



PF CHAPTER HITS MILESTONE

The Jackson County Pheasants Forever chapter received the \$6 million plaque at its annual banquet last week.
Story, B1



JACKSON COUNTY PILOT

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ICE STORM PULLS PLUG ON COUNTY

Thousands lose power as electric lines, poles snap

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

Life began to return to normal for residents of Jackson County this week after many were without power for days following last week's ice storm.

Thousands of local homes and businesses were plunged into darkness last Wednesday as freezing rain built up on electric lines across the county causing wires to break and poles to snap. High winds last Thursday made a bad situation worse.

At its peak, around 2,700 Federated Rural Electric members in Jackson and Martin counties — about 40 percent of the local electric co-op's total membership — were without power. As of early last Thursday morning, most of Jackson County was in the dark.

Hundreds of electric poles went down across Jackson County, including more than 50 transmission line poles owned by Federated's power wholesaler Great River Energy and around 300 of Federated's distribution line poles. Officials with Federated and Great River were quick to term the extent of damage to the county's electrical system infrastructure as unprecedented.

Joe Marthaler, Federated's operations manager, said last week's ice storm was far worse than the April 2013 ice storm, as outages were more widespread and more members were without power. The most members without power back in 2013 were around 1,400.

Priti Patel, Great River Energy's vice president and chief transmission officer, said her co-op has never had as many damaged structures on the system at one time as it did last week. She termed the scope and magnitude of the restoration effort "huge."

Federated sent out a call for assistance last Thursday morning, though the

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Clockwise from top: Linemen crews work to right poles knocked down by last week's ice storm. Linemen responding to Jackson County from outside agencies find road ditches littered with broken wires and poles. Linemen lift the first of several power lines down along Highway 86 near Lakefield as they work to open yet another gravel road this past Friday. Federated linemen Jeff Broitzman, Mike Scheff and Leigh Aspelund work to reset one of the many poles snapped off at the ground in an attempt to restore power to local homes as quickly as possible last week.

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The city plans to pitch in on branch collection in the wake of last week's ice storm.

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Commentary: The response to a widespread power outage this past week was truly a team effort.

Restoring electric system may take a year — or more

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

It will likely take more than a year to fix what Mother Nature destroyed in a matter of days.

That's the assessment from Scott Reimer, general manager of Federated Rural Electric, who on Sunday said now that power knocked out by last week's ice storm has been restored, Federated must move on to the next step in what promises to be a long recovery process.

"The work is just moving to a different level," Reimer said. "We still have a lot of storm cleanup to do."

Reimer said much of the work done the last few days was done to simply restore power to Federated members as quickly as possible and is in reality only a temporary fix.

"We temporarily stubbed poles broken at the base into a new hole," he said, adding, "We have many leaning poles that will need to be straightened and reinforced with rock, especially with spring planting around the corner."

It's going to be a long trek to get the system back to what it was prior to last week's storm and where it needs to be going forward, Reimer said — one that will likely require outside assistance to complete.

"Restoring our system back to the level it was will probably take us over a year," Reimer said. "We will likely hire contractors to rebuild some sections of line."

Initial countywide damage estimates related to last week's ice storm are in the neighborhood of \$4.6 million, Jackson County Emergency Management Director Tawn Hall reported Tuesday, with most of that tallied by Federated.



Scott Reimer



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Minnesota State Patrol Sgt. Ron Richards throws an arm up in the air as he goes down on icy Highway 86 last Thursday in a frame from the video shot by dash cam that has since been seen around the world.

Ice storm goes global thanks to fall seen 'round the world

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

The entire world knows of the ice storm that hit Jackson County last week because Ron Richards fell on his butt.

A video clip of Richards, a Minnesota State Patrol sergeant from Jackson, being blown across an icy Highway 86 near Lakefield last Thursday before tumbling to the ground went viral in every way possible

last week, garnering millions of views on social media and being shown on television stations across the globe.

"My son is serving in the military in Eastern Europe and he saw it on a feed of 'Good Morning America,'" Richards



Ron Richards

said Monday. "I guess it's been on British television and everywhere. You work hard your entire career and the thing you're remembered for is falling on your butt on international television."

Richards, a decorated 24-year veteran of the Minnesota State Patrol, said he's never taken himself too seriously, and added he's taking his newfound fame in stride.

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For local lineman, payback comes nearly 15 years later

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

For Federated Rural Electric lineman Kollin "Mort" VanDeVere, payback came 14 years later.

