

FEBRUARY 2026

Iowa

ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LIVING

**Balancing service, reliability
and costs for members**

**Forces shaping the
rural economy in 2026**

Recipes: Cajun classics

High school seniors: Apply now for CVEC scholarships ▶ See Page 5

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ON THE COVER

Special thanks to Ryan Van Dyke, a North West REC member-consumer, for supplying this month's cover image. Submit high-resolution photos for consideration to editor@ieclmagazine.com. You could receive \$100!

LOVE IS IN THE AIR AND ON THESE PAGES

BY ANN FOSTER THELEN



Love is in the air in February, and Valentine's Day gives us an opportunity to share heartfelt messages of adoration. It is also a fitting

time to reflect on something we care deeply about at *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living*. Each month, we have the privilege of creating a magazine for you, our electric cooperative member-consumers, and that connection is at the heart of everything we do.

This magazine has always been about more than turning pages. It is about strengthening ties to your local electric cooperative, sharing stories rooted in Iowa communities and offering practical information you can use every day. Whether it is a recipe clipped for later, an energy tip put into action, a safety tip that prevents an injury or a story that sparks conversation at the kitchen table, our goal is to serve you well.

Powered by our readers

One of the things we love most is the engagement we receive from readers across the state. You send in cover photo submissions that showcase Iowa's beauty in every season. You share favorite recipes that turn into family-tested meals for kitchens far beyond your own. You suggest story ideas, enter contests, respond to features and let us know what resonates with you.

That kind of participation does more than fill pages. It reminds us that this magazine is not a one-way conversation. It is a shared space where your voices, creativity and experiences help guide what we publish. When you take the time to reach out, you help make *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living* stronger and more relevant for everyone.

This magazine also reaches beyond individual readers. It is shared with community leaders, policymakers and others who help shape decisions affecting rural Iowa. By telling local stories and explaining how electric cooperatives work, these pages help build understanding of the cooperative model and the value it brings to the communities we serve.

Connecting locally, living cooperatively

Your readership reinforces something we believe deeply. This publication matters because it reflects what matters locally. Readers consistently show that they value content that helps them feel informed, connected and engaged with their electric cooperative. That includes learning how cooperatives work, understanding cooperative principles and seeing how local co-ops serve their communities every day.

We hope these pages also encourage you to take part in cooperative life beyond the magazine. Attend your cooperative's annual meeting. Vote for directors who help guide important decisions. Participate in youth programs, educational opportunities or advocacy efforts that give member-consumers a voice. These experiences strengthen the cooperative business model and keep it rooted in local leadership.

At its core, *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living* exists to support the same mission as your local electric cooperative. It is about service, transparency, education and community. As we move through February and beyond, thank you for reading, engaging and being part of this shared effort. We look forward to continuing to serve you and your community, one issue at a time.

Ann Foster Thelen is the editor of Iowa Electric Cooperative Living magazine.

EDITOR'S CHOICE CONTEST

WIN AN ECOBEE SMART THERMOSTAT!

The ecobee smart thermostat automatically adjusts to your set schedule to save energy when you're gone and optimize for comfort when you're home. Fine-tune your comfort on the thermostat's color touchscreen or from the ecobee app. Works with major smart home ecosystems like Apple HomeKit.

Visit our website and win!

Enter this month's contest by visiting www.ieclmagazine.com no later than Feb. 28. You must be a member of one of Iowa's electric cooperatives to win. There's no obligation associated with entering, we don't share entrant information with anyone and multiple entries from the same account will be disqualified.

The winner of smart bird feeder from the December issue was **Julie Tjepkes**, a **Grundy County REC** member-consumer.



ENTER ONLINE BY FEB. 28!

BALANCING SERVICE, RELIABILITY AND COSTS FOR MEMBERS

BY TROY AMOSS



At Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC), we take our responsibility to you – our member-owners – very seriously. One of the

most important commitments we make is to provide reliable electric service at the lowest possible cost, while maintaining the infrastructure and resources needed to serve our members safely and efficiently.

This spring, CVEC will implement a rate adjustment due primarily to an increase in wholesale power costs. I want to take this opportunity to explain why this change is necessary and what it means for you.

Why rates are changing

Wholesale power – the electricity CVEC purchases before it is delivered to your home, farm or business – makes up the largest portion of your electric bill. Over the past several years, wholesale power costs have steadily increased due to



a combination of factors, including higher fuel prices, renewable energy investments, increased demand, supply constraints and ongoing investments in generation and transmission infrastructure across the electric industry.

Despite these rising costs, CVEC has worked hard to manage expenses and minimize the rate increase. Through careful budgeting, operational efficiencies and long-term planning, we have taken steps to minimize the impact on our members. However, wholesale power costs have reached a point where an adjustment is necessary to ensure the cooperative remains financially sound and is able to continue providing the level of service our members expect and deserve.

