

By Addie Broyles

You know Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative as the company that keeps your lights on. Other cooperatives in the Bluebonnet territory are flipping switches of their own — in ways you might not expect.

Every time an item is purchased at the Burleson County Co-op Store in Caldwell, it's not just a sale. It's a return on the investment its members paid to own a stake in the feed store.

When Aubrey and Perrine Noelke of Belle Vie Farm & Kitchen near Thrall sell their pasture-raised meats at Chaparral Coffee in Lockhart, the sale ripples through the Central Texas Farmers Co-op, where success is shared.

And when members of the Washington County Wildlife Society gather to learn about being good stewards of the wildlife roaming their properties, the cooperative-model group's wisdom is shared with its more than 350 members.

According to the National Cooperative Business Association, about one in three Americans belong to a cooperative of some kind.

Cooperatives — not just electric cooperatives like Bluebonnet — have been the lifeblood of rural America since the early 1900s, when residents started organizing cooperatively run businesses to help them do everything from negotiating a good price for corn to advocating for fair working conditions.

By definition, a cooperative is a business or organization owned and run by the people who use it. Whether they are farmers, consumers or community organizations, the members call the shots and share the benefits, instead of earning profits for outside investors. Co-ops focus on members' needs, and each member typically has an equal vote in how the cooperative is run, no matter how much cotton they grow or how much electricity they buy.

That is central to the core principles of all cooperatives, no matter what industry they serve. **See the 7 cooperative principles, Page 19.**

The roots of co-ops in America date back to the 1750s with the first mutually run insurance groups. In 1844, the Rochdale Pioneers, a group of weavers and artisans in England, founded the first consumer cooperative,

Continued on Page 20



WHAT IS A CO-OP?

Cooperatives are member-owned and democratically run businesses or organizations that return profits through capital credits or dividends. Each member gets one vote — whether farmer, consumer, worker or business — in how their cooperative is run. The U.S. Department of Agriculture names October as National Cooperative Month, launched in 1964 to honor co-ops' impact on communities and the economy. Nearly one-third of Americans belong to one. The United Nations has identified 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives.

INSIDE

Bluebonnet is part of Texas' power legacy, **Page 18**

The 7 cooperative principles, **Page 19**

Timeline: America's electric cooperatives, **Pages 18-19**

Bluebonnet-area cooperatives, **Pages 20-21**

Follow Bluebonnet on social media all October for giveaways — and ways to celebrate co-op values.

Central Texas Farmers Co-op member Aubrey Noelke checks on the pasture-raised pigs at his farm near Thrall.

The pigs dine on dropped fruit and nuts from the native trees they live under.

Their diet is supplemented with organic grains.

Sarah Beal photo



CENTRAL TEXAS FARMERS CO-OP

Eight member producers from Hays, Caldwell, Blanco, Bastrop, Travis and Williamson counties

- Community-supported agriculture model founded in 2016
- Buyers purchase seasonal subscriptions for shares of meat, poultry, vegetables, eggs and cheese from all member farms
- Goods can be purchased weekly at any of the five pickup locations, one of which is Chaparral Coffee in Lockhart
- centraltexasfarmers.com

BLUEBONNET IS A PART OF TEXAS' POWER LEGACY

Electric cooperatives like Bluebonnet play a vital role in powering communities, especially in rural areas. In honor of National Cooperative Month, we're highlighting how your member-owned organization operates on the principles of local governance, service and community investment.

Founded on Aug. 2, 1939, Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative — originally known as the Lower Colorado River Electric Cooperative — was created to bring electricity to rural Central Texas under the Rural Electrification Act signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936. As one of the earliest co-ops in Texas, Bluebonnet quickly expanded access to power in underserved communities.

By 1940, the cooperative had 646 miles

of line and 1,468 members. In 1965, it was renamed Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative. Today, Bluebonnet serves more than 142,000 meters across 12,700 miles of power lines in 14 Central Texas counties. Over the past five years, that number has grown by 32%, making Bluebonnet one of the fastest-growing electric cooperatives in the nation.

The co-op prioritizes system reliability, preventive maintenance and long-term infrastructure planning to deliver safe, affordable power. Its electric rates remain among the lowest in Texas, and its member-service commitment continues to meet the needs of a rapidly growing region. Bluebonnet also supports local communities through grants, scholarships and civic involvement.



Trey Townsend, left, and his dad, Bubba, at a new construction site in Red Rock. Sarah Beal photo

THE 7 COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES

These principles were adopted in 1995 by the International Cooperative Alliance, a global organization that supports and promotes cooperatives across all industries. They reflect the core values that define cooperatives: democratic governance, member ownership and a focus on serving members' needs rather than generating profit.

