



FREESTATE ELECTRIC  
COOPERATIVE, INC.

# TheOutlet

## FREESTATE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE, INC.

### BOARD OF TRUSTEES

**Larry Butel**  
Overbrook

**Bill Conley**  
Delia

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Leavenworth

**Don Montgomery**  
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**Ralph Phillips**  
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**Rob Sage**  
Maple Hill

**Matthew Turecek**  
Valley Falls

**Mark Wulfkuhle**  
Lawrence

### STAFF

**Christopher Parr**  
CEO

## DISTRICT OFFICES

### MCLOUTH OFFICE

P.O. Box 70  
McLouth, KS 66054-0070

### TOPEKA OFFICE

1100 S.W. Auburn Road  
Topeka, KS 66615

### OFFICE HOURS

Monday-Thursday  
7 a.m.-5:30 p.m.

## REMINDER

On Thursday, June 12, our offices will open at 10 a.m. for all employee safety training.

## FROM THE CEO

# Navigating Federal Legislative Challenges for a Brighter Future

I had the privilege of attending the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C., where over 2,000 co-op leaders gathered to discuss the future of our industry. The conference allowed the voice of local electric cooperatives to come together to address legislative priorities that will shape our path forward. The goal is to make lawmakers understand that electric reliability is non-negotiable.

The primary focus of the NRECA visits was advocating for smart energy policies that meet the growing demand for electricity. We emphasized the need for permitting reform to streamline the federal permitting process, which currently imposes unreasonable delays and drives up costs for essential infrastructure projects. We called for the repeal of the EPA Power Plant rule, which jeopardizes grid reliability by forcing the premature closure of coal-fired plants and imposing unworkable emissions reductions on new natural gas plants.

We also urged Congress to defend against wildfires by passing the bipartisan Fix Our Forests Act, which would make it easier for co-ops to remove hazardous trees from federal land.

While advocating collectively on a national level; we also took the opportunity to meet with our state congressional delegation to discuss issues here at home that impact our communities and individual cooperatives and members.

To support rural communities, co-ops asked lawmakers to:

- ▶ Support full funding for the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) Electric Loan program to finance construction of electric infrastructure projects. Co-ops repay these loans with interest, which makes money for the federal government.
- ▶ Protect electric co-ops' access to elective-pay tax credits to help them deploy new energy technologies, including energy storage and renewables. For-profit utilities have long had access to such tax credits, and the elective-pay incentives help level the playing field for not-for-profit co-ops.



Chris Parr

**The goal is to make lawmakers understand that electric reliability is non-negotiable.**

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# Meet the Mascot

Willie  
Wiredhand,  
our “never-  
tiring, always  
available” hired  
hand, turns  
75 in 2025

Willie Wiredhand will turn 75 years old this year. Willie is the longtime mascot of America's electric cooperatives, and he's been working hard for us since 1950. Willie's official “birthday” is Oct. 30, the next-to-the-last day of National Co-op Month. As we approach this milestone anniversary, let's take a look at how Willie came to be and how he has worked for us all these years.

## BEFORE WILLIE

After the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, electricity gradually worked its way into American businesses and homes, predominantly in urban areas. By 1926, another mascot — Reddy Kilowatt — appeared as a cartoon “electrical servant” that served as a spokesman for electricity generation. As the brainchild of Ashton B. Collins, Sr., Reddy Kilowatt had lightning bolt arms and legs wearing safety gloves and shoes. His friendly face featured a lightbulb nose and outlets for ears. Alabama Power Company, where Collins worked, was the original copyright owner, and they gave the rights to Collins in 1933 so he could be granted the trademark.

Electrification was suppressed by the Great Depression in 1929, and rural electrification was slow. As late as the mid-1930s, nine out of 10 rural homes were without electric service.

Factories and businesses, of course, preferred to locate in cities where electric power was easily acquired. For many years, power companies ignored the rural areas of the nation.

## RURAL ELECTRIFICATION ADMINISTRATION

The idea of providing federal assistance to accomplish rural electrification gained

It wasn't easy getting electrification to rural America, and similarly, it wasn't easy to secure a mascot. After years in the courts, Willie Wiredhand was copyrighted in 1957.

ground rapidly when President Roosevelt took office in 1933. On May 11, 1935, Roosevelt signed Executive Order No. 7037 establishing the Rural Electrification Administration (REA). It was not until a year later that the Rural Electrification Act was passed and the lending program that became the REA got underway.