Our cooperative commitment to members

It's important to remember that as a cooperative, CVEC operates differently than investor-owned utilities. We are not driven by profits for shareholders. Instead, we exist solely to serve our members. Any rates you pay go directly toward covering

the cost of providing electric service – purchasing power, maintaining more than 1,300 miles of line, responding to outages, upgrading equipment and investing in system reliability.

I understand that any increase in costs is unwelcome, and I assure you this decision was not made lightly. The CVEC board of directors and staff carefully reviewed the situation and determined this adjustment is necessary to protect the long-term health of your cooperative.

We will continue to keep members informed as we move closer to implementing this rate adjustment. Additional details will be published in an upcoming issue of this magazine, and each member will also receive an official notice by mail with specific information about the change.

Thank you for your understanding and continued trust in CVEC. We are grateful for the opportunity to serve you and remain committed to providing safe, reliable and affordable electricity – today and into the future.

Troy Amoss is the CEO/general manager of Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative.



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HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS: APPLY NOW FOR CVEC SCHOLARSHIPS!

Are you a graduating high school or home-schooled senior – or do you know one? Don't miss the opportunity to apply for Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative's (CVEC) scholarships. This year, CVEC will award \$5,500 in scholarships to support students pursuing their dreams of higher education.

Scholarship opportunities

- **Four \$1,000 scholarships:** Open to students planning to pursue post-secondary education in any field of study.
- **One \$1,500 scholarship:** Specifically for a student planning to attend an accredited electrical lineworker program, climbing school or training center, or major in electrical engineering.

Applicant qualifications

- Must be graduating from an accredited high school or home-schooling program.
- Parents or legal guardians must be members of CVEC.



Empower your future today – apply for a CVEC scholarship!

- Must plan to attend an accredited institution of higher learning, including vocational schools, technical schools, junior colleges or universities.
- Must complete an application and a 500-600-word essay describing: **How will your education help you contribute to your community, and what steps will you take to ensure your success benefits others?**
- Must maintain a 2.5 GPA during the first semester of college and provide proof of enrollment in the second semester to receive the scholarship disbursement.

Application deadline

All application materials must be submitted to CVEC by **March 31**.

Scholarship recipients will be selected based on academic achievement, leadership and initiative, goals and aspirations and their essay. The selection committee is comprised of cooperative leaders from the surrounding area.

For more details, visit our website at www.cvrec.com/scholarship-program, contact CVEC at 641-932-7126 or check with your high school guidance counselor.

WELCOME TO THE TEAM: GRANT POWERS

Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC) is excited to welcome Grant Powers as the newest member of our team! Grant recently joined CVEC as an apprentice lineman, where he will train alongside our experienced line crews to help build, maintain and restore the electrical system that serves our members.

As an apprentice lineman, Grant will gain hands-on experience in all aspects of line work while learning the skills necessary to ensure safe, reliable electric service throughout our service territory. This role plays a key part in developing the next generation of skilled lineworkers

who keep the lights on – often in challenging conditions.

Grant is no stranger to CVEC. He previously worked as a summer intern, where he gained valuable exposure to the cooperative's operations and developed an interest in pursuing a career in line work. His familiarity with CVEC's system, safety practices and commitment to members provides a strong foundation as he begins this next step in his career.

About Grant

Grant is a 2025 Albia High School graduate and a recent graduate of Midwest Line College. When he's



Please join us in welcoming Grant to the CVEC team!

not at work, Grant enjoys staying active and spending time outdoors. He is excited to continue learning, growing and serving the members of CVEC as part of the line crew.



Robert Wakehouse



Jerry Beck

TWO OUTSTANDING INDIVIDUALS HONORED WITH FIRST IOWA ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE EXCELLENCE AWARDS

BY ERIN CAMPBELL



Iowa’s electric cooperatives have a new way to recognize the contributions of outstanding individuals within the industry with the introduction of the Iowa Electric Cooperative Excellence Awards Program.

During the 2025 Annual Meeting of the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives (IAEC) in West Des Moines on Dec. 4, the Excellence Awards debuted as a way to honor Iowa electric co-op employees and board directors who go above and beyond. Earlier in the year, employees and board directors of IAEC-member cooperatives were invited to nominate colleagues; a panel of judges independently reviewed all entries to select finalists.

The Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives (IAEC) is a trade association established to support the interests of member-owned electric cooperatives, including 38 distribution co-ops and nine generation and transmission co-ops. Formed in 1942, IAEC aims to unify and empower Iowa’s electric cooperatives through legislative representation, regulatory oversight, training and education services, safety programs, communications support and advocacy. Since 1948, IAEC has been publishing this magazine to share timely and relevant energy information with co-op member-consumers across Iowa. Learn more at www.iowarec.org.