1. Open and voluntary membership: Open to all who can use the services and accept membership responsibilities.

2. Democratic member control: Members actively participate in governance and have equal voting rights.

3. Members' economic participation: Members financially support the cooperative in a fair and proportional way based on their use of its services and share in the cooperative's financial benefits.

4. Autonomy and independence: Cooperatives remain self-sufficient, member-controlled organizations. Even when they partner with outside entities, they maintain their independence and identity.

5. Education, training and information: Ongoing learning and communication helps members, employees and leaders make informed decisions and support the cooperative's success.

6. Cooperation among cooperatives: Working with other local, regional, national and international cooperatives strengthens services and benefits members and communities.

7. Concern for community: Cooperatives are committed to the long-term well-being and development of the communities they serve.

Sources: International Cooperative Alliance, National Rural Electric Cooperative Association

A TIMELINE OF AMERICA'S ELECTRIC COOPERATIVES



1900-1929

Electricity transformed U.S. cities, boosting quality of life and productivity. By the late 1920s, most urban homes were wired. Private utilities, however, deemed rural areas too costly to serve due to distance and sparse populations.

1937-1940

Dozens of co-ops — many in Texas — energize homes for the first time. The electric cooperative that became Bluebonnet is founded in 1939.



Mid-1960s

Cooperatives begin computerized billing and records.

Late 1960s-1970s

Utilities introduce control centers for real-time monitoring of electric grids and management of power loads. Coordination among co-ops improves power reliability and planning.



2000s-2010s

Co-ops begin adopting technologies that remotely collect electric usage data and automate parts of the power distribution system, allowing the grid to detect faults, reroute power and alert control centers.



1935

President Franklin D. Roosevelt establishes the Rural Electrification Administration to bring electricity to rural America through low-interest loans.



1940

Nearly 600 cooperatives in 46 states serve nearly 1.5 million rural Americans. With support from REA, co-ops build 200,000+ miles of power lines.



1980s-1990s

Electric co-ops implement supervisory control and data acquisition, or SCADA, systems to monitor power lines and substations, and geographic information system technology to improve outage response.



1995

The International Cooperative Alliance adopts the Seven Cooperative Principles. (See above.)



Today

Nearly 900 electric distribution cooperatives serve 42 million people across 48 states, powering over 22 million homes, businesses and farms.



establishing the model and principles that guide today's cooperatives.

The National Cooperative Business Association CLUSA International reports that today, there are approximately 65,000 cooperatively run organizations in the United States.

Of all cooperative businesses, electric cooperatives are among those with the largest membership. Some products and businesses that are household names are run by cooperatives, including Ace Hardware, Do-it-Best Corporation, Blue Diamond Almonds, Sunkist, Land O'Lakes, Ocean Spray, Bob's Red Mill and REI.

CHS Inc., a Minnesota-based grain and agriculture supply co-op, generates the most revenue of any cooperative in the United States — more than \$45 billion annually, according to the National Cooperative Bank.

Nearly 900 electric cooperatives operate across 48 states, serving 42 million Americans and powering more than half the nation's landmass. Electric co-ops maintain over 2.7 million miles of distribution lines nationwide and employ more than half a million people.

In Texas, 76 electric cooperatives serve around 3 million members, according to Texas Electric Cooperatives, an association that represents the interests of the state's member co-ops. The association advocates for cooperatives at the state and national levels and provides products and services for its members, including the publication of this magazine.

"Texas electric cooperatives have a long history of working to improve the quality of lives of their members and their communities," said Martin Bevins, Texas Electric Cooperative's vice president of communications and member services.

"Across the state and the country co-ops invest in their members' future by providing countless student scholarships for higher education and sponsoring the Government-in-Action Youth Tour which has been providing a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Washington D.C. for co-op youth since 1965. Communities are often safer because of the support co-ops provide to volunteer fire departments and first responders. In fact, two of the seven guiding cooperative principles: Concern for Community and Education, Training and Information are at the center of why co-ops stay focused on programs like these," Bevins said.



Manager Glenn Tydlacka began working at Burleson County Co-op Store in 1973 after graduating from high school and became manager in 1979. Sarah Beal photo

BURLESON COUNTY CO-OP STORE

Caldwell, 111 W. Mustang St., about 260 members

- One of the last remaining cooperative feed stores in the Bluebonnet region
- Organized in 1945 by Ben Wolz, who was also a 40-year member of the Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative Board. His son, Lyle, was a Bluebonnet Board member for 30 years
- The farmer-owned cooperative provides everything from feed, fertilizer and seed to veterinary supplies and sporting goods
- \$10 one-time membership fee
- Members receive a dividend based on their annual purchases

Texas is also home to thousands of cooperatives across nearly every sector of the economy, particularly agriculture, according to Christy Lewis, executive director of the Texas Agricultural Cooperative Council. Lewis works with about 250 rural cooperatives across Texas, including those that support farm supply stores, cotton gins and grain elevators.

