

NEBRASKA

Magazine

April 2022

NREA.org

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**YOUTH
ENERGY
LEADERSHIP
CAMP**

Inside:

- PREMA Helps Set Community Table
- Capturing Carbon • Five Questions To Ask Your Home Inspector

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NREA 

SACRED STONE OF THE SOUTHWEST IS ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION



Centuries ago, Persians, Tibetans and Mayans considered turquoise a gemstone of the heavens, believing the striking blue stones were sacred pieces of sky. Today, the rarest and most valuable turquoise is found in the American Southwest— but the future of the blue beauty is unclear.

On a recent trip to Tucson, we spoke with fourth generation turquoise traders who explained that less than five percent of turquoise mined worldwide can be set into jewelry and only about twenty mines in the Southwest supply gem-quality turquoise. Once a thriving industry, many Southwest mines have run dry and are now closed.

We found a limited supply of turquoise from Arizona and purchased it for our *Sedona Turquoise Collection*. Inspired by the work of those ancient craftsmen and designed to showcase the exceptional blue stone, each stabilized vibrant cabochon features



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Telling the story of
Rural Nebraska

Volume 76
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April 2022



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Students learn about public power at the NREA Youth Energy Leadership Camp. See the related article on page 10. Cover photograph by Wayne Price



Wayne Price

Celebrating Our Lineworkers

Mark your calendar on April 11, 2022 to join us in celebrating a group of our state's hardest working men and women -- the electric lineworker. You probably don't even notice these well-trained and highly skilled employees working hard to keep the electricity flowing in the areas they serve. It's not until a storm strikes that most of us think about these guys.

When the power goes out, for whatever reason, Nebraska's electric linemen are the first to jump into action. Crews from neighboring systems will join in the effort to help restore power as quickly as possible. This type of mutual aid was evident last month when crews responded to damage caused by winter storms and flooding across the state.

Linemen must perform their duties safely and efficiently while wearing special gear to protect themselves. This gear often makes their tasks more difficult.

America's public power districts and electric cooperatives have designated the second Monday of April as National Lineman Appreciation Day.

On April 11, the Nebraska Rural Electric Association and its 34 member-systems will honor the hard working men and women who often work in challenging conditions to keep the lights on.

We proudly recognize all electric linemen for the services they perform around the clock in dangerous conditions to keep power flowing and protect the public's safety.

Electric linemen do not often receive the recognition they deserve. They work all hours of the day, often in hazardous conditions far from their families, going above and beyond to restore power to their communities. Our linemen, as well as linemen from across the nation, truly deserve this special day of recognition.

From restoring power after a storm to building new lines to serve customers, Nebraska's electric linemen are the face of public power in Nebraska. They play a vital role in serving customers around-the-clock with reliable and affordable electricity.

Please take a moment on April 11 and join us in expressing your appreciation for their professional contributions in all kinds of weather conditions, day and night. Use #ThankaLineworker on social media to show your support for the men and women who light our lives.



Lineworkers go above and beyond.

The Responsibilities of a Director

If you ask a new board member what his/her impression has been for the first few months of being seated on a board, you'll see a glassy stare along with comments such as "I had no idea;" or "There's more to this than I knew;" including "I'm not sure how I'll ever get up to speed." Those are typical responses.

Public power districts are unique in structure and are required to follow Nebraska's open meetings act. Whether the board is publicly traded or a non-profit, board members share three fundamental responsibilities: duty of care, duty of loyalty and duty of obedience.

Duty of care

Ensures directors act in a reasonable, honest, fair, and informed manner.

Duty of loyalty

Means directors give their undivided allegiance to the organization which includes exercising their powers in good faith, ethically, and avoid conflicts of interest, providing full disclosure as necessary.

Duty of obedience

Asks directors to be faithful to the district's mission and goals. They must ensure the company operates in compliance with the local, state, and federal laws, as well as following policies they have approved.

Within those three duties there are primary duties that hold true in every business and often at every meeting.

- Determine the organization's strategic direction
- Hire/evaluate the general manager and delegate to same
- Ensure adequate resources and

manage them effectively through the budget process

- Exercise accountability to customers
- Govern the company by structured objectives with applicable policies
- Monitor the financial performance of the district
- Impose/change/create rates accordingly

It is necessary to keep the "primary duty overview" in mind when discussing issues and making decisions. Questions like "does this fit my company's mission" or "how will our actions help or hinder the industry" and "is this in our current budget."

Directors have a legal responsibility to provide financial control and accountability for the district. Boards must contemplate the best way to allocate money and other resources that benefit the organization. They are tasked with operating efficiently, within all applicable laws, and to the benefit of the company and its ratepayers. Financial oversight is a familiar job that boards usually do well.

A board member should collaborate effectively with the general manager and the rest of the board using clear communication and transparency. It is their duty to represent customers who have independent and diverse perspectives. It is also their position to explain how decisions were made and why.

Every director is asked to carry out what's in the best interest of the organization. They must serve



Gwen Kautz

responsibly when they need to take action to comply with fiduciary responsibilities or to uphold good governance standards. Directors need to protect the company's assets and manage them effectively.

