



Blackfoot Telephone delivers world-class technology to Rocky Mountain Ranch.

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By NTCA Staff

Twenty-five miles outside of Philipsburg, Mont. (pop. 900), near the Western gateway to Yellowstone National Park sits the 150-acre Great Divide Ranch. From the road, the ranch looks like any other dude ranch in this part of the Rocky Mountains.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

However, thanks in large part to Blackfoot Telecommunications Group (Missoula, Mont.), the Great Divide Ranch offers something more than horse riding lessons and an opportunity to brand your own cow. Behind the walls of the main house, computers controlling one of the largest databases in the United States hum steadily in an open room, people dart about with coffee and readouts, and phones ring. Several TVs are going at once, adding to the wall of sound.

This is the main vortex of the information hurricane, known as Project Vote Smart (PVS). PVS is a team-run operation of about 100 young people from all around the country who converge upon western Montana for one main purpose: to keep America's voters informed and up-to-speed on local, state and national political candidates from all parties.

Many are unpaid interns, simply making the trip to be a part of PVS and live in the mountains. ... People who want to "finish work and go ride a horse," said PVS senior advisor, Adelaide Kimball. Interns live around the ranch, but also live on the ranch in one of the many bunkhouses.

Essentially, PVS tracks all information--from speeches, to lectures, to public appearances, newspaper and magazine quotes, voting records, campaign finance data and issue positions--for every major political candidate in the county, and then disseminates that information to the public to help voters make informed decisions.

Everything is available by phone or on the Web. All prospective voters need to do is type a keyword or phrase into the database, or ask an intern to do it over the phone, and everything they need to know becomes available.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Among the biggest questions that Kimball said she finds herself answering is, "How the heck do you guys do that in the middle of nowhere?"

Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of the entire organization is its remote location. Some question how such a technologically intricate system requiring advanced capabilities and Internet speeds to operate can function in a place like this. However, thanks to Montana's independent rural telcos, most communities in the state are just as wired these days as most metropolitan areas.

Blackfoot Telecommunications provides telecommunications service in the Philipsburg area. When PVS came along looking for a future home, Blackfoot immediately jumped on the chance to help out, wiring T-1 cables--a special 1.54 megabyte circuit that runs on either copper or fiber optic cable--all the way out to the ranch for free.

"Blackfoot was just wonderful," Kimball said. "They came out and connected us free of charge. We have people ask us all the time how we can do what we do out here--they just can't believe it."

Going the extra mile (literally in this case) for clients is not new to the telco, according to Bill Squires, senior vice president at Blackfoot Telecommunications.

"Part of our cooperative philosophy is to get services to the far reaches of our service area," he said. "Our mission is to take services to those areas if at all possible."

In fact, Blackfoot has deployed broadband service capabilities throughout nearly 100% of its service territory, ensuring business and residential consumers have access to the services they need.

Contrary to initial thoughts, it wasn't plowing through solid Rocky Mountain stone that posed the biggest challenge to the cooperative. Instead, it was the physical plant that was the greatest challenge.

"We had to get a very substantial amount of cable out there to get them the proper bandwidth they needed to operate, but that's another part of our philosophy--we make sure our customers have what they need no matter what," Squires said.

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