One of the largest agricultural co-ops in the country is Farmers Cooperative Compress in Lubbock. With approximately 9,300 grower-owners, it is the largest cotton warehousing entity in the world.

Cooperatives like these can help ranchers and farmers negotiate better prices on everything from meat processing to seed. Lewis predicts that cooperatives will play an increasingly critical role in the future of smaller, family-owned farms and ranches across rural Texas.

Rural communities thrive with the help of cooperatively run businesses. The co-ops are often deeply involved in community matters because the residents are also the people making co-op decisions.

Bluebonnet, for example, follows a long-standing tradition of providing more than just electricity to the communities it serves.

The cooperative allocates money each year to support community groups and events, schools and scholarships.

In 2025 so far, Bluebonnet has provided 250 cooling fans, 2,160 cases of water and sponsored or made cash donations to 100 events across the service area, including the Lee County Fair in Giddings, the Watermelon Thump in Luling, the Back-to-School Bash in Cedar Creek, the Washington County Fair Shrimp Boil in Brenham and the annual Resource Fair in Manor.

Phyllis Hillhouse can describe how Bluebonnet's efforts helped her forge a stronger bond with the members of her community.

She manages Zedler Mill, a historic cotton gin along the San Marcos River near Luling. Last year, she worked with Bluebonnet representatives to host an event celebrating the mill's 100th anniversary. The cooperative set up cooling fans to keep about 800 guests comfortable, and provided an exhibit showing how electricity works.

Being an 18-year member of Bluebonnet has brought Phyllis and her husband, James, other benefits.

When she receives her electric bill, she does a little dance, she said. That's because the bill is as much as 40% lower than the



Washington County Wildlife Society member Cary Dietzmann on his land in Brenham. Cattle grazing removes older, coarse vegetation that deer don't prefer, allowing tender new growth to emerge — a favorite food for deer. Sarah Beal photo

WASHINGTON COUNTY WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Five wildlife management associations, more than 350 members

- Groups of landowners work cooperatively to find ways to maintain their properties' habitats and wildlife
- Founded 25 years ago
- The first group of this kind was created in the 1970s to help landowners develop management plans for deer populations threatened by overhunting
- \$20-a-year dues; twice yearly meetings with dinner and educational programs from game wardens, biologists and others about land stewardship that extends beyond property lines



Joe Stafford photo

'I am telling you, this is the best electric service I've had.'

— Phyllis Hillhouse,
18-YEAR BLUEBONNET MEMBER

ones she received in other Texas cities where she has lived. Earlier this summer, she said the bill for their 3,500-square-foot home was less than \$150 for each of three consecutive months. "And we keep it cool," she added.

Hillhouse even had good things to say about the few power outages they have experienced.

"The few times that our electricity has gone out, I get the warning on my phone," she said of Bluebonnet's outage text notifications. "They keep me posted. Then, I look out and see trucks troubleshooting. They are Johnny-on-the-spot."

Whether it's Bluebonnet, the Burleson County Co-op Store, the Central Texas Farmers Co-op or the Washington County Wildlife Society — or any other type of cooperative — the core principles create connections and shape futures.

That is because cooperatives don't just serve people — they are people. It is ownership with a heartbeat. ■

Sources: Texas Electric Cooperatives, Corporation Works, National Cooperative Bank

MANY KINDS OF COOPERATIVES

From electric utilities and feed stores to coffee shops and cotton gins — cooperatives take many forms. Here are some of the primary types:

UTILITY CO-OPS: Member-owned public utility providers for services like water, electricity or telecommunications.

CONSUMER CO-OPS: Businesses like Burleson County Co-op Store in Caldwell, which lets customers become members and earn a year-end dividend, or companies like REI and Ace Hardware are owned by customer-members.

WORKER CO-OPS: Businesses owned and run by their workers, such as Patchwork Farm in Manor.

INSURANCE CO-OPS: Member-owned mutual insurers serving policyholders, like Nationwide and Farm Bureau Insurance.

HOUSING CO-OPS: Residents pool resources to own and control their buildings or communities, usually in urban areas.

PRODUCER CO-OPS: Producers join to market or process goods, such as the Central Texas Farmers Co-op. Cotton gins and grain elevators are classic examples.

PURCHASING CO-OPS: Individuals, organizations or businesses — like childcare providers or schools — combine buying power to get better prices and terms. Many area schools use co-ops like BuyBoard, TIPS-USA or Texas SmartBuy.

Sources: Cooperation Texas, National Cooperative Business Association