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## 2024 AWARD CYCLE DEADLINES AND KEY DATES

Entries Accepted*.....	October 12, 2023 through December 1, 2023
Judging .....	December 16, 2023 through February 23, 2024
Edgar F. Chesnutt Award Winner Notified.....	March 3, 2023
Winners Notified.....	Week of March 11, 2024
Winners Announced.....	April 1, 2024

*\*Note, most entries will be submitted digitally via the Award Force platform. (Categories that may require hard copy submissions are noted beginning on page 5.)*

If needed, please send all hard copies of submission materials to the Spotlight on Excellence Administrator at the address below. Materials must be postmarked no later than Friday, December 1, 2023.

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Blue Wagon Group  
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Dallas, TX 75235

## About the Spotlight on Excellence Awards Program

The Spotlight on Excellence Awards Program has recognized a body of outstanding work produced annually by electric cooperative communication and marketing professionals across the network for more than 35 years. The award categories reflect the wide variety of communications used by today's co-op communicators, and award winners showcase top-tier, industry-leading practices. Their outstanding achievements have lasting impact, demonstrate a high level of professionalism and deliver exceptional results.

### Reenergizing the 2024 Program

The Spotlight on Excellence Awards Program has sought to advance the recognition, education and professionalism of electric cooperative communicators and their affiliated organizations since its inception in 1987. Administered by NRECA and the Council of Rural Electric Communicators (CREC), the program has evolved over the years in efforts to innovate and incorporate feedback from members and previous entrants about the program experience. This year's program has been revamped to feature:

- A streamlined submission process.
- Updated award categories that highlight digital, video and social platforms.
- Consolidated award classifications designed to enhance the competitiveness of the program, while fostering more equitable conditions that provide opportunities for cooperatives of all sizes to showcase their work.
- An expanded pool of judges, updated judging rubrics and a comprehensive feedback process for all entries.

Additional NRECA and CREC initiatives under the umbrella of the Spotlight on Excellence Awards include two individual awards: The LaBerge Award for Excellence in Strategic Communications and the J.C. Brown CEO Communication Leadership Award. Each of these awards are administered separately from the Spotlight Awards and have different qualifications and eligibility requirements.

Go to [cooperative.com](https://cooperative.com) for more information on all of NRECA's Cooperative Communication awards.

## Eligibility

NRECA voting members, including electric cooperatives, public power districts, G&T cooperatives and service members (including statewide associations) in good standing may submit a Spotlight on Excellence Award entry under Classifications 1 through 5. The submission must be original work produced and implemented by co-op employees or under the direction of their employees.

If you are unsure about your entry's eligibility, please contact the Spotlight on Excellence Administrator at [spotlightonexcellence@nreca.coop](mailto:spotlightonexcellence@nreca.coop) for clarification.

Wholly-owned subsidiaries, such as gas, broadband or solar, are eligible to submit entries in any category judged by classification; however, they are not eligible to submit entries in At-Large categories. If submitted, the entry will be disqualified and not issued a refund. Wholly-owned subsidiaries fall under Co-op Classification 5.

## Requirements for Spotlight on Excellence Award Entries

- Work submitted must have been implemented from November 22, 2022, through December 1, 2023.\*
- All entries must have been used to promote the mission of the cooperative organization (or wholly-owned subsidiary if entering in Classification 5).
- Consultants, agencies and freelancers are not allowed to submit entries to the awards program directly, nor are they eligible for awards in any category. Work done in conjunction with an agency, freelancer or consultant is acceptable if it meets the following criteria:
  - The cooperative must have regular, ongoing and strategic involvement in the creative, execution and review process of a project.
  - The entry is submitted by someone employed at the cooperative. Entries submitted by an agency, freelancer or consultant will be disqualified without a refund.
  - An explanation is given that clearly indicates what tasks or role the cooperative completed and what tasks or role the agency, freelancer or consultant completed specific to each entry. Entries lacking a description of how much work was done by the cooperative versus any agency, freelancer or consultant may have 10 points deducted from the final score, or the entry may be disqualified without a refund.

