

## One Voice Can Make a Difference

*Be part of your utility's collective power with grassroots efforts*

**By Brandon Pomrenke**

Speaking up about important issues at your utility can make a difference. It may not happen overnight, but with as little as an email or letter to your utility or state legislative representative, you can be part of a grassroots campaign that looks to protect your utility and your interests.

Grassroots efforts involve each and every individual interested in an issue. They allow everyday citizens to affect change at a variety of levels.

For co-op member-owners, it means moving to action when they see harmful legislation or, as in the past, a need for change and reformation.

### **How Grassroots Efforts Work**

As the name suggests, grassroots efforts start at ground level and work their way up and out. Grassroots supporters may look to make changes at the local or state

level. But in many instances, they try to affect a national decision that could shape policy for millions of Americans.

"A successful grassroots program requires two things: cooperative advocates and education," says Nevada-based Wells Rural Electric Co. CEO Clay Fitch. "First, you have to spend time in your communities to build relationships with your owners. That's how you develop advocates. Once you have advocates, you have to help them understand the issues and carefully choose when to call for their support."

Grassroots activism is what brought power to many rural areas and, today, keeps rates affordable.

That is where agencies such as the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association come into play. NRECA represents more than 900 nonprofit electric co-ops in 47 states, which serve more than 42 million Americans

throughout the U.S.

NRECA understands the needs of cooperative members and asks for their opinions. A prime example is the recent call to action about the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Clean Power Plan, which seeks to reduce the amount of allowable carbon emissions by power plants.

Originally, little allowance was made for states to come up with their own plans to maintain the affordability of reliable electricity, especially in more rural areas.

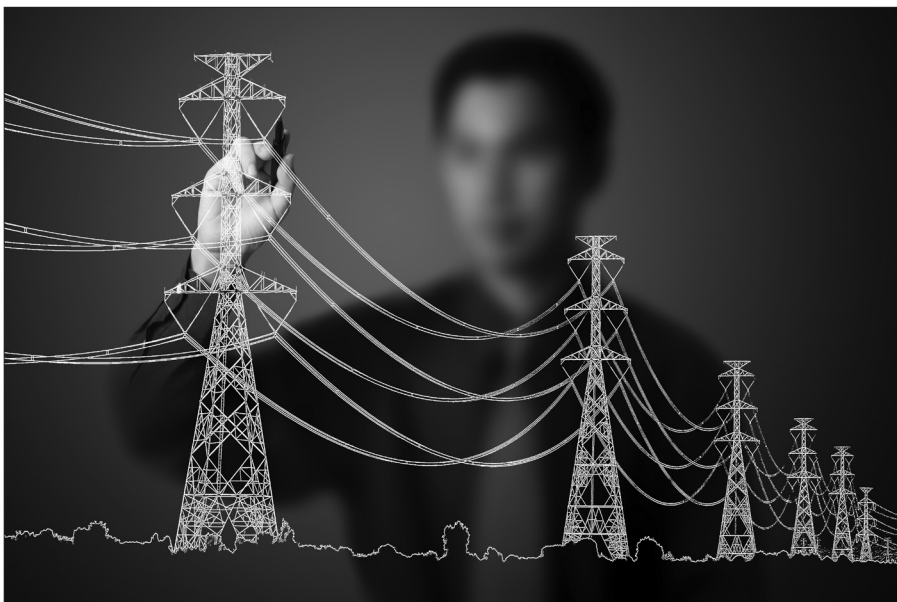
NRECA and local utilities stepped in and asked for members' letters, emails and signatures on petitions to slow the changes and allow each state to implement a plan that would keep prices affordable, but still help reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

"Our co-op members are very knowledgeable about what is going on in the world and seldom take things for granted," says Dale Anderson, manager of member services for Big Bend Electric, based in Ritzville, Washington. "Whenever Big Bend Electric Co-op has needed help with legislative issues, we've asked our members to send letters or emails to legislative representatives, and they have been motivated to work for their co-op in presenting these concerns to the elected officials in a respectful manner."

### **Importance of Involvement**

The path to electricity and public drinking water in Parkland, Washington, was shaped through public involvement.

"Prior to 1914, Parkland residents had no electric lights," says Mark Johnson, Parkland Light and Water Co. general manager. "People used candles and kerosene lamps."



**Actively participating helps you shape the future of your utility.**

Photo by Dusit/Shutterstock

They did not have public drinking water, either.

“The city of Tacoma just to the north had both power and piped potable water,” says Johnson. “Parkland was still living in the dark ages.”

That all changed, thanks to the efforts of 41 local residents who banded together, organized and elected a group of trustees to create the nation’s oldest mutual cooperative.