2025 EMPLOYEE EXCELLENCE AWARD



Robert Wakehouse
Director of Operations
Harrison County Rural
Electric Cooperative (REC)

Harrison County REC Board Treasurer Brenda Lundergard noted in her nomination how Robert exemplifies the cooperative spirit of collaboration and service. Robert has worked at the electric co-op for more than 26 years and was promoted to director of operations in 2025.

During Robert's first month in his new role, the co-op faced two destructive winter storms. Brenda wrote, "Under immense pressure, Robert responded with clarity, determination and strategic foresight with his quick coordination of mutual aid assistance from partner cooperatives and a

plan to restore power to our membership. His actions have fostered trust, demonstrated the strength of mutual aid and underscored the resilience of our rural electric systems. He leads by example, inspires loyalty among his team and represents the absolute best of what our statewide cooperative family has to offer."

In a letter of recommendation that accompanied Robert's nomination, Harrison County REC CEO Shadon Blum stated, "I have witnessed firsthand the exemplary level of professionalism, leadership and dedication that Robert brings to our cooperative and the communities we serve." He went on to explain, "Prior to his role as director of operations, Robert served as our subforeman and staking technician. During this time, our co-op faced the devastating loss of a valued member of our cooperative family. Robert did not hesitate and stepped up to lead his fellow



crew members to make sure that nothing was left incomplete and the cooperative wasn't falling short of its core mission, to provide our members with safe and reliable power."

2025 DIRECTOR EXCELLENCE AWARD



Jerry Beck
Board Director
Iowa Lakes Electric
Cooperative

Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative Board Chair Daniel Winterhof shared the following in Jerry's nomination: "Jerry's enthusiasm for the cooperative model goes beyond personal interest; it inspires those around him. Through conversations, mentoring and his consistent example, he fosters understanding of the cooperative principles in both his family and the wider community."

Ken Kuyper, retired executive vice president and general manager of Corn Belt Power Cooperative, shared in his letter of recommendation:

"Jerry has been a cornerstone of Iowa Lake's organization for decades, demonstrating both vision and dependability. His leadership style is rooted in listening, collaboration and action."

Rick Olesen, retired president and CEO of Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative, wrote the following in his letter of recommendation: "Jerry's gift, as I have related to many of my peers, is his ability to communicate, especially one on one with his director peers, and work through challenging issues to find common ground and build consensus resulting in positive outcomes in support of the member-consumer."

And Jerry's daughter, Elizabeth Beck, shared the following: "What sets him apart is not just his knowledge, but his unwavering commitment to improving the lives of others - through his work, community service and dedication to the cooperative movement. His leadership, vision and integrity consistently reflect the



principles he believes in and the values he has lived by for decades."

As a special surprise, Jerry's daughter attended the IAEC Annual Meeting from out of state to celebrate the award presentation in person.

Congratulations to Robert Wakehouse and Jerry Beck for being named the first recipients of the Iowa Electric Cooperative Excellence Awards.

Erin Campbell is the director of communications for the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives.



CHICKEN AND SAUSAGE JAMBALAYA

- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- 1 pound kielbasa, any style
- 2 medium red, green or yellow bell peppers
- 2 medium yellow squash
- 2-3 tablespoons Creole or Cajun seasoning
- salt, to taste
- 2 14.5-ounce cans petite diced tomatoes
- 2 small onions, diced
- 1 pound shrimp, cooked, deveined and peeled
- cooked rice
- fresh parsley, chopped, optional

Cut chicken into bite-size pieces and slice kielbasa into half-inch pieces. Seed, core and cut bell peppers into two-inch strips. Cut squash into bite-size pieces. Grease slow cooker and place chicken and sausage in first. Sprinkle with Cajun seasoning and salt. Pour in diced tomatoes. Top with bell peppers, squash and onions. Cover and cook 7-8 hours on low, or 3-4 hours on high, until chicken is done. Add cooked shrimp and stir to mix. Cook 5-10 minutes longer on low. Spoon jambalaya into bowls of hot cooked rice. Sprinkle with parsley. *Serves 8, recipe can be cut in half to serve 4*

Jacque Bird • Sutherland
North West Rural Electric Cooperative

SHRIMP DIP

- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese
- ½ cup sour cream
- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- 1 cup cocktail sauce
- 2 4-ounce cans tiny shrimp, drained
- crackers

Mix the first three ingredients and spread on a platter. Spread cocktail sauce over top and sprinkle with shrimp. Serve with crackers. *Serves 10-15*