*\*The only exceptions to the stated timeframes are entries in Best Strategic Communications Campaign, Best External Event or Best Internal Engagement that are planned/developed in one year and implemented or evaluated in another year. In that case, the program or event may be entered once – either in the annual award cycle that coincides with the planning phase, or the annual award cycle coinciding with the implementation and evaluation phase.*

## **Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!**

### **Reasons for Disqualification**

An entry may be disqualified for the following reasons, without a refund:

- Payment was not received (with exception of BOGO entries).
- The entry was submitted after the deadline.
- If the entry does not follow all rules as outlined in this document, or is submitted without completing all required information.
- If it is revealed that an entrant was not forthright on their entry form.
- The entry was submitted by, or primarily created, implemented and/or evaluated by an agency, freelancer or consultant and not by the cooperative.
- If it is determined the cooperative did not have regular, ongoing and strategic involvement in the creation, execution and review process of a project.
- Organizations can submit more than one entry per category, but may not submit the same publication more than once in the Best Internal or Best External News Publication. Duplicates will be disqualified.

### **Co-op Classifications—Updated for 2024!**

For judging purposes, cooperatives are divided into five classifications. Although the classifications are updated for 2024, entrants continue to be judged against cooperatives of similar size to ensure an equitable playing field.

This division is based on the number of meters served, and whether a cooperative is a Distribution Co-op, Statewide Association, G&T, Service Member or a Wholly-owned Subsidiary. For most categories, you must select your classification. The breakdown of classifications is noted below:

- Classification 1: Distribution Cooperative from 1 - 22,999 meters
- Classification 2: Distribution Cooperative from 23,000 - 64,999 meters
- Classification 3: Distribution Cooperative with more than 65,000 meters
- Classification 4: Statewide Association, G&T or Service Member
- Classification 5: Wholly-owned Subsidiaries of an NRECA member cooperative

There are a total of 20 award categories. This year's program features revised and new categories, with greater emphasis on digital, video and social platforms.

Please read carefully as you select your categories, to ensure you understand the requirements and instructions for each category as noted below. If an entry has been submitted under an incorrect category, the Spotlight administrator will redirect your submission to the appropriate category. Please refer to Submission Information on page 12 for more details.

## Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!

### At-Large Award Categories

Award categories labeled “At-Large” are not separated and judged by co-op classification; all entries are judged together. NRECA and the CREC determined the quality of work in these categories is not affected by the size of the cooperative or its budget, so they are judged as one group. *Please note: Wholly-owned subsidiaries may not enter At-Large categories.*

WRITING ENTRIES: Category and Description	What to Submit
<p><b>1. Best News Story (At-Large Category)</b> Honors a time-sensitive external, internal or industry announcement. It differs from a feature story in that it is of immediate interest and focuses on facts and straight news reporting rather than narrative. Anything in the news report that could reasonably be disputed should be attributed. Syndicated, borrowed, or reprinted material is not eligible, nor are pieces written by freelancers, consultants or agencies.</p>	<p>PDF or URL link to the news release / announcement in the print or digital publication where it appeared.</p>
<p><b>2. Best Feature Story (At-Large Category)</b> Honors in-depth, interpretive coverage of a subject, or an entertaining, colorful story that informs the reader. It differs from a news story in that it is narrative in nature and shows significant depth, insight and/or new understanding of a topic, rather than focusing on the straight facts. It is not time-sensitive and is often evergreen. Only individual feature stories should be submitted, so if the story is part of a series, please submit only one story per entry. Syndicated, borrowed or reprinted material is not eligible, nor are pieces written by freelancers, consultants or agencies.</p>	<p>PDF of or URL link to the story in the print or digital channel / publication where it appeared.</p>
<p><b>3. Best Column or Blog Post (At-Large Category)</b> Honors an article or blog post that is produced regularly. It is typically written in the first- or second-person (I or you), and often includes the writer’s point of view. Examples may include first-person manager or employee columns/posts, external or internal editorials, etc. Only one column or blog post should be included per entry. Syndicated, borrowed or reprinted material is not eligible, nor are pieces written by freelancers, consultants or agencies.</p>	<p>PDF of or URL link to the column or blog post in the print or digital channel / publication where it appeared.</p>



## Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!

