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Thwarting hackers



By **GARY WIENS**, CEO of Montana Electric Cooperatives' Association

ALTHOUGH it may not keep you up at night, research shows most Americans are worried about hacking that involves their personal information, financial institutions, government agencies or certain utilities.

According to one recent poll, 9 in 10 Americans are at least somewhat concerned. This worry is likely growing as we hear with increasing frequency about hacking that disrupts daily lives.

Last May, one cyber incident on the company owning the nation's largest pipeline led to gas shortages along the East Coast. A few weeks later, a similar attack on the world's largest meat-processing company disrupted production around the world.

So what about your local electric cooperative? What are these folks doing to help prevent cyber-attacks, especially since every entity, big or small, is a potential target?

Quite a bit actually. Co-ops are working together to recognize and manage growing threats, promote continued improvement and develop solutions that keep the grid secure.

Nearly all of Montana's electric cooperatives and your statewide association participate in a new nationwide program run by our co-ops' national

association, known as the Rural Cooperative Cybersecurity Capabilities Program, or RC3. RC3 develops training courses, tools and resources co-ops need to thwart cyber attacks. It ensures all co-op staff recognize their role in cyber resiliency and empowers them to defend their co-op. Co-ops that are not part of RC3 have their own effective programs providing similar protections.

And thanks to the recently passed federal infrastructure bill, co-ops will be doing even more in the near future. The new law includes \$250 million over five years to help rural and municipal utilities advance their cybersecurity posture. This funding will help utilities detect, respond to and recover from cybersecurity threats with greater speed and efficiency.

The overarching goal of electric cooperatives is to keep the lights on at a price you can afford. In order to do that in today's digital society, a consistent focus on cybersecurity is essential. That's why cybersecurity is a top priority for Montana's electric cooperatives, and why you can have confidence they're taking meaningful steps to protect their systems and members' information.

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