South Dakota Rural Electric Association, Inc.

222 West Pleasant Drive

P.O. Box 1138

Pierre, South Dakota 57501-1138

Phone: 605-224-8823

Fax: 605-224-4430

[www.sdrea.coop](http://www.sdrea.coop)



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Contact: Billy Gibson, Director of Communications, SDREA

billy.gibson@sdrea.coop

225.405.4910

PIERRE – Gov. Kristi Noem praised the state’s electric cooperatives for delivering affordable, reliable power to more than 120,000 members across the state while also reducing carbon emissions.

Speaking at the South Dakota Rural Electric Association’s 80th annual membership meeting on Jan. 14-15, Noem noted that the state ranks fifth in the use of renewable energy and third in service reliability. Basin Electric, the primary power supplier for the state’s electric co-op network, has reduced its reliance on coal generation by 20 percent over the past two decades. Roughly 60 percent of the power produced by Basin throughout its nine-state service area comes from resources other than coal.

“I want to let you know how grateful I am for all you do for our communities in South Dakota. We talk about statistics, but the reality is that you make it happen every day…you make sure we have energy that comes from a diversity of sources and is reliable for families and businesses,” Noem said.

She said that as a business owner and an elected official, she understands the necessity of reliable power in achieving financial and economic success and also recognizes the maze of regulatory and legislative rules that power providers must follow.

“As someone who has been in business and who has seen the struggles with regulations at the federal level, I believe you’re a bright spot on the horizon. And it means the world to me that you do what you do,” she said.

The annual meeting was held at the Ramkota Hotel and Conference Center with more than 300 cooperative leaders in attendance. Nearly 100 state lawmakers representing both major parties attended the association’s Legislative reception.

Rep. Dusty Johnson and Sens. Mike Rounds and John Thune also addressed the cooperative group. Johnson echoed the comments of his congressional colleagues when he said the South Dakota delegation has “a great working relationship” with the cooperatives.

He said electric co-op leaders have a long history of successfully collaborating with state and federal lawmakers on a wide range of issues such as environmental regulations, renewable energy, affordability and advancing technology.

“We have some challenges ahead with the reemergence of the Waters of the U.S. initiative, improved reliability and also challenges from a cultural perspective,” he said, pointing out that a minority of federal lawmakers represent rural districts back home.

The two-day event also included business meetings, market and industry reports, the annual Action Committee for Rural Electrification (ACRE) breakfast banquet and other activities.

The association named Steve Reed of Murdo and Ed Anderson of Pierre as winners of the 2022 Legacy of Leadership Award.

Reed served as manager and CEO at West Central Electric in Murdo for 34 years. He was selected to replace the late Fritz Jost as manager in 1985 and held that post until he retired in 2019.

Anderson joined the South Dakota Rural Electric Association in 2000. He became general manager of the organization in 2009 and retired last July. During his career, Anderson represented rural electric cooperatives by also serving as a director for the American Coalition for Ethanol Board, South Dakota One-Call Notification Board and the South Dakota Co-op Hall of Fame Committee.

“I’d like to thank the SDREA Board and your continued commitment to serving all the members of SDREA,” Anderson said. “You understand the importance of that, and I know your job hasn’t gotten any easier over the past 20 years. But I’m confident that if you continue to look at the cooperative principles to guide your daily actions, you will continue to play a very important and positive role for your members and the citizens you serve all across the state.”

Current SDREA General Manager Trevor Jones said the annual gathering is an important time for the state’s electric cooperatives to connect with one another and with lawmakers to discuss current issues facing the electric power industry. Many of those issues, he said, have the potential to impact the pocketbooks of co-op members.

“It’s always a productive time for us to get together and reconnect with one another and learn more about an industry that is rapidly changing,” he said. “There are important issues such as cybersecurity, renewable power and the emergence of electric vehicles that can have a direct impact on our members. We need to make sure we’re able to stay current on these topics so we can have informed discussions with our members and provide them with credible information. And we always look forward to meeting one-on-one with our representatives to begin the session.”