Within months, it became evident to REA officials that established investor-owned utilities were not interested in using federal loan funds to serve sparsely populated rural areas. But loan applications from farmer-based cooperatives poured in, and REA soon realized electric cooperatives would be the entities to make rural electrification a reality. By 1953, more than 90% of U.S. farms had electricity.

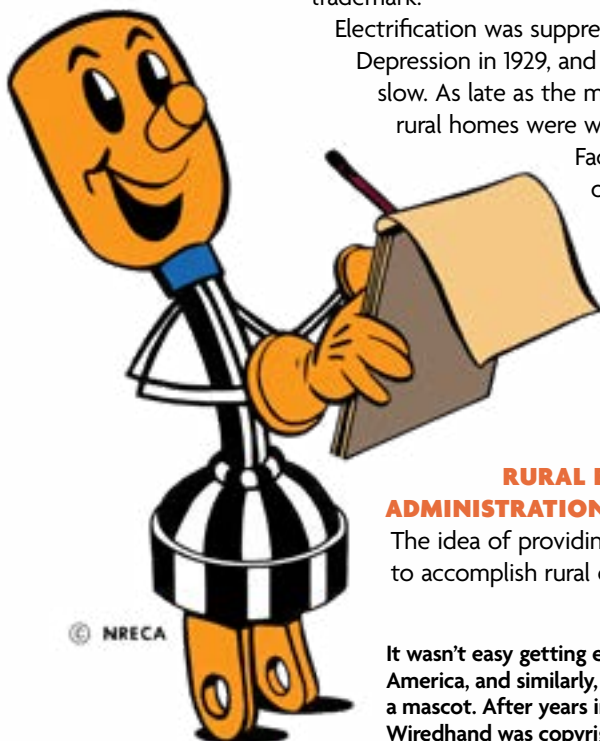
## THE FORMATION OF NRECA

False claims that electric cooperatives were hoarding copper wire during World War II brought cooperative leaders from different states together to defend themselves. As a result, in 1942, America's electric cooperatives formed the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) to provide a unified voice for cooperatives and to represent their interests in Washington, D.C. NRECA was founded in 1942 as a trade organization to represent these rural co-ops and provide additional services, which were too expensive individually.

Willie Wiredhand was created when NRECA was unable to license the Reddy Kilowatt mascot from Collins. He intended Reddy to be used to promote investor-owned utilities, who did not find it sufficiently profitable to build electric infrastructure in rural areas.

In 1948, Collins refused to license the Reddy Kilowatt character to rural electrical co-ops, on the grounds that it would harm the reputation of the investor-owned utilities to be associated with the federally subsidized rural programs. In response, NRECA had a contest to design their own mascot.

The mascot contest was announced in *Rural Electrification* magazine in December 1948, with a \$50 prize for the best design. Freelance artist Andrew “Drew” McLay designed Willie Wiredhand with a lightbulb socket head, a wire torso, a push-



© NRECA

button nose and a two-pronged power plug for his hips and legs. He wears the thick gloves of a lineworker. The name is a play on the phrase “hired hand” and the character was chosen as the contest winner in 1951. He advertised electricity as “the never-tiring, always available hired hand to help the nation’s farmers.”

Everything about Willie was symbolic of rural electricity. He was small and wiry, a hard-working, friendly icon with a big, determined smile. One magazine story describes Willie as, “the friendly and inspirational golden boy who symbolizes dependable, local, consumer-owned electricity.”

### THE LAWSUITS

Collins challenged NRECA’s right to its own mascot as soon as the contest was announced, claiming that he was “the originator and owner of figures symbolizing the use of electric energy.”

In essence, Reddy and his legal henchmen were trying to pull the plug on Willie. From their beginning, co-ops had constantly fought skirmishes with private power companies attempting to thwart the success of non-profit utilities over territory and power supply. Appropriately, the battle between Willie and Reddy was symbolic of the David vs. Goliath struggle between co-ops and private power companies.

Although Collins had already legally eliminated other mascots such as The Willing Watts, Eddie Edison, Elec-Tric, Mr. Watts-His-Name and Mr. Watt-A-Worker, Willie Wiredhand proved to be a more formidable foe. The lawsuit and all subsequent appeals were decided in the co-op’s favor, holding that there was no trademark confusion, the names were entirely different, and the figures did not look alike. NRECA successfully countersued for their legal

fees, and Willie Wiredhand was granted his own trademark in 1957.

