



**Wisconsin  
Electric  
Cooperative  
Association**

Contact: Julie Lund, Director of News  
and Communications  
608-469-4826 or [Julie@weca.coop](mailto:Julie@weca.coop)

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## **WECA Mourns Loss of Steve Freese, a Champion for Rural Wisconsin (1960-2024)**

(Hazel Green, WI) - WECA has announced President and CEO Steve Freese has lost his battle with cancer. Freese, who also served in the Wisconsin State Assembly for 16 years, passed away at his home in Hazel Green Wednesday morning, with his family by his side. He was 64.

Born on March 16, 1960, in Dubuque, Iowa, Freese grew up on his family's farm in Hazel Green and earned a degree in political science from UW-Platteville. He emerged as a leader early on, championing rural Wisconsin issues. He served on the Jamestown Town Board and Grant County Board of Directors before he was elected to serve in the Wisconsin State Assembly, where he represented the 51<sup>st</sup> District from 1991 until 2007.

In 2007, Freese was selected to serve as executive director of Circus World Museum in Baraboo where he was instrumental in his efforts to maintain and grow the iconic museum. He also served as Chief Administrative Officer of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation and its subsidiary organizations before joining Cooperative Network in 2015 as vice president. It was in this role that Freese was directed by the board to reestablish the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association (WECA), as a stand-alone organization working on behalf of Wisconsin's electric cooperatives.

Under Freese's leadership, WECA has had many successes including numerous legislative victories. He has helped guide the statewide in spearheading fundraising efforts, helping co-ops navigate funding opportunities from the Inflation Reduction Act and other state and federal programs, assisting with operations during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and helping to secure more than \$2 million to lay a new underwater power cable to Washington Island.

He also served as board president of Customers First Coalition, working on behalf of co-ops to ensure affordable and reliable energy for members. More recently, he was instrumental in the creation of the Rural Policy Institute, a nonprofit non-partisan coalition of organizations working to promote generational prosperity in Wisconsin's rural communities.

In 2022, Freese was awarded a special Ally of Cooperative Electrification (ACE) Award, the highest honor presented by WECA and its board of directors. He was selected for his lifelong commitment to community, as evidenced by his many years of leadership and service to state and local government, community organizations, and the electric cooperative industry.

"Steve's strength in conviction, fairness, industry knowledge, and dedication to fighting on behalf of Wisconsin's electric cooperatives has served as an inspiration to us all. He will be greatly missed.

Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and loved ones,” said Rob Richard, WECA interim president and CEO.

“Creating opportunities for, and safeguarding Wisconsin’s rural interests was so important to Steve, and he never strayed from a challenge,” said Tim Clay, WECA vice president of operations, environmental and regulatory services.

“The dedication and determination Steve demonstrated in building WECA into the organization it is today, while navigating many challenges and conflicts, leaves a lasting legacy. He never lost sight of the core mission, fighting on behalf of Wisconsin’s electric cooperatives,” said Dan Hillberry, WECA board chair.

Haudenshield Funeral Home & Crematory in Cuba City is handling the funeral arrangements which are planned for September 6-7, 2024.

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