Laura DeSmet • Larchwood
Lyon Rural Electric Cooperative

CAJUN BUTTER CHICKEN BREAST

- 2 teaspoons brown sugar
- 1½ teaspoons mild paprika
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon chili powder, add more if you like heat
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ¼ teaspoon cracked pepper, to taste
- 2 large chicken breasts
- 1½ tablespoons canola oil, divided
- 4 tablespoons butter, divided
- 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ½ cup low-sodium chicken stock broth
- rice

Combine the first nine ingredients to make a Cajun seasoning. Slice chicken horizontally in half to make four steaks. Toss chicken in seasoning mixture. Drizzle with ½ tablespoon oil and rub seasoning all over chicken to coat evenly. Heat remaining oil and 1 tablespoon butter in skillet or pan over medium-high heat until combined and hot. Sear chicken in batches for 5-7 minutes each side, until golden or internal temperature is 165 degrees F using a meat thermometer. Remove from pan and set aside to rest for 5 minutes. Meanwhile, reduce heat to medium and melt remaining butter in pan. Sauté garlic about 30 seconds, until fragrant, while scraping any browned bits from the pan. Pour in broth and let reduce for 2-3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and drizzle sauce over chicken. Serve warm with a side of rice. *Serves 4*

Bryce and Kelly Godbersen • Odebolt
Raccoon Valley Electric Cooperative

Visit www.ieclmagazine.com
and search our online archive
of hundreds of recipes in
various categories.



CAJUN SHRIMP PASTA

- ½ cup butter
- 5-6 scallions, chopped
- ½ cup fresh parsley, chopped
- ½ head fresh garlic, smashed
- 1 quart heavy whipping cream
- ¼ cup spicy seasoning mix
- 2 pounds raw shrimp
- ¼ cup Parmesan cheese
- 1 pound package angel hair or linguini pasta, cooked

Melt butter on medium-high heat. Add scallions, parsley and garlic. Cook until melted, then turn heat to high and add heavy cream. Add your choice of spicy seasonings to taste (or add a mixture of Chef Paul Prudhomme Magic Seafood Seasonings or Blackened Redfish and Louisiana Cajun Blackened Seasoning). Then add shrimp and cook. Stir the entire time until shrimp are fully cooked. Cover and turn to low or turn heat off. It will thicken as it cools. Add Parmesan cheese and serve over cooked pasta. *Serves 10*

Russell Hornsby • Bouton
Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative Association

BANANAS FOSTER BREAD PUDDING

- 5-6 cups bread cubes
- 2 eggs
- 2 cups half and half
- ½ cup sugar
- ½ teaspoon vanilla
- ¾ teaspoon cinnamon, divided
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- salt
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 4 tablespoons brown sugar
- 4 tablespoons pecans
- 2 tablespoons rum, optional
- 2-3 bananas, sliced

Place bread cubes in greased baking dish. Mix eggs, half and half, sugar, vanilla, ½ teaspoon cinnamon, nutmeg and a sprinkle of salt. Pour over bread. Bake at 350 degrees F for 35 minutes. In a saucepan, melt butter, brown sugar, pecans, ¼ teaspoon cinnamon, a sprinkle of salt and rum, if desired. Heat over medium-high heat until bubbly. Add bananas and cook for 2-3 minutes. Serve bread pudding warm or at room temperature with warm bananas foster sauce. *Serves 6*

Chris Daniels • Casey
Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative Association

SPICY CAJUN PRETZELS

- 1 cup corn oil
- 1 1-ounce package ranch dressing
- 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried dill weed
- 1 16-ounce package mini pretzels

Combine oil and seasonings. Break pretzels into pieces and place pieces in roaster pan. Pour seasoned oil over top of pretzels and stir. Bake at 200 degrees F for 2 hours, stirring every 30 minutes. Remove from oven, drain on paper towel. Store until ready to serve. Makes a great party snack!

Tahni Lang • Russel
Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative, Inc.

CAJUN POTATO AND ANDOUILLE SAUSAGE

- 1 pound andouille sausage, sliced (or any sausage)
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 green bell pepper, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 4 medium potatoes, diced
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- salt, to taste
- pepper, to taste
- 1 cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup fresh green onions, chopped (for garnish)

In a large Dutch oven, add andouille sausage and cook until brown. Remove, drain on paper towel and set aside. Add onion and bell peppers to Dutch oven. Sauté until tender, then add garlic. Add potatoes to vegetables and pour in chicken broth. Stir to combine ingredients evenly. Add seasonings and stir well. Cook until potatoes are tender, then add sausage. Stir in heavy cream. Taste and adjust seasonings if necessary. An additional sprinkle of smoked paprika can be added for extra flavor. Garnish with green onions and serve hot. *Serves 6*

Tonya Crowl • Ashton
Osceola Electric Cooperative, Inc.