WRITING ENTRIES: Category and Description	What to Submit
<p><b>4. Best External News Publication</b> Honors print or digital newsletters, magazines or other publications produced regularly to deliver news and information to co-op members or related audiences. Use this category to submit any external news publication incorporated as part of another publication (such as local pages in your statewide magazine).</p>	<p>Hard copies, PDF(s) or URL link(s) to the three best issues from Dec. 2022 to Nov. 2023. (If publication is semi-annual, submit two.)</p>
<p><b>5. Best Internal News Publication</b> Honors print or digital internal newsletters, magazines or other publications produced regularly to deliver news and information to co-op directors, employees or related audiences. Newsletters or publications produced by third parties are not eligible.</p>	<p>Hard copies, PDF(s) or URL link(s) to the three best issues from Dec. 2022 to Nov. 2023. (If publication is semi-annual, submit two.)</p>
<p><b>6a. Best Special Publication – Small (1 to 8 pages)</b> Honors infrequent print materials for internal and/or external audiences such as one sheets, small brochures, quarterly reports, handbooks, mail pieces, etc. that do not exceed eight pages.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s), or URL link(s) to a sample. <i><b>PLEASE NOTE</b> - if submitting a hard copy entry, two hard copy samples of the publication will be required. Hard copy samples must be mailed to the Awards Administrator at the address listed on Pg. 1 of the Call for Entries and postmarked no later than Dec. 1, 2023.</i></p>
<p><b>6b. Best Special Publication – Large (More than 8 pages)</b> Honors infrequent print materials for internal and/or external audiences such as books, calendars, larger brochures, quarterly reports, handbooks, mail pieces, special employee or promotional reports, etc. that are more than eight pages long. Special editions of newsletters should be submitted in Category 4 or 5.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) to a sample. <i><b>PLEASE NOTE</b> - if submitting a hard copy entry, two hard copy samples of the publication will be required upon submission. Hard copy samples must be mailed to the Awards Administrator at the address listed on Pg. 1 of the Call for Entries and postmarked no later than Dec. 1, 2023.</i></p>

## Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!

### 7. Best Annual or Impact Report

Honors print or digital annual reports that effectively communicate the organization's mission, accomplishments and required financial information to the cooperative's membership. An impact report may contain some of the same elements as an annual report but focuses specifically on the co-op's impact in the community and conveys critical co-op achievements.

PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) to a sample.

**PLEASE NOTE** - if submitting a hard copy entry, two hard copy samples of the publication will be required upon submission. Hard copy samples must be mailed to the Awards Administrator at the address listed on Pg. 1 of the Call for Entries and postmarked no later than Dec. 1, 2023.

## Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!

DIGITAL ENTRIES: Category and Description	What to Submit
<p><b>8. Best Web-Based Project</b></p> <p>Honors the work of designers, developers and/or content creatives who create a visually appealing, interactive, web-based resource to inform, engage and/or educate internal/external audiences. Emphasis is placed on exceptional design, quality of content, usability and functionality. Examples may include a website, section or web page. It must be an original digital asset, website or web page created by a cooperative staff member; however, the use of pre-built templates is allowed.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) that showcase the project.</p>
<p><b>9. Most Innovative Use of Digital Engagement</b></p> <p>Utilizing digital tools and technology platforms to engage audiences in an informative, educational way. Entries can include one or more directly related components for interaction, education, information, advocacy, advertisement, promotion or e-commerce. Examples include email campaigns; podcasts and webinars that provide information or updates on a new product, service or timely announcement; an activity that gives users a virtual reality experience into the utility world; gamification of energy-saving initiatives; a custom mobile app (not already supplied by a vendor); chat programs; and other campaigns that personalize digital content. Social media campaigns should be entered in Category 11.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPGs(s) or URL link (and password, if necessary) to the program, mobile site, application or podcast hosting service. If your entry cannot easily be shared digitally, please provide a video in MP4 format showcasing the digital tool / resource / platform in action.</p>
<p><b>10. Best Social Media Post</b></p> <p>A single social media post featuring original content. The post should be creative, clearly showcase information and drive social engagement. Content cannot originate from a third-party, whether a contractor, vendor or online source. Social media campaigns should be entered in Category 11.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) that showcase the post.</p>
<p><b>11. Best Social Media Campaign</b></p> <p>Honors a strategic social-media campaign using original content that has clear goals, strategy and measurable results. Campaign can include posts on Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, X (formerly Twitter) or any combination of social media platforms. Examples include storm response campaigns, public education efforts on various topics or other social campaigns to engage target audiences in unique and creative ways. Content cannot originate from a third-party, whether a contractor, vendor or online source.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) that showcase the campaign or program.</p>



## Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!

DIGITAL ENTRIES: Category and Description	What to Submit
<p><b>12. Best Short-Form Video (Two Minutes or Less)</b> Honors an originally produced, short-form video that clearly/effectively conveys a message or tells a story, links to intended goals for video/distribution strategy for the target audience(s), is tightly-edited/well-paced and creative.</p>	<p>MP4 or URL link(s) to the video file or hosting site, and a script/storyboard in PDF or Word format, along with any special instructions for viewing. Videos with unscripted interviews or drone footage may submit storyboards in place of a script.</p>
<p><b>13. Best Long-Form Video (More Than Two Minutes)</b> Honors an originally-produced, long-form video that clearly/effectively conveys a message or tells a story, links to intended goals for video/distribution strategy for the target audience(s), is tightly-edited/well-paced and creative.</p>	

## Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!

ARTISTIC/DESIGN/OTHER ENTRIES: Category and Description	What to Submit
<p><b>14. Best Photo</b></p> <p>Honors a strong and engaging photograph (in black and white or color) that has been taken by an employee of the organization and used for publication, display or presentation. The photo should convey great composition, lighting, emotion and subject matter. Photos by freelancers or agencies, or other third parties are not allowed. <i>Note: Winning photos will be added to NRECA's libraries and may be used in future projects.</i></p>	<p>A high-resolution JPG of the photo and a PDF or screen shot of the photo in use. A URL link to the photo and use case is also acceptable.</p>
<p><b>15. Best Graphic Design</b></p> <p>Honors print or digital materials (newsletters, brochures, ads, calendars, etc.), logos, illustrations, charts, graphs/infographics, signage, car wraps, visual presentation themes and branding assets, etc. that demonstrate high production quality, capture attention and draw the viewer's eye to critical information. It must be original work designed by a cooperative staff member.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) to the final project/asset(s) in use. <i>Note, if the design was printed, two hard copy samples will be required from Gold Winner(s).</i></p>
<p><b>16. Best Digital or Print Ad</b></p> <p>Honors a single advertising piece (print, in-bill, digital, audio or outdoor) that demonstrates exemplary writing, creative graphics/design, and high production quality to promote an idea, service or product to a targeted audience through paid media. Brochures should be submitted in Category 6.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) to the final project/asset(s) in use. All entries, regardless of medium, must be accompanied by a PDF demonstrating proof of use.</p>

## Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!

ARTISTIC/DESIGN/OTHER ENTRIES: Category and Description	What to Submit
<p><b>17. Best External Event</b></p> <p>Honors an external event, program or live production that engages the public to inform external audience(s) or celebrate a co-op milestone. This can include an annual meeting, grand opening, special celebrations, youth programs, other meeting or conference. Internal programs should be submitted in Category 18.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) and/or URL link(s) showcasing materials used for the event, including key promotional materials, and up to six photos of the event and/or displays.</p>
<p><b>18. Best Internal Engagement</b></p> <p>Honors an internal program or event that engages internal co-op audiences, including co-op employees or Board members. This can include an employee appreciation event, a co-op wide training day, milestone celebration, etc.; or an internally developed program focusing on employee recognition, leadership, career mentorship, healthy living or other topic that promotes employee engagement or development. External events should be submitted in Category 17.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) and/or URL link(s) showcasing materials used for the event, including key promotional materials, and up to six photos of the event and/or displays.</p>
<p><b>19. Best Wild Card</b></p> <p>Honors any communication or marketing effort that does not fit another category, such as exhibits and displays, specialty item(s) that shows originality and has an intentional goal in promoting a co-op message, and other items or programs that have an educational or entertaining appeal. Mass vendor-produced items that simply feature co-op logos applied to mugs, novelties, hats, T-shirts, etc. are not eligible.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) showcasing the program or materials.</p>

