

Member Focus

Hard hats and cowboy boots

Touchstone Energy® adds co-op flair
to Black Hills Stock Show & Rodeo

By Erin Huntimer



With ranch life comes freedom – and the occasional black eye. Or two. Co-op member Blair Bohl says it's a small price to pay for the life he loves.

At first glance, they didn't appear real. His eyes were that black. It had to be makeup. But it wasn't. He's a real cowboy, those are real black eyes. He got them while working at the sales ring. A cow ran into a gate, but that's life. Ranch life. Rural life. Co-op life.

The cowboy is Blair Bohl. He ranches near Mellette, SD, and is a member of Northern Electric Cooperative, a Class C member of Basin Electric, headquartered in Bath. He came to the Black Hills Stock Show on Feb. 2 to compete in the Ranch Rodeo. His team didn't make the finals, so he's enjoying the show from the stands, watching some other cowboys get roughed up for a change.

The Ranch Rodeo, a fun, frenzied take on ranch life, was sponsored by South Dakota's Touchstone Energy cooperatives. It's one of many ways the co-ops have a presence at the 10-day event. They sponsor events, host a booth and demonstrate electrical safety.

But Touchstone Energy's sponsorship means more than arena signage and trade show booth space. It helps support the rodeo life lived by many members. It connects the co-ops to their rural roots. And it saves lives through education – a worthwhile investment by any measure.

A good fit

The Black Hills Stock Show started in 1959 with local cattle producers promoting their stock in a cold tin building. Since then,

it's grown in size and reputation. Today, it's held in the sprawling Rushmore Plaza Civic Center in Rapid City, and more than 250,000 people pass through the doors throughout the event.

Ron Jeffries, general manager of the Black Hills Stock Show & Rodeo, says the show stands out when compared to the big shows down south. "With most of those

places – Houston, San Antonio, Denver – you're dealing with population bases of more than a million people. Rapid City's population base, the immediate trade area,

“For us to draw 250,000-300,000 people to a show like this is pretty remarkable.”

Ron Jeffries, Black Hills Stock Show & Rodeo



Robert Raker of West River Electric teaches young cowboys and cowgirls what to do if their truck or tractor makes contact with a live power line.



Chuck Even of Butte Electric Cooperative shoots t-shirts into the crowd at the Ranch Rodeo with a special gun owned by Grand Electric Cooperative.

is about 100,000-150,000 people. So for us to draw 250,000-300,000 people to a show like this is pretty remarkable.”

The cooperatives first got involved with the stock show in 1987 with a booth by Rushmore Electric Power Cooperative, a Class A member of Basin Electric, headquartered in Rapid City. Todd Eliason, assistant general manager at Rushmore Electric, says co-op involvement has grown to include all Touchstone Energy cooperatives in South Dakota.

Eliason says co-op employees from across the state work in the booth and give safety demonstrations. They donate shirts and hats to toss to the crowd at the Ranch Rodeo. A team representing five cooperatives conducts a high-voltage demonstration for hundreds of children and adults in the main arena. Rushmore Electric employees rise early to serve coffee and doughnuts to producers showing their livestock.

“Touchstone has been a really big help over the years. When you mention Badlands Circuit now, well the first thing you think about is Touchstone, and vice versa.”

Jim Sutton, Badlands Circuit Rodeo

“It’s just being a part of the rural community,” Eliason says. “I think that’s so important – the members own us, and we give back to the members and the communities. The co-ops just are such a huge part of these small communities.”

Jeffries says Touchstone Energy’s sponsorship provides purse money for the rodeos, supports production of the events and helps advertise – all important to producing a high-quality event. “With the Black Hills Stock Show and

Touchstone Energy, we both have the same clientele. You deal with rural ranch markets, and so does the stock show. The two of us work real well together,” he says.

But more important than money and sponsorships is the safety message repeated by the cooperatives at the booth and the high-voltage demonstration in the main arena. The message is undoubtedly making a difference.

Continued ▶

Member Focus



South Dakota U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem greets fans at the Ranch Rodeo.

Eliason says at the start of this year's show, a teenager and his mother approached him. "The son was pointing at me saying, 'He's the one.' She came up, shook my hand and says, 'You know, my son got tangled up with the Farmhand® in the overhead power line, and he knew exactly what to do. We think him seeing this saved his life,'" he says.

"It gives you goose bumps to know we're doing that and maybe saving a few lives."

Ranch Rodeo

Rather than calf roping, barrel racing and bull riding, Ranch Rodeo cowboys compete in events that mirror day-to-day ranching activities – wild cow milking, trailer races, stray roundup, wild horse riding – and unsaddling – and more.

"This is the time you compete for bragging rights amongst all your friends and neighbors and cousins and relatives. And Touchstone Energy's been a big sponsor of that, helped us put this program on the map to tell you the truth," Jeffries says.