WANTED:

BACKYARD BBQ FAVORITES

THE REWARD:

\$25 BILL CREDIT FOR EVERY ONE WE PUBLISH!

Deadline is Feb. 28

We're looking for delicious summer **backyard BBQ recipes** – think potato salads, sweet corn dishes, saucy BBQ ribs and beyond! Selected submission will appear in our June issue. Please include your name, address, telephone number, co-op name, recipe category and number of servings on all submissions.



EMAIL: recipes@ieclmagazine.com

MAIL: Recipes

Iowa Electric Cooperative Living magazine
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COBANK: FORCES THAT WILL SHAPE THE U.S. RURAL ECONOMY

At the end of 2025, CoBank – one of the largest providers of credit to the U.S. rural economy – released its “2026 Year Ahead Report: Forces that will Shape the U.S. Rural Economy.”

The financial services firm said economic uncertainty surrounding U.S. trade policy is much lower than it was a year ago, steadying the broader outlook for 2026. The reduced market anxiety can be seen in historically low volatility metrics for equity, bond and currency markets, as well as in historically tight corporate credit spreads.

With tariffs fading from the forefront of economic concern somewhat, artificial intelligence (AI) has become the focal point of financial market prognostication. Direct investments in AI and related infrastructure, combined with the wealth effects

from the surging stock market, have conservatively added 1% to U.S. GDP this year. Over the next three to five years, the report indicates AI will likely play out similarly to the oil and gas shale boom between 2010 and 2015 – overproduction of a commoditized product, lower than expected earnings and disappointing industry profit margins.



U.S. economy: Markets adjust to a new normal

Several indicators suggest the economy will continue to remain steady in 2026. With the year-on-year tariff inflationary effect fading by end of the first quarter, core inflation is likely to resume its downward trend in the second half of the year. Moreover, the Congressional Budget Office estimates the accelerated depreciation provisions in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act will boost GDP

growth by almost a full percentage point next year. The labor market has cooled from the post-COVID cycle and is now more in line with historic norms. Near 4% wage growth and sub 5% unemployment are well within the margin of safety for a growing economy in 2026.



U.S. government affairs: Tariffs, farm policy and the shifting Washington landscape

The environment in Washington is beginning to change, if ever so slightly. Farm Bill programs have been extended through September, but pressure is growing for Congress to take further action before the next election. Questions surrounding the president’s authority on tariffs, a key issue impacting several market sectors and businesses, will also dominate policy discussions in the coming year.

Grains, farm supply and biofuels: Ample grain supplies will burden markets in 2026

Global grain and oilseed markets remain oversupplied, but increased biofuels production and improving export conditions are boosting optimism that prices have passed their cyclical bottoms. Demand for U.S. grains and oilseeds will continue strengthening as low prices stimulate usage. But grain farmers will face hard choices for planting this spring. Prevailing prices of nearly all crops are below the cost of production. Current price ratios indicate soybeans stand to pull acres from all major crops in 2026. High input costs may discourage farmers from planting corn and switch to cheaper alternatives. Farmer affordability remains under pressure and while corn prices have slid, fertilizer prices have not.

Animal protein: Investment in efficiency is paying dividends as consumers clamor for protein

Despite rising price points for meat and poultry, animal protein demand should remain strong in 2026. The combination of higher revenues and falling feed prices is boosting producer optimism for the year ahead, but not to the degree that expansion is expected to proliferate. Livestock supply conditions have grown notably tighter in the last two years and are likely to remain so over the next 12 to 18 months.

As a result, feeding efficiencies and heavier carcasses will remain a focal point in 2026. While optimism in the sector is strong, several headwinds including new and recurring livestock diseases and trade disruptions could constrain growth in the coming year.

Dairy: Protein will drive milk checks for the foreseeable future

Milk protein is poised for an extended bull-market run as demand for protein-based dairy products continues to climb. While demand for full-fat dairy products also remains strong, butterfat has moved to an oversupply situation. Shifting consumer dietary trends suggest protein markets will remain strong for many years to come. And according to data from Circana and Dairy Management Inc., four of the top 10 protein products for absolute unit sales growth in the past 52 weeks were dairy products, including cheese, cottage cheese and yogurt.

Power and energy: Patchwork or partnership?

U.S. electricity consumption is increasing at its fastest pace since World War II. The Department of Energy is using its emergency authority to direct the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to quickly standardize large load interconnections. If adopted, some of the proposed reforms would mark

a major shift in how large, energy-intensive customers like data centers connect to the grid. While the reforms could expedite grid access for major customers, they may compromise local utility investment and state regulatory authority. That means unified planning and coordination at the federal, state and local levels will be even more critical going forward.

