ops plan to make an impression

By Tracie Bettenhausen

The race for the office of President of the United States starts in Iowa. Candidates, staff, news crews and others descend on the Midwest state. National news networks carry footage of people yelling and candidates crying. Pundits and news anchors read off important sets of numbers.

The Iowa caucuses are the first time real results come together to show how much support each candidate has. It is often where presidential candidates are validated – or subjugated.

The Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives plans to use this opportunity. Tim Coonan, director of government relations, says the statewide organization, headquartered in Des Moines, wants to make sure the presidential candidates realize the importance of electric cooperatives.

“We want to educate them on co-ops and educate them on the co-op issues, and then educate Iowa’s member consumers about where the candidates stand on our issues,” Coonan says.

The Iowa statewide will identify cooperative employees willing to act as a liaison between the cooperatives and each viable presidential campaign. That person will start by gauging what the candidate knows about electric cooperatives.

“Does the candidate support electric cooperatives? Do they believe the Rural Utilities Service should continue to help electric cooperatives build new generation facilities? Do they know how many consumers live on electric co-op lines? Once we know where they stand, we can give them insight into why our positions matter,” Coonan says.

The liaison will also offer up cooperative headquarters around the state as meeting places for the candidates and will ask the candidates to speak at their annual meetings. Coonan says it’s important for the presidential hopefuls to find groups of people to remember their name at the polls. “The caucus is

just different (from primaries),” Coonan says. “Candidates don’t fly in and have meetings with big donors. Candidates go house to house to try to get delegates. They want to be able to speak to large groups of people, and co-ops can offer that.”

Dale Niezwaag, senior legislative representative for Basin

Electric, says there are about 14 viable presidential campaigns running currently, and while the future president doesn’t have to win Iowa to eventually become president, history shows they do have to finish in the top three to have a shot.

“Even if these people don’t become president, they’re going to be educated in electric cooperatives, and they’re going back to

be senators or governors or something else. They’re going to take that knowledge with them wherever they go,” Niezwaag says.

The Iowa statewide has invested heavily over the last decade constructing a statewide grassroots network and supporting infrastructure.

“This means we have cadre of trained and engaged grassroots advocates in all 99 of Iowa’s counties, so getting involved in the caucus just makes sense,” Coonan says. “We have a unique opportunity and responsibility to rural electric cooperatives throughout the nation to get our issues on the national radar, and that is what we intend to do.”

Niezwaag says presidential candidates aren’t the only ones who’ll learn about cooperatives through this process. Journalists are known to work in Iowa during a presidential caucus to get noticed so they can go on to work at national networks as reporters or consultants. “The cooperative message will be shared in several different ways. The more people who know our story, and how our success affects a large swath of the Midwest, the better,” Niezwaag says.

Niezwaag says this is a program that could expand to other states. Basin Electric is helping to fund this initiative in Iowa.

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