Back in 2005, VanDeVere and a half-dozen of his fellow Federated Rural Electric linemen responded to a mutual-aid call from Lyon/Lincoln Electric Cooperative to help with power restoration in the wake of a major ice storm. VanDeVere said he was only too happy to help back then as his good buddy, Shawn Marthaler, was a lineman for the Tyler-based electric cooperative.

"We were up there for a full week working with Shawn," VanDeVere said. "I've known him for 20 years."

When the Federated crew was about to leave, Marthaler told VanDeVere — "half joking, probably," VanDeVere said — that he'd return the favor someday.

This past week, he

See **PAYBACK** on **A3**



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Meeker Cooperative Light and Power Association lineman Shawn Marthaler (right) returns a favor to Federated Rural Electric lineman Kollin "Mort" VanDeVere (left) by responding to a mutual-aid call in Jackson County this past week.



BUSINESS BRIEFS

Local gas stations rebranding

Jackson's two SuperAmerica gas stations and convenience stores are being rebranded under the Speedway name.

The change is part of a nationwide rebranding in the wake of last year's purchase of SuperAmerica owner Andeavor by Marathon Petroleum.

Though the names are changing, company officials say store hours and much of the products and services offered will remain the same. Additionally, Speedway has a customer loyalty rewards program, and all SA rewards points will transfer. Gas cards will also continue to be honored.

Jackson's downtown SA opened in 1969; at the time it was the second SuperAmerica franchise in the entire country. A 50-year anniversary celebration is being planned at the downtown location, running from June 10-14 and featuring drawings, giveaways and specials.

Money available to help local business owners fix up façades

The Jackson Business Development Committee is teaming with the Jackson Economic Development Authority to help downtown business owners spruce up their storefronts.

A full \$25,000 is available to Jackson business owners looking to fix up their building façades. The money will be made available as five-year forgivable loans to owners of eligible properties.

"This is something the JBDC thought could help improve the aesthetics of downtown Jackson," said Tom Nelson, the city's contracted economic development coordinator. "It will help property owners improve the appearance of their storefronts and make downtown Jackson a more inviting place."

The minimum forgivable loan will be \$1,000; the maximum will be \$5,000. The money comes with a dollar-for-dollar match requirement.

Eligible properties include commercial buildings located within Jackson's central business district. Eligible improvements must be visible to the public and may include façade materials and construction, brickwork, painting, windows and doors, awnings, signage, lighting and landscaping.

"These will be limited funds," Nelson said, adding, "We want to target the needed areas in town."

Jackson will transform into hub of curbside commerce later this year

Jackson will transform into a hub of curbside commerce next month as the city hosts its annual citywide garage sales.

Dates of the citywide sales are May 2-4. Details on how to register sales are included in the April 14 Livewire, Jackson County's largest circulation newspaper.

Festival planning committee asks businesses, others to host events

Local businesses, along with social and civic organizations, churches, nonprofits, groups and individuals are being sought to help organize and host events, fundraisers and socials during this year's Jackson Town and Country Days festival.

Dave Schmidt, a member of the Jackson Area Chamber of Commerce's Town and Country Days Planning Team, said any and all ideas are welcome as the committee looks to make Jackson's 2019 summer festival bigger and better than ever.

Those interested in hosting an event are encouraged to contact the chamber office.

This year's Jackson Town and Country Days festival is scheduled for June 1-2.

Downtown business is local outlet for tickets to Opry Christmas show

A downtown Jackson business is the local outlet for tickets to the 11th annual Opry Christmas Jackson Style live musical extravaganza.

Tickets for reserved seating to the two Dec. 7 shows are available now at Colleen Anderson Insurance Agency on Jackson's Main Street.

Proceeds raised from the sale of tickets benefit community-building Jackson Kiwanis Club-sponsored activities.

Jackson home sales rebound

by JUSTIN R. LESSMAN
Publisher

Assessor: Ag land values down, residential values steady to higher

Ag land values across Jackson County slid sharply last year even as residential values held steady or slightly increased.

Total estimated market value of Jackson County in 2019 totals around \$3.2 billion, Jackson County Assessor Jason McCaslin reported at last week's board of appeal and equalization meetings in Jackson and Lakefield, down nearly \$143 million — or 4.3 percent — from the year prior.

The culprit is tillable ag land. "We saw reduced tillable values in 2018 of 6.12 percent," McCaslin said.

The Minnesota Department of Revenue had pegged the decrease in county tillable land values at around 9 percent based on numbers collected during its study period, which ended Sept. 30 of last year, McCaslin said. However, a number of qualified sales occurred in the three months following that indicating the market was strengthening, or at least stabilizing, in the last quarter of 2018, he added.