## Award Categories & Submission Criteria—Updated for 2024!

FEATURED ENTRY: Category and Description	What to Submit
<p><b>20. Best Strategic Communications Campaign and Edgar F. Chesnutt Award</b></p> <p>Honors an internal or external initiative that features either a short- or long-term, multi-channel communications campaign designed to inform, educate, persuade or promote an action (e.g., public relations campaign, program rollout, etc.) through specific objectives, budget and results. The campaign can include print, digital and physical elements. Entries should be program-specific, rather than a department's work plan.</p> <p>You will need to summarize the Research, Action, Communication, and Evaluation steps used for the campaign as specifically as possible within the word limits of the online entry form.</p>	<p>PDF(s), JPG(s) or URL link(s) showcasing all materials used in the campaign or program. <i>Note, if applicable, two hard copy samples of the campaign assets will be required from Gold Winner(s).</i></p>

## Entry Fees & Payment Information

All payments and entries must be submitted using the online form on the Spotlight on Excellence Awards webpage on [cooperative.com](https://cooperative.com) by the deadline of December 1, 2023.

**The entry fee is \$120 for all categories.**

Once payment is received, you will receive a confirmation email with a link to the entry form.

### Buy One Get One (BOGO)

Cooperatives that haven't entered the Spotlight Awards Program in five or more years are eligible for a special promotion.

When you enter one project at full price, you'll be able to enter a second one for free!

Please see the special instructions in the payment section online.

## Refund Policy for Entry Changes and Cancellations

Entries, cancellation and changes in payments will be accepted until the deadline date. Cancellations for entries are fully refundable.

Unpaid entries will be disqualified, with the exception of BOGO entries. If your entry is disqualified for any reason, you will not receive a refund.

Cancellations to the entry and additional entries can be made online. Visit [cooperative.com](https://cooperative.com) > Member Center > My Registrations. Any other changes must be submitted in writing to the Accounts Receivable department at [accountsreceivable@nreca.coop](mailto:accountsreceivable@nreca.coop).

## Questions Regarding Payment

Questions regarding payment should be directed to the Accounts Receivable department at 703.907.6875 or by email at [accountsreceivable@nreca.coop](mailto:accountsreceivable@nreca.coop).

*Please note: The online payment portal and submission platform will accept entries submitted until Friday, December 1, 2023 at 11:59 PM Pacific. However, staff within the Accounts Receivable department at NRECA will only be able to assist you until 5:00 PM Eastern that day. No extensions will be given. Please plan accordingly.*

## Submission Information

All entries must be submitted using the online submission platform, Award Force. You will receive a link to Award Force in the confirmation email that is sent to you after your payment has been received. Please read all instructions carefully and provide all information requested before proceeding with your submission.

Note the following:

- Entries, both in-progress or already submitted, can be revised, withdrawn and re-submitted up until the deadline on Friday, December 1, 2023.
- An employee of the cooperative must submit all entries. Agencies, freelancers or consultants are not permitted to pay for or enter submissions.
- Organizations can submit more than one entry per category but may not submit the same publication more than once in the Best Internal or Best External News Publication. Duplicates will be disqualified.
- All required fields must be completed for a successful submission. If you are missing required information, the Award Force platform will prompt you to complete the required field before proceeding.
- Entered work utilizing Artificial Intelligence (AI) to assist with planning or ideation are permitted; however, the work may not be a complete creation of AI. If AI was used in development of the entered work, the use of such tools must be disclosed.
- Award Force allows for uploading supporting materials, including audio and video clips, PDFs and JPGs. If your file is not accepted by the platform, please try to save and submit a different format. In lieu of uploading a file, entrants may also use a cloud-based sharing platform or website and provide a URL link to supporting materials.
- If a password is necessary to access the hosting site, it must be included with the URL. Passwords and access must stay active until after the Connect Conference in May 2024.