Digital infrastructure: Navigating AI's expansion into rural America

The rise of AI is fueling a historic surge in data-center spending and hyperscalers will increasingly depend on rural America to achieve their ambitious buildout plans. Rural areas offer what hyperscalers like Microsoft and Amazon desperately need: land for sprawling campuses and the ability to colocate data centers with major power infrastructure. Given the business and geopolitical stakes, data center operators are moving fast and writing big checks to reduce friction in rural communities. While these communities face tradeoffs, rejecting data center projects could mean missing out on generational economic benefits.



Scan the QR code to read the full report.



BE ENERGY EFFICIENT YEAR-ROUND

As energy consumers, we can all play a role in conserving resources, improving comfort and managing energy costs. Making a few simple changes around your home can boost energy efficiency throughout the year – often with little or no cost.



Know your energy consumption

Start by reviewing your energy bills for the past

12-24 months. Knowing your average monthly usage helps establish a baseline so you can better measure the impact of any energy-saving efforts you make.



Adopt no-cost ways to save energy

Small changes can lead to noticeable savings:

- Turn off lights and unplug electronics and chargers when they're not in use.
- Close or adjust window coverings to help regulate indoor temperatures.
- Change HVAC air filters regularly according to manufacturer recommendations.
- Use ceiling fans wisely – set them to run counterclockwise in the summer and clockwise in the winter to circulate warm air downward.
- Grill outdoors during the summer months to keep excess heat out of the kitchen.



Insulate your home

Proper weatherproofing helps maintain comfort while reducing energy use:

- Check for air leaks around windows and doors using the wet finger or tissue test.
- Seal gaps with caulk or weather stripping to reduce drafts.
- Keep exterior doors closed to prevent conditioned air from escaping.



Get smart with your thermostat

Many homeowners don't take full advantage of their programmable thermostat. Set it to automatically adjust temperatures while you're asleep or away from home.

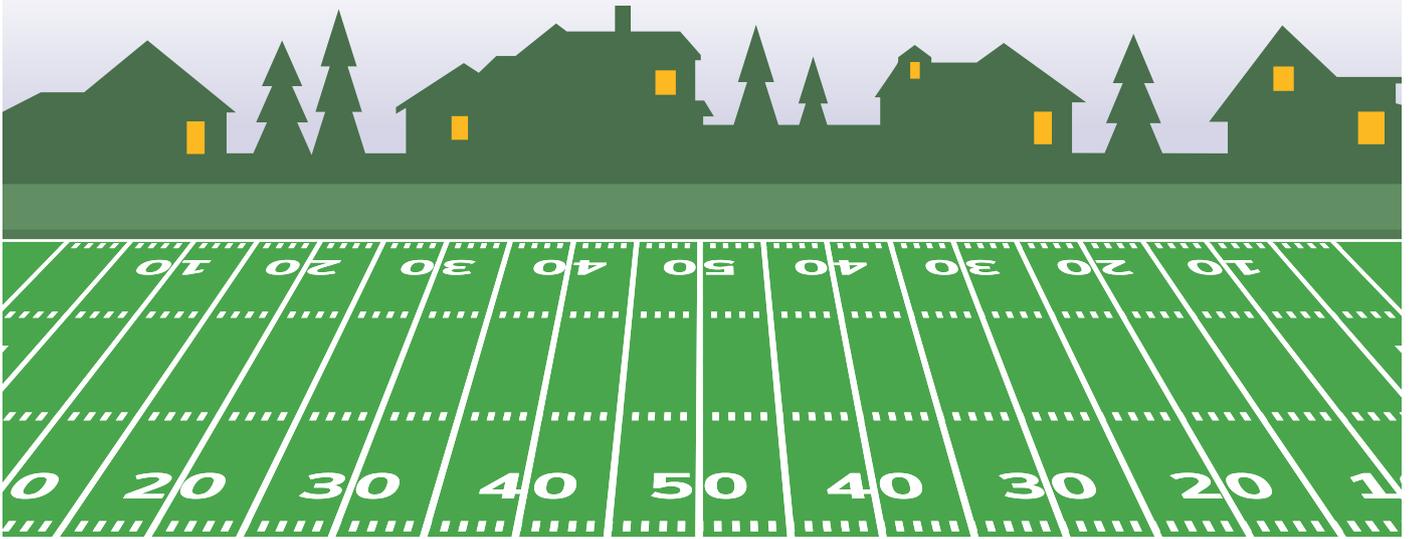
- Consider upgrading to a smart thermostat for added convenience and efficiency.
- In general, adjusting the thermostat just a few degrees can result in meaningful energy savings.

By taking these simple steps, you can lower your energy costs while helping conserve resources – benefiting both your household and the cooperative community we all share.



Score Big with Energy Savings!

Every Super Bowl MVP makes big plays—and you can too! Use the clues below to fill in the blanks and learn how you can help save energy at home by making smart, efficient plays. Double check your work in the answer key.