The citizens saw a need, researched resolutions, lobbied for the right to incorporate and, on April 23, 1914, officially began PL&WCo.

Cooperatives have been successful because of member involvement, beginning under the same grassroots principles.

Today, member-owners can educate themselves online, watch television programs, listen to the radio or speak with experts to stay up-to-date on pressing issues.

With many avenues for education, grassroots activism is currently experiencing a surge.

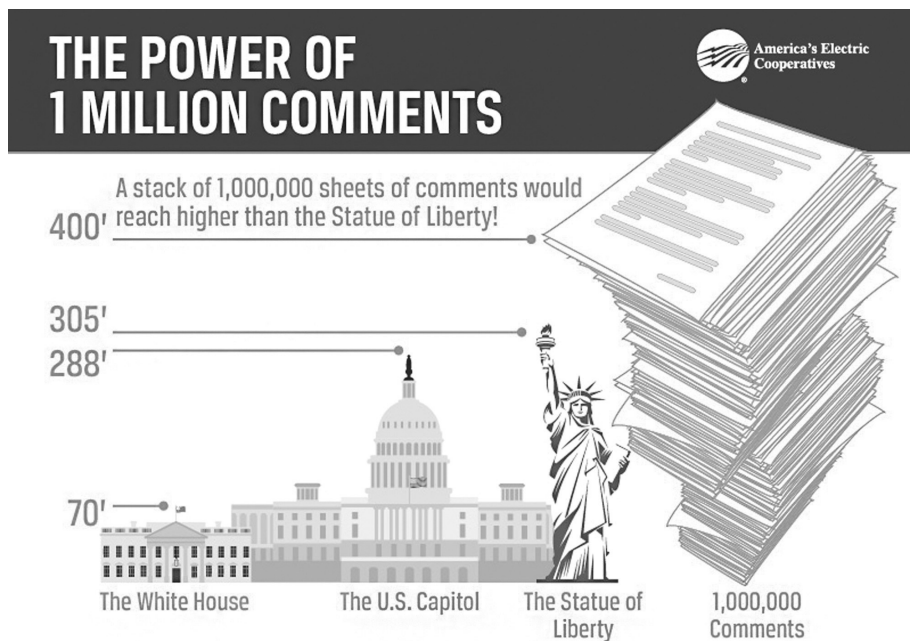
When NRECA asked utilities and their mostly rural members to get involved in the campaign addressing the proposed Clean Power Plan, more than 1 million letters were sent to the EPA detailing how the plan would affect the livelihood of rural Americans.

The EPA proposal would set national targets reducing carbon dioxide from existing power plants to 30 percent below 2005 levels. The EPA planned to achieve that by restricting the amount of coal-fired power and relying on natural gas, conservation and renewables, excluding most hydropower.

### The Power of Public Opinion

Will Hart, executive director for the Idaho Consumer-Owned Utilities Association in Boise, helped organize a state legislative effort to allow additional bonding authority for municipal utilities.

Municipals would be allowed to enter into contracts for the purchase of



wholesale power, and to buy, maintain and upgrade the equipment needed to ensure affordable, reliable power to members.

To be implemented, the state’s constitution must be amended.

Hart informed the state’s cooperatives and municipals about ICUA’s goals. He then suggested cooperative and municipal managers, CEOs and directors educate their members through town hall meetings, informational settings and bill inserts. Cooperatives put forth extra effort with informational campaigns using their publications.

“We had 22 utilites working together instead of 11 co-ops and 11 municipals,” Hart says, noting this bonding proposal helps only municipals. “We were working for public power, and there is greater power in numbers.

ICUA raised about \$75,000 to campaign for the public electorate to vote for House Joint Resolution 7. It was just like running a candidate for statewide office or passing a voter initiative.”

Such success stories involving grassroots activism are becoming more prevelant. People have more resources

## GRASSROOTS TOOLKIT

### Get Involved

Many resources are available to help you get educated and involved not just in how your utility runs, but how state- and national-level politics affect your utilities. Visit any of the following sites to learn about and get involved with grassroots campaigns affecting you and your utility.

- ▶ [www.cooperative.com](http://www.cooperative.com)
- ▶ **Cooperative Action Network**  
[www.action.coop](http://www.action.coop)
- ▶ **Action Committee for Rural Electrification**, [www.nreca.coop/political-action/acre/](http://www.nreca.coop/political-action/acre/)
- ▶ **Your local utility’s website**

available to them than ever before.

“Our true strength comes from the grassroots out there—people who actually understand what happens in their communities when energy prices rise, when the electric grid becomes less reliable,” says NRECA Vice President of Government Affairs Kirk Johnson. ■