

# 2020 J.C. Brown CEO Communication Leadership Award

**Name \*** Maureen Kuhlman

**Job Title \*** Director of Strategic Services, Oregon Rural Electric Cooperative  
Wilsonville, Oregon

**Name \*** Ted Case      **Job Title \*** Executive Director

**Electric Cooperative \*** Oregon Rural Electric Cooperative Association  
CEO since 2009;  
Case has not served as CEO of another co-op.

**The Cooperative Difference (35 points) – In what ways does the CEO’s commitment to communication, both internal and external, help advance the seven cooperative principles, philosophy and way of doing business? Maximum of 500 words. \***

Ted Case is a national leader when it comes to espousing the Seven Cooperative Principles. Here are just a few examples:

Education, Training and Information:

Ted is the author of two books chronicling the seminal moments in electric cooperative history: "Power Plays: The U.S. Presidency, Electric Cooperatives and the Transformation of Rural America" and "Poles, Wires and War."

"Power Plays," endorsed by presidential historian Michael Beschloss, is required text for Cooperative Communicators to achieve their certification. The late Bob Bergland, a former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, said the book is a "must read for electric co-op leaders." "Poles, Wires and War" explores the dramatic effort to establish electric cooperatives in South Vietnam during the war. The book has resonated with Vietnam-era veterans involved in the co-op program.

During his time at ORECA, Ted has educated thousands of co-op and non-co-op audience members about the cooperative principles, free of charge, while donating scores of books to schools, libraries and veterans.

Ted consistently offers classes on the cooperatives at ORECA conferences and is unafraid to tackle difficult topics such as lessons learned from cooperatives that have lost sight of the Seven Principles.

#### Concern for Community:

By the following actions, Ted has advanced literacy in rural communities, demonstrated leadership with respect to the safety of co-op members, and shown concern for community beyond our borders:

- Spearheading an Oregon electric cooperative effort to partner with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to mail free, age-appropriate books to households with children under five years of age. Based on our success, the electric cooperative national brand, Touchstone Energy, is exploring a nationwide program.
- Focusing ORECA communications resources on the importance of preparing for the Cascadia Earthquake, which seismologists believe will devastate the Northwest in the next 50 years.
- Advocating for responsible vegetation management policies in our National Forests, including ORECA congressional testimony supporting legislation to help prevent the deadly wildfires that occurred in California.
- Coordinating Oregon line crews to assist other utilities, including linemen who travelled across the country after Hurricane Sandy.
- Forming a partnership with the NRECA International Program to electrify villages in Guatemala. Oregon electric co-ops are scheduled to electrify Aldea Nueva village in April 2020.

#### Cooperation Among Cooperatives:

During National Cooperative Month, Ted organizes a celebration luncheon in our State Capitol with elected officials, credit unions, telecommunications and agricultural cooperatives.

Ted served on the NRECA 21st Century Cooperative Committee, designed to

provide a compass for the future of America's electric cooperatives. He is the author of the committee's mission statement later adopted by NRECA and many cooperatives: "Our purpose is to power communities and empower members to improve the quality of their lives."

Democratic Member Control:

With interest in the electric cooperative resolutions process waning, the NRECA Board of Directors created the Resolutions Review Committee to increase member involvement. As a Team Leader, Ted gained recognition for developing a presentation and recommendations that revitalized the resolutions process nationwide, with NRECA lauding Oregon's engagement as a model for the entire co-op program.

**Strategic Approach (25 points) – In what ways does the CEO integrate communication into the organization's strategic planning and management processes? Maximum 500 words. \***

To understand the communications program at ORECA, it is important to know where we started when Ted took over ten years ago. At that time, ORECA had a nominal communications program (no magazine, newsletter, and only a small social media presence). That was soon to change. Ted met with our board and our staff of three employees and outlined a strategic plan to raise Oregon's electric cooperatives' profile by making communications a centerpiece of our organization. His vision included highlighting the cooperative difference and the importance of federal hydropower, which is 95% of the electric cooperative power supply in Oregon but faces political pressure in the state and at the federal level. (Both Democratic and Republican administrations had proposed to sell off the federal dams.)

Working with our board, Ted proposed that a communications program become a priority action item in the ORECA 2010 strategic plan. We started with "This Week at ORECA," a fast-paced email update to the ORECA membership about the activities of the association. By overhauling our website and creating a regular digital newsletter – Keeping Pace – we developed new ways to communicate with ORECA members, industry and opinion leaders. ORECA staff created the content and partnered with the Ruralite Services (now Pioneer Utility Resources) on the design. In only its second year, "Keeping Pace" was recognized as the best external newsletter in the statewide category in the Spotlight on Excellence

Awards.

In 2012, during another strategic planning session, Ted proposed a new monthly statewide magazine. Launching a magazine was a bold endeavor for a small statewide because it required a significant commitment of staff time and resources in ORECA's budget. However, Ted convinced our board and staff that the publication would yield tangible results with the policymakers and opinion leaders who are crucial to ORECA's success. The board committed the resources, and "ORECA Ruralite" was launched in 2013. Two years after its initial publication, "ORECA Ruralite" won the prestigious Haggard Award for best statewide magazine.

Subsequent strategic planning has focused on enhancing our education program, social media program, and launching a new grassroots political initiative, ORECA–Action, to activate our members on issues such as hydropower and provide regular communications to co–op leaders, employees and co–op members on key issues. All strategic planning initiatives are reviewed in detail at the outset of each board meeting, with Ted reviewing the goals and objectives.

Ted has also engaged the services of an Edelman Public Relations consultant to evaluate ORECA's overall communications program. This analysis led to an updated plan to communicate the higher–level, purpose–driven impact that Oregon electric co–ops have on Oregon's rural communities.