Incidentally, the case also ended Reddy’s monopoly over other power companies. Testimony during the trials revealed that Reddy’s syndicate often acted like B-grade movie gangsters using threats of lawsuits and intimidation to keep other private power companies from creating their own spokes-characters.

Though Willie symbolized co-op friendliness, he also embodied co-op spunk, willing to stand up for what was right in the face of impossible odds. “He’s small, but he’s ‘wiry’” became part of Willie’s trademark and allowed him to become the beloved character he remains today.

### WILLIE GETS TO WORK

As an advertising mascot, Willie appeared consistently in advertisements and newsletters for NRECA’s members. Beginning in 1956, Willie was the face of a cooperative group of electronics retailers who could advertise as official “Willie Wiredhand Dealers.” Willie was dressed as a minuteman and appeared on stage behind Senator John F. Kennedy for a political campaign called “Minutemen for Rural Electrification” at an NRECA event in Washington, D.C., in 1959.

In the 1960s, a family group of musicians known as the “Willie Wiredhand Serenaders” hosted a local television show in Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri that was sponsored by several electric cooperatives. The group also gave touring performances.

Two comic books starring Willie Wiredhand were published in 1967 and 1968. “Cousin Johnny Discovers Power in Rural America” and its sequel, “It’s



In 1959, Willie Wiredhand appeared on stage behind then Senator John F. Kennedy at an NRECA event in Washington, D.C. Dressed as a minuteman, Willie was promoting the “Minutemen for Rural Electrification” campaign.

WISCONSIN ENERGY COOPERATIVE NEWS



A political cartoon depicting the victory of Willie Wiredhand over Reddy Kilowatt.

Annual Meeting Time for the Davis Family” were distributed by member cooperatives.

A 5-foot animatronic mascot at the office of the Electric Power Associations of Mississippi could move its arms and speak. Branded items, including Willie Wiredhand wristwatches and aprons were given as prizes at local events sponsored by the cooperative. Some cooperatives created “Watt’s Cookin’?” cookbooks featuring Willie with member recipes.

NRECA produces an annual Christmas ornament of Willie, and other items have included bobbleheads, lapel pins, and handmade wooden pens.

**FOLLOW US ON FACEBOOK FOR A CHANCE TO WIN A WILLIE WIREDHAND BOBBLEHEAD.**

Follow us on Facebook for a chance to win a Willie Wiredhand bobblehead.





## 2025 Annual Meeting in Pictures



In 1968, Willie Wiredhand was featured in the comic book, "It's Annual Meeting Time" for distribution to electric cooperative members.



Grant carefully arranged the kitchen shears to hand out to guests. A \$10 bill credit was added to each membership that had a member at the meeting.



Co-op attorney Jacob Pugh provided the results of the trustee election. Incumbents Ralph Phillips, Karol Lohman and Mark Wulfschle were each reelected to a three-year term on the board.

## NAVIGATING FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE CHALLENGES FOR A BRIGHTER FUTURE *Continued from page 12A ►*

- Oppose cuts to federal grant and loan programs that are helping co-ops deploy new energy technologies, harden the grid, protect against cyberthreats, strengthen their systems against wildfires and more. The programs, administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Department of Energy, include Empowering Rural America (New ERA), Powering Affordable Clean Energy (PACE), Rural Energy for America (REAP) and Grid Resilience and Innovation Partnerships (GRIP).
- Ensure that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) continues to help fund the restoration of electric service after natural disasters. Without assistance from FEMA co-ops see recovery time and costs increase dramatically for small rural communities.
- Address United States Postal Service (USPS) issues with rural delivery delays and routing, in addition to post office services to our rural communities.

The conference highlighted the importance of collaboration and innovation in meeting the challenges ahead. By working together, we can ensure a resilient, reliable, and affordable electric grid that powers the future of rural America.

### SPECIAL BOARD MEETING

[HTTPS://FREESTATE.PUB/PGEN](https://freestate.pub/pgen)

The board of trustees will hold a special meeting on Wednesday, June 25, 2025, to adopt the updated rate tariff as required by the new Kansas statute.



Before the April 15 meeting, a pulled pork barbecue dinner prepared by Lago Vista Grill of Ozawie was served. There were 134 members, guests and staff in attendance.