"When we started the Ranch Rodeo 12 years ago, I had to work with our promoter to get enough teams to enter. You couldn't find 12 teams." This year's 54 team entries set a record, he says.

More than 7,000 fans cheered on the teams during the finals the night of Feb. 2. They were treated to a visit from South Dakota's U.S. Rep. Kristi Noem, and hats and t-shirts from the cooperatives. "We feel that sponsorship is a big thing for us. Our members are ranchers and farmers, and rodeo is a big part of the cooperative world, so we help support that," Eliason says.

Badlands Circuit Rodeo

For many rural electric cooperative members, rodeo is not a job; it's not a hobby. It's a life. And sponsorships from organizations like Touchstone Energy help make the rodeo life possible. Take it from barrel racer, Jana Griemsman of Piedmont, SD. She competes in the Badlands Circuit Rodeo, sponsored by Touchstone Energy.

Of the sponsorship, she says, "We could not do it without it. I know as a contestant, having to ask for money is very hard to do. We appreciate anything and everything Touchstone Energy has done for our sport of rodeo."

Jim Sutton produces the rodeo events at the stock show. The events draw talented competitors from the Badlands Circuit, including some of the best bronc riders in the country. As the circuit's reputation builds, he says sponsors like Touchstone Energy play a big role in keeping that momentum going.

"I don't think anyone really realizes what that does mean. . . . Touchstone has been a really big help over the years. When you mention Badlands Circuit now, well the first thing you think about is Touchstone, and vice versa," Sutton says.

Touchstone Energy booth

If a power line falls on your car or tractor, should you jump, or should you stay? Co-op employees teach little cowboys and cowgirls to stay put in a shocking, memorable way at the Touchstone Energy booth. The safety demonstration performed with live electricity inevitably draws in

adults as well, and the cooperatives serve up conservation and efficiency tips for them.

Frank Mueller of LaCreek Electric Cooperative of Martin, SD, and Robert Raker of West River Electric Cooperative of Wall, SD, worked at the booth. Their cooperatives serve members in the area.

“Frank and I are pretty fortunate that the Black Hills Stock Show is held here in Rapid City,” Raker says. “We get to talk to a lot of members. We hear about some of their concerns – a lot of interest in helping lower their energy bills.”

High-voltage safety demonstration

The cooperatives kick up the safety message in a big way at the stock show, demonstrating the true power of 7,200 volts in person. On Jan. 31, about 350 students and adults watched as Joe Connot of West Central Electric Cooperative, Murdo; and Gerald Draine and Mike Davis of Butte Electric Cooperative’s Spearfish office channeled electricity through tree branches, kite string, hot dogs and grapefruit to drive home the message to stay away from power lines. Davis and Draine are linemen who work together daily. Connot is a former lineman who now works in member services.

“A lot of these kids come back year after year. And they say, ‘Hey, you’re that guy who “blowed” that hot dog up.’ Yup. That’s me,” Connot says. “We just hope we leave a lasting impression with the kids, because they’re the ones we’re trying to get to. They’re the future of the cooperatives.”

The demonstration is conducted on a specially designed trailer owned by the South Dakota Rural Electric Association for use by all the state’s electric cooperatives.



Linemen Mike Davis and Gerald Draine of Butte Electric fry a hot dog the hard way to demonstrate the dangers of power lines.

More than a demo

For linemen Mike Davis and Gerald Draine, the safety demonstration is more than just show and tell; it’s a reflection of real life. Two years ago, Davis and Draine were on a typical outage call when Davis slipped and made contact with 7,200 volts of electricity. Draine, his foreman, helped rescue him. In his own words, Davis talks about his experience:

“My initial contact I don’t remember at all. I remember everything else. I remember watching Gerald and another gentleman we work with run up to get the bucket truck to get me down. I remember talking with them, telling them, you know, hurry up.

“Gerald came up with the bucket truck. He unhooked my strap and got me down. Jeff, the guy we were working with, helped me into the truck, and we went and met the ambulance right after that.

“It (electricity) went in my right arm. I had flash burns all across my back. I had deep burns in my waist. It came out my right leg, which I have two more sets of skin grafts done there. I was flown from the Spearfish airport to St. Paul, MN, where I spent eight days in the burn center.

“I’m lucky to be alive, let alone to even be able to come back to my job and have my arm and my leg. So I’m very fortunate. The biggest thing I can say is don’t ever get too comfortable with it, because that’s when something’s going to get you.”

On the Web ...

Posts on The Flip Side blog, basinelectric.wordpress.com

- Co-ops educate in electrical safety at the Black Hills Stock Show & Rodeo: <http://bit.ly/ElectricalSafetyStockShow>
- Wild video from the Black Hills Ranch Rodeo: <http://bit.ly/RanchRodeo>

Videos in the gallery on www.basinelectric.com

- Co-ops support stock show, rodeo: <http://bit.ly/Co-opsSupportStockShow>
- High-voltage safety demonstration: <http://bit.ly/SafetyDemo>