Over the course of a decade, strategic planning has been a critical tool for Ted to work closely with our board and staff to propose, create and evaluate a robust statewide communications program that punches far beyond its weight.

**Integrated Approach (20 points) – In what ways does the CEO demonstrate support for the cooperative's communication staff? Maximum of 500 words. \***

We take pride in how ORECA has produced an award–winning communications program despite being one of the smallest statewide organizations in the country. But, we also acknowledge the large network of co–op communicators responsible for our success. For our in–house operation, Ted created a new "Communications Specialist" position giving broad autonomy to help build a communications program from scratch. He encouraged participation in a regional association of co–op communicators, NRECA's Connect Conference, and included a generous budget for training and professional development. The

communications program has flourished because of Ted's commitment to making it a priority with our existing legislative and regulatory programs.

ORECA's program is closely aligned with our partner communications cooperative, Pioneer Utility Resources. Located outside Portland, Oregon, Pioneer assists with our publications and social media program, along with consumer-owned utilities in 16 states. This year, Ted applied for and was selected for a seat on the seven member Pioneer Board of Directors. Ted has made clear his primary objective as a board member would be to support Pioneer's team of Certified Cooperative Communicators and other professionals with the resources necessary (compensation, training, etc.) to meet the needs of their members. He is currently the only electric cooperative statewide manager on the Pioneer Board.

Ted has also formed a close partnership with communicators who represent Oregon's 18 electric cooperatives and are an integral part of our program. He has worked to break down silos and includes the communicators in weekly updates provided to the ORECA Board and the co-op CEOs. There is broad content sharing among the statewide and our member co-ops, and Ted has organized a committee of Oregon co-op communicators to exchange information about communications and political activities of the statewide. Moreover, he has taken steps to recognize communicators' value to the program. Upon his arrival to ORECA, Ted established a new "Rural Electrification Award" given annually to a cooperative communicator for outstanding achievement. Working with the ORECA board, Ted established nomination and presentation criteria, which includes the award being bestowed at our highest profile event – the ORECA Annual Meeting.

In his remarks last year presenting the award, Ted said he agreed with the assessment of former NRECA CEO Glenn English, who believed that along with the bronze statue of a co-op lineman in the lobby of the NRECA headquarters there should also be a statue of a co-op communicator because of their equally vital role in the electric co-op program.

By words and actions, Ted has certainly demonstrated his support for our staff and for those who help us with our mission. He has also been a national voice for cooperative communicators. For instance, the NRECA 21st Century Committee report made several recommendations regarding the future of electric

cooperatives. Ted was a strong advocate for the report's Recommendation on the Importance of Cooperative Communication: "That the messages, means and modes of communication to effectively engage member owners and stakeholders be given the same level of strategic focus as the delivery of electricity."

**Measures of Success (20 points) – Please note indicators of the success of the cooperative's communication/marketing programs during the CEO's tenure, and on which he or she has had an influence. This criterion is not intended to be an evaluation or showcase of the cooperative's communication products and services as defined in the larger Spotlight on Excellence awards program. Maximum of 500 words. \***

Over the past decade, ORECA has had measurable success communicating our priorities: the importance of renewable federal hydroelectricity, the cooperative difference and the importance of rural economies.

Public Relations Success:

ORECA participated in a successful "Clean Hydro" marketing campaign designed to build long-term political support for large hydroelectric projects. The campaign included television, print and social media advertising focused on increasing support among key demographic groups. Recent polling indicates the campaign has increased support for hydroelectricity as a renewable resource. Our consistent messaging also led ORECA to be featured in numerous media outlets, including a New York Times story about an ORECA-sponsored gubernatorial debate highlighting the importance of hydropower.

Advocacy Success:

Oregon is one of the most active legislatures in the country with energy legislation, and ORECA has won victories in high-profile legislative battles involving hydropower because of our communications. Key legislative leaders who were critical of the dams have even changed their perspective, noting the persuasiveness of ORECA's communication and lobbying efforts.

ORECA's hydropower advocacy led to a private meeting with current U.S. Energy Secretary Rick Perry. Ted urged Secretary Perry to withdraw the administration's proposal to auction off the federal hydro system to the highest bidder. Secretary Perry conceded the proposal would not move forward.

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For seven years, ORECA pursued a lobbying and communications campaign to persuade the U.S. Congress of the importance of vegetation management in our National Forests around power lines. This included two rounds of ORECA testimony before congressional committees. In 2018, Congress passed a landmark National Forest law that will help curtail deadly western wildfires. ORECA was given significant credit for its passage by key congressional advocates.

ORECA's broadband advocacy led to a private meeting in rural Oregon with current FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai, who vowed to pursue efforts to help bridge the digital divide.

Recognition:

Ruralite Magazine has been a tremendous ORECA success story. An independent readership survey by GfK MRI reported that the time spent reading Ruralite was well above the most highly rated magazine titles in the country. Our content has also received recognition, with ORECA Ruralite receiving the prestigious Haggard Award for best statewide magazine. Ted is a prolific contributor, and as one Haggard judge noted, the "quality of articles and effective distribution of articles on electric cooperatives establishes the publication as an advocate for their interests as well as the interests of consumers and members."

In 2016, Ruralite Services awarded Ted its Communicator of the Year, citing his well-written features on interesting topics and monthly thought-provoking columns.

Ted also receives high marks for his speaking. Mark Glaess, the former CEO of the Minnesota Rural Electric Association, said Ted twice received the association's highest rating at their Energy Issues Summit. A Basin Electric Cooperative communicator wrote that Ted "was one of the best speakers" who ever appeared at their events. He is also a gifted moderator, having moderated discussions at co-op meetings with individuals such as Governor Mario Cuomo, Karl Rove, Speaker Newt Gingrich and Senator Bill Bradley.

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