"As I have always stated I would use as much information as possible to ensure accuracy in values, I felt an aggressive downward adjustment was not warranted," he said.

Rural residential values increased by an average of 3.5 percent in 2018, McCaslin said, while in-town residential valuations held steady or increased a bit. But even if a local taxpayer's home value didn't go up at all, McCaslin said, the slide in ag land values will still likely mean homeowners will be responsible for a greater share of the overall county tax burden.

"Homeowners may see that even if their value didn't change, their tax liability may rise slightly," he said.

In 2017, Lakefield had only one fewer qualified sale than Jackson.

"Lakefield was a close second," McCaslin said.

The county as a whole tallied 85 qualified residential real estate sales in 2018, with Jackson sales

accounting for nearly half and Lakefield sales close to a quarter of them. The city of Heron Lake notched six qualified sales in 2018, with Okabena recording three and Alpha one. Wilder had no qualified residential sales last year, McCaslin

said.

"Wilder has had only one qualified sale in the last five years," he said. "Alpha, too, has had very limited sales over the last five years."

The remaining 16 sales were rural residential sales.



Clockwise from top: Power poles lie in various states of disrepair along Highway 86 south of Lakefield following last week's ice storm. Bucket trucks are out in full force over the past weekend working to restore power as quickly as possible. A line crew works in blustery conditions north of Lakefield Friday morning.

ICE STORM: Thousands of locals lose power

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response was delayed somewhat by treacherous road conditions and the widespread power outages across southwestern Minnesota. As road conditions improved, however, linemen from across the region started descending on Jackson County. At one point, the number of assisting linemen in the county exceeded 55.

"We appreciate the 56 linemen who traveled up to four hours and worked diligently for us," Scott

Reimer, Federated's general manager, said Sunday as the final few homes in Jackson County were reconnected. "Line crews commented how nice Federated members were in offering them food in the field. In addition, we are amazed by the generosity of businesses and organizations who offered or donated food, by the restaurants who provided meals for the crews on short notice and, yes, our farmers, who helped pull line trucks out

of the wet, muddy fields and ditches. What a team effort."

Despite the presence of downed electric lines across the county, the fact thousands were without heat and other amenities for days and treacherous road conditions for a time, Jackson County Sheriff Shawn Haken said his office received no reports of injuries.

"From that standpoint, it was quiet on our end, which was fantastic,"

he said Monday morning. "That freed us up to assist in other ways." Haken said his office coordinated with Federated and the county's public works department to help barricade roadways until downed lines were removed and help in other ways as needed, including by delivering meals to linemen this past Friday.

"It was a great team effort across the board," Haken said.

City to pitch in on branch cleanup

The city plans to pitch in on branch collection in the wake of last week's ice storm.

City of Jackson residents may place downed tree branches from the ice storm on the boulevard next to the street. Branches are to be cut in pieces no longer than 8 feet long and be placed parallel to the street.

The city street department will begin branch pickup on Monday, April 22. City staff will not go onto yards and private property to pick up branches.

PAYBACK: From 2005

Continued from A1

did.

When the call for help went out from Federated Rural Electric last Thursday in the wake of an ice storm that knocked power out to thousands across Jackson County, Marthaler, now a lineman at Litchfield-based Meeker Cooperative Light and Power Association, was among the first to respond.

"It's been 15 years," VanDeVere said, "but he finally came and repaid the favor."

Marthaler, the son of Federated operations manager Joe Marthaler, brought with him another lineman and some equipment. The two Litchfield linemen were among the more than 55 from across the region who responded to assist Federated.

They were on the scene for four days. "For them to volunteer to help us out was huge," VanDeVere said. "It really made a difference."

"FOR THEM TO VOLUNTEER TO HELP US OUT WAS HUGE."

Kollin "Mort" VanDeVere

GLOBAL: A viral fall

Continued from A1

"If you can't laugh at yourself, then you shouldn't be in this business," he said.

Richards said he was responding to a jackknifed semi on Highway 86 last Thursday as Kelly Mitchell, chief deputy with the Jackson County Sheriff's Office, approached in his car to assist. Mitchell had his dash camera on.

"He pulled up at the opportune moment — or inopportune, as far as I was concerned — and got it all on his dash cam," Richards said. "He told me the first thing he did

after that, and before getting out of his car to assist, was turn off the camera so it didn't catch him doing the same thing."

Upon verifying Richards was uninjured and getting the approval of the state patrol, Jackson County Sheriff Shawn Haken posted the dashcam video on the sheriff's office's Facebook page and a star was born.

"Sheriff Haken was the driving force in sharing it," Richards said, "and from there, it went to the world."

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