1. Spend time outdoors or unplugged to reduce your _____ time and save energy.
2. Turn off the _____ while brushing your teeth.
3. When it's cold, wear an extra layer of _____ instead of turning up the thermostat.
4. Keep doors and _____ closed when your home's heating/cooling system is turned on.
5. Unplug smaller electronics like _____ when you're not using them.
6. Turn off _____ when you leave a room.

Word Bank:
 windows
 clothing
 water
 lights
 screen
 chargers

Answer Key: 1. screen 2. water 3. clothing 4. windows 5. chargers 6. lights

SHOULD I UPGRADE MY APPLIANCE?

BY MIRANDA BOUTELLE

Buying a new appliance can feel daunting. Before you hand over your hard-earned money, choose an appliance that will help you save money over time.

When shopping, keep in mind that not all new appliances are high efficiency and not all old appliances are inefficient. The less efficient your current appliance is, the more you will save with an upgrade. The yellow EnergyGuide label on new appliances shows the yearly energy cost, kilowatt-hour electricity use and ENERGY STAR® logo, if certified.

Refrigerators: When an upgrade pays off

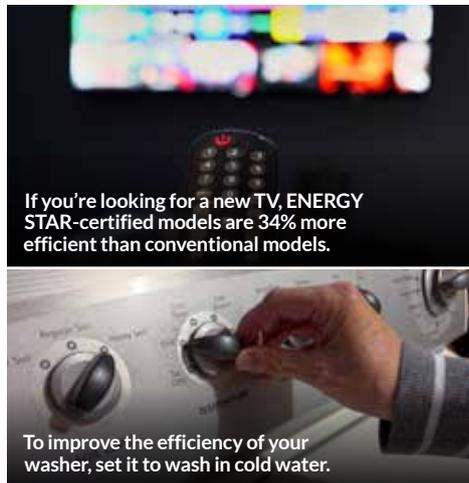
Refrigerators have seen major efficiency improvements over the years. New refrigerators use up to 73% less energy than 1970s models and about one-third less than 20-year-old models.

On a visit to my mom's house, she proudly showed off her 1980s refrigerator she bought when her 1970s harvest gold model died. If her 80s fridge uses 2,000 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per year, at 14 cents per kWh, it costs \$280 per year to operate. New ENERGY STAR-certified refrigerator prices start at \$500 with yearly energy costs ranging from \$38 to \$122. If mom buys a new ENERGY STAR-certified refrigerator for \$1,000 with \$100 yearly energy cost – saving her \$180 per year – it will pay for itself in about 5½ years.

If you intend to keep your existing appliance, be sure to weigh the additional energy costs. Maximize efficiency and keep your food safe by setting your refrigerator to 37 degrees F and your freezer at 0 degrees F.

Laundry appliances: Efficiency gains aren't always equal

New ENERGY STAR-certified clothes washers and dryers are also more efficient than older models. Use the ENERGY STAR Product



If you're looking for a new TV, ENERGY STAR-certified models are 34% more efficient than conventional models.

To improve the efficiency of your washer, set it to wash in cold water.



A secondary fridge or freezer allows you to save money through groceries by stocking up on sales, preserving your own food and saving gas with fewer trips to the store. It's all a balance.

Finder at www.energystar.gov to compare products. Integrated Modified Energy Factor measures the washer's energy efficiency. A higher number is better. Integrated Water Factor measures water efficiency. A lower number is better.

I recently bought a new washing machine when my old front-load machine died. I was considering a top-load machine. When I compared ENERGY STAR-certified top loaders to front loaders, I changed my mind. ENERGY STAR-certified front loaders use about 50% less energy and water than top-load agitator washers and about 25% less energy and water than top-load impeller washers that don't have an agitator.

My new washer cost \$698. According to the appliance's EnergyGuide, based on six loads of laundry a week and an electricity cost of 14 cents per kWh, the yearly energy cost is \$15. Similar non-ENERGY STAR-certified models were \$48 per year. Mine didn't cost much more than non-ENERGY STAR models and will help me save over time.

Then I had to make the decision about buying the matching dryer. My dryer was functional but had features I didn't like. At 14 cents per kWh and running roughly six loads a week for an hour each, my old dryer used \$131.04 per year.

The new matching ENERGY STAR-certified dryer cost \$698 and estimates annual energy use at 607 kWh, which is \$84.98 per year at 14 cents per kWh. With an estimated savings of \$46 per year, the dryer would take 15 years for the savings to cover the price. That's a long time and not worth the cost.

To improve your washer and dryer efficiency, wash in cold water, don't over dry clothes and clean your lint trap between every load.