### How to Use Award Force for Your Spotlight Award Entry

- Visit [cooperative.com/spotlight](https://cooperative.com/spotlight).
- Select the "Submit an Entry" button to be taken to the payment portal.
- Submit your payment information and select the categories you plan to submit entries in.
- Check your email for payment confirmation, which will include the link to the online submission platform.
- Create an account on the Award Force submission platform or log into an account used for a previous submission cycle.
- Select the following information:
  - I. Chapter: Spotlight on Excellence
  - II. Category: The same information as entered on the payment portal
  - III. Classification: As needed
- Complete the required information on all tabs.
- Upload the required attachment materials at the end of your entry.
- Be sure to press the "Save+ Next" button at the bottom of your screen to save the information on that page and advance to the next. You must select the "Save+ next" or "Save+ close" button to save your information before leaving the page. If you do not, your information will be lost and will need to be re-entered.
- Press the "Save+ close" button to save your entry before submitting and to complete it at another time.
- Press the "Submit entry" button to submit your entry upon completion.



## Judging & Scoring Information

### Judging Information

The Spotlight on Excellence Awards judges consist of faculty from accredited schools of journalism as well as practicing communications, marketing and graphic design professionals. The judges remain anonymous.

When evaluating the Spotlight on Excellence Awards entries, judges consider the following information:

- Completeness of the entry forms and following instructions.
- Quality of work product and effectiveness of the project in achieving the stated objective(s).
- Inclusion of budget information. If your entry doesn't have a specific budget allocated, try to calculate the number of staff hours translated to salary amounts, or the percentage of time it took to complete, with any additional outside costs such as printing, stock photos, etc.

### Scoring

Spotlight on Excellence entries will be evaluated on absolute scores rather than a comparison of entries. Please refer to the score sheets on [cooperative.com](https://cooperative.com) to view the evaluation criteria for each category. Your entry must meet the following scoring requirements to be considered for a Spotlight on Excellence Award:

- Gold Award: Entries must score at least 90 points.
- Silver Award: Entries must score at least 80 points.

Judges will not give an award in a category or classification if no entries meet these scoring requirements.

The judges will award the Edgar F. Chesnutt Award to the cooperative whose entry receives the highest score of all entries in the Best Strategic Communications Campaign category, regardless of classification size.

### Individual Scores and Judges' Feedback—Expanded for 2024!

Following the Connect conference in May 2024, individual scores and judges' comments will be available via the Award Force platform for all entrants to view for two weeks. These comments will not be in-depth commentaries but will point out positive aspects of your entry and, where appropriate, suggestions that could have made it stronger. Two weeks after the Connect conference, scores and feedback will no longer be accessible.

## Award Notifications & Recognition

Winners will be notified the week of March 11, 2024, and given the chance to approve any names that will appear on the physical awards.

Please note, most awards will have the name of the cooperative printed on the award. Only four categories print the name of the person who worked on the project:

- Best News Story
- Best Column or Blog Post
- Best Feature Story
- Best Photo

## Spotlight on Excellence Reception

NRECA and the CREC will host a Spotlight on Excellence reception recognizing award winners during the Connect Conference in May. All winners and their teams are invited and will be recognized at that time. You will also have opportunities to take photos at this time.

## Additional Recognition and Retention of Entries

In addition to the Spotlight on Excellence Reception, all winning entries will be displayed at the Connect Conference, either digitally or in a hard copy format at the Spotlight Café. Because entries or samples are not returned, please retain copies that hold value, or make arrangements to pick them up at the Spotlight Café no later than noon on the last day of the conference.

At the opening of the Connect Conference, all winning entries will be added to the Spotlight on Excellence Library of Leading practices. This resource allows fellow co-op communicators to view winning entries from previous years, learn from them and apply new ideas to their own projects at their co-ops.

Winning entries may also be featured on [cooperative.com](https://cooperative.com) or other NRECA features or communications. Winning entries in the Best Photo category will be added to NRECA's photo libraries and may be used in further communications.

By completing the entry form and submitting your materials, you are agreeing to any future use by NRECA and the Spotlight on Excellence Awards Program.