



North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives
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March 17, 2025

To: North Dakota Senate Industry and Business Committee

From: Josh Kramer, general manager, North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives

RE: **Support of House Bill 1524**

Chairman Barta and members of the Senate Industry and Business Committee, on behalf of the North Dakota Association of Rural Electric Cooperatives (NDAREC) and our members, we extend our support for House Bill 1524.

Since the early 1990s, our state association has been providing development services through our rural development center that is supported by rural electric and broadband cooperatives in North Dakota.

Our center provides technical assistance and connection to resources, including grants and low interest financing, for communities as well start-up and expanding cooperatives, small businesses and non-profit organizations. We've assisted initiatives and projects in the areas of rural emergency services, health care, childcare, grocery and local food access, meat processing, housing, infrastructure, quality of life amenities, and more!

We, and the cooperatives we represent, are dedicated to improving the quality of life for rural people and rural places. Though we've made many impacts across the state, there is always more demand for the technical assistance that we provide, and limited funding and financing capabilities — to serve all the needs. Our tracking list shows 76 projects in process or in response-to-inquiry or exploratory phases. These projects need guidance, handholding, organizational assistance, help obtaining grants and loans, and coordination with other regional and state efforts.

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Regional councils play a crucial role in advancing projects in our state, and are important partners, with the shared goal dedicated to improving the quality of life in rural places. We often work together with some combination of support and loans through cities, counties, businesses, and philanthropic organizations, to package and move projects forward.

With these experiences, we see first-hand the need for more hands-on assistance in communities and counties that can't afford economic development staff or that lack organized entities focused on community betterment.

Several communities in North Dakota are growing, but there are many that are not. County population estimates through 2023 show only 10 counties growing in population since 2020. Looking for consistent growth, only four counties make the list: Cass, Burleigh, Morton and Billings.

Small towns matter. Among North Dakota's 355 cities, only 92 have a population greater than 500 and 263 are below this threshold. These communities are in places that produce our food and energy. The people who live in these rural and frontier places deserve access to basic goods and services.

As a state, we must be deliberate about empowering all communities to capitalize on the growth, opportunity and the prosperity potential that exists, as we all benefit, when they do.

The dedicated funding in HB 1524, will better equip the state's eight regional development councils to serve their respective areas, by providing much needed resources for boots on the ground, enabling more dedicated technical expertise and by allowing more partnerships to flourish, that will assist communities in addressing challenges and capitalizing opportunities.

NDAREC urges a "Do Pass" recommendation on HB1524.