Televisions: Settings may make a difference

Just like the light bulbs in your home, LED televisions offer increased efficiency. ENERGY STAR-certified televisions are 34% more efficient than conventional models. If you have a working LED television, swapping to an ENERGY STAR model is more efficient but may not make up for the cost of a new TV. Instead, check the efficiency settings on your TV or buy a smart power strip that turns off other connected devices when not in use.

Whatever appliance you are upgrading or replacing, make an informed decision by comparing the cost of operation and shopping ENERGY STAR models to help lower your electric bill.

Miranda Boutelle writes on energy efficiency topics for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

LOVING THE LAND

BY DARCY DOUGHERTY MAULSBY

February is the month of love, with Valentine's Day and all the flowers, candy and cards that come with it. I wasn't thinking about valentines, though, last December during the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives' (IAEC) Annual Meeting in West Des Moines.

Instead, I started thinking about a love of the land in this unlikely setting, thanks to Red Steagall. Late that Thursday afternoon, Steagall, 87, and The Boys in the Bunkhouse sang songs of the West, celebrating the American spirit. You could tell that Steagall's connections to rural America have remained as strong as his boyhood memories of Texas Panhandle cowboys.

An award-winning songwriter, recording artist, radio host, TV personality and official cowboy poet of Texas, Steagall also has ties to northwest Iowa. As he shared stories that inspired his poems like "The Fence That Me and Shorty Built," Steagall recalled the five summers he spent working on his uncle's farm near Havelock in Pocahontas County. From Texas to Iowa, Steagall's sentiments reflect a love of the land:

"You don't own the land;
the land owns you."

"We must care for the land
while we're here and pass it
on to future generations."

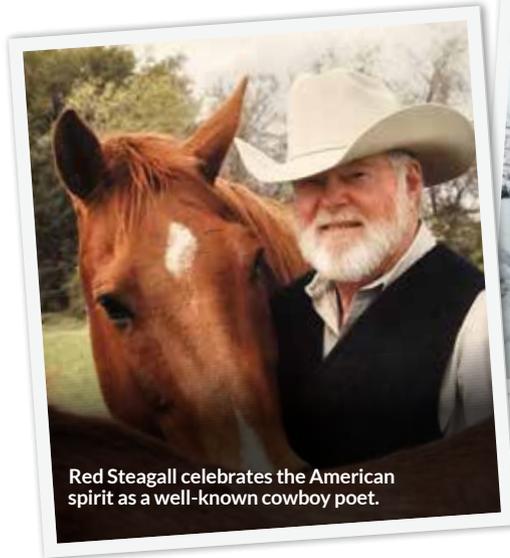
"I sincerely believe in the ownership
of land in the progress of a
free, independent society."

Who talks like this anymore?

It's rare to hear unabashed,
heartfelt sentiments about land
ownership and the essence of
American liberty. I was hooked.

America's story: a history of the land

This brought back memories of
growing up on my family's farm
northwest of Lake City, where my dad



Red Steagall celebrates the American spirit as a well-known cowboy poet.

told me that all original wealth comes from the land. I also recall reading "Gone with the Wind" and thinking about my Irish ancestors who came to Calhoun County in 1889 to farm.

"To anyone with a drop of Irish blood in them – why, the land they live on is like their mother," Gerald O'Hara emphasized to his daughter Scarlett during one poignant scene. "It will come to you, this love of the land. There's no gettin' away from it if you're Irish."

Previous generations intimately understood the inherent value of land. Native Americans' views of land centered on deep spiritual connections, stewardship and communal use – all essential to their identity, culture and survival.

Pioneer settlers often risked everything to acquire land. Western settlement exploded after Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862. This offered up to 160 acres of public land for a nominal fee to anyone who was willing to claim, settle and farm the land for at least five years.

More than 50% of homesteaders successfully "proved up" and achieved their dream of land ownership. The Homestead Act gave away 10% of U.S. land (270 million acres).



By 2007, there were an estimated 93 million homesteader descendants alive, according to the National Park Service.

"We are born to this land"

Despite this heritage, it seems like land isn't top of mind for most people anymore, probably because we've become such an urbanized society. Even in a farm state like Iowa, 63.2% of us live in urban areas. (A community must have a population of at least 5,000 to qualify as an urban area, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.)

Still, there's something about land that touches something deep inside us. Throughout American history, there have been various "back to the land" movements. Then there's the current homesteading movement and the freedom to pursue a simpler, more sustainable life.

"My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty." Or, in the words of the iconic Steagall: "We are born to this land. We call her America. We love her. We are the luckiest people on this earth."

Darcy Dougherty Maulsby lives near her family's Century Farm northwest of Lake City. Visit her at www.darcymaulsby.com.



Watch Red Steagall's performance from the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives' Annual Meeting.



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