

# commentary

GLENN ENGLISH, CEO

The 113th Congress comes to Washington, D.C., next month facing a formidable amount of unfinished business. To make sure our voice gets heard in 2013 and beyond, we must prepare for looming fights by building our political strength through engaged CEOs and employees, supportive board members, and—perhaps most important going forward—dedicated consumer advocates.

Last spring, NRECA hired the Beekeeper Group, a political consulting firm, to conduct an objective assessment of electric cooperative grassroots political strength. The audit found that NRECA, through its member cooperatives, could potentially muster the largest active grassroots base (42 million consumers) of any organization in the nation.

In comparison, three groups recognized as having powerful grassroots lobbying operations—AARP, the National Rifle Association (NRA), and the Sierra Club—boast 37 million, 4 million, and 1.4 million members, respectively. However, earlier this year, environmental interests like the Sierra Club were able to mobilize and transmit 2 million messages to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in support of a greenhouse gas emissions rule that effectively blocks construction of new coal-fired power plants (and may eventually be applied to existing coal generation). As proposed, this measure could potentially force electric co-ops to use higher-priced fuels for producing power, which would cost billions of dollars, impact service reliability, and cripple our efforts to keep electric bills affordable.

For our part, electric cooperatives submitted 31,902 messages to EPA—an encouraging sign, as it represents a 295 percent increase

over the number of e-mails sent to the agency regarding coal ash disposal in 2010. But as the Beekeeper Group noted, we have the potential to do much more if we can form a corps of consumer-members who understand that when they speak on behalf of their co-op they are looking out for themselves and their neighbors.

Following up on one of the recommendations made by the Beekeeper Group, NRECA has created a Grassroots Toolkit, an online

“one-stop-shop” for statewide and local distribution co-ops to create their own political action plan. The toolkit, which includes best practices, advice from members of Congress and advocacy experts, and a political action plan template, is now available on Cooperative.com.

Imagine this—we could match the environmentalists’ EPA message “turnout” if each electric co-op could count on just 5 percent of its consumers to take part. While the prospect of growing a grassroots effort that matches the Sierra Club or AARP’s may seem daunting, our Grassroots Toolkit provides each co-op step-by-step guidance on how to do so.

When Congress returns to work in January, NRECA’s lobby team will be busy educating new House and Senate members about what electric co-ops are and the cooperative difference. But the truth is that what we


say won’t matter unless we have co-op consumer-members—the “folks back home”—giving us a boost.

While electric co-ops have always punched above our weight on Capitol Hill, for us to be seen as strong as “big boys” like the NRA, AARP, and the Sierra Club in years to come, we need you to recruit consumer-members to our cause. Please check out the Grassroots Toolkit today. ■



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