When tackling an issue, project, or policy, the difficulty in addressing the best decision for their organization rests not in what is expected now, but in what is required long past their elected service. We charge a director with representing their customer today but also the consumer that will be present 10 or 20 years from now. Decisions made by directors now will affect the district in the short and long term.

A board dedicated to serving their customers will be passionately committed to the district's values and mission. They are often your neighbors and as such have a personal vested interest in the district's success. To all those serving on boards (present and past), we thank you for the time and dedication!

Helping the Community

PREMA Helps Set Community Table

The scent of chili wafted through the room as PREMA employees Katie Childers and Allison Beagle ladled servings into bowls for local residents in the lunch line at the Community Table in Alliance.

PREMA (Panhandle Rural Electric Membership Association) is among about 40 businesses, agencies, organizations and programs who work together to make it possible to feed the hungry in Alliance every weekday through the Community Table. The independent non-profit volunteer organization has a mission to “provide a meal to anyone in need, regardless of circumstances.”

Ryan Reiber, PREMA general manager, wrangled sack lunches to send home, among other tasks, as Katie and Allison worked the serving counter to close out 2021. This past Dec. 30 was one of the cooperative’s most recent turns to serve a meal, just part of its ties to Community Table.



PREMA General Manager Ryan Reiber fills lunch sacks available Fridays at the Community Table.

Coordinator Whitney Baldwin and Nancy Reiber, one of six active board members, took time to meet at the Masonic Center, which hosts the Community Table, to talk about how this collaborative effort began and continues to impact a multitude of people.

Nancy (Ryan’s wife) explained she has been on the board since the start, while Whitney, who is a PREMA customer member, became involved during November 2018. “Because we’re not federally funded . . . we feed whoever needs a meal. We don’t have any questions (such as age, income or people in a family),” Whitney said.

Like poverty in general, anyone who does not know where to look may miss the Community Table in downtown Alliance, a town of about 8,000 people in the Panhandle. Numbers tell the tale of hunger, at least in part. Nancy said they served 11,000 people the first year



PREMA employees Katie Childers (left) and Allison Beagle serve chili at the Community Table. Photographs by John Weare

Community Table moved inside. At the Masonic Center the program shifted from targeting children who may not have enough to eat over vacation to the general public. Nancy said with the Covid 19 Pandemic the in-person dining setup had to switch completely. People came to the door to take sack lunches home, Whitney added. Then, it became delivery only with 150-300 phone calls a day for months. After that there was a steady line of vehicles in the alley for drive up as restrictions eased. By May of last year the service was able to resume in-person dining.

“That really said a lot about our volunteers,” Whitney said. “Tell us what you can do, and Community Table can do the rest.” Nancy said that assistance reflects the people of Alliance in general. “When there is a need, our community will step up and take care of things.”

Organizers felt nationwide supply chain issues too during the height of the pandemic. Nancy said they asked themselves, “What do we have and can source locally?” In Box Butte County the answer was dry beans and potatoes grown by area farmers. “Harris Sales made sure we always had buns for sandwiches. Grocery Kart and local stores were great at making sure (we had everything else),” Whitney said. “Also we had people who stepped up financially,” Nancy added.

“When school and everything was canceled, it was crazy – we fed them,” Nancy said. From a high of about 300 people a day, volunteers now serve 30-40. Numbers increased over local schools’ Christmas vacation with kids being about 75 percent of the diners, Nancy estimated.

For more than three years as coordinator, Whitney has excelled at ensuring there is enough food and volunteers as the door opens next to a sandwich board in the 200 block of Laramie Avenue advertising the meal. In

and about 50,000 in 2020. With the Community Table open Monday through Friday and a meal on Saturday served by the Alliance Berean Church at their downtown life center, anyone can count on an opportunity for free food and fellowship six days a week.

“I started and was hired as coordinator and was talking to people about Friday to go (meals),” Whitney recalled. “I asked them what they do on Sunday. (The response was) ‘Wait until Monday.’” Still one of her most memorable experiences, she added, “That moment for me . . . (meant) I’m in the right place, I’m here for a reason.”

The effort began with meals in the city park, coordinated by Mara Anderson through the Alliance Recreation Center in the summers of 2017 and 2018. After the second summer they wanted to keep it going, Whitney said. When the school year began the

Continued on Page 8

From Page 7

PREMA's case, "They do the whole hog: pay for the food, prepare the food and serve it," Nancy said.

"(PREMA is) really great about stepping in when they can," Whitney emphasized. "Sometimes we have really short notice when we need someone to come," Nancy said, noting PREMA is able to fill the gap. "Not out of the scope of what they do," she said, referring to the cooperative's linemen and others always on call to respond during a storm or other emergency.

PREMA has been involved since Community Table started. Some of their employees also volunteered while attending the Western Nebraska Community College Lineman School in Alliance.

"We encourage our volunteers to hang out with them," Nancy said, noting that, before Covid, students from Alliance's Catholic and Lutheran schools would eat first then serve.

Regular lunchtime visitors see a range of faces on the other side of the serving window. Like PREMA, some groups and individuals return every few weeks or months. Seniors citizens through RSVP and several churches are among the volunteer base. Food and drink comes from many sources as well. The Community Table is able to accept donations that could not be sold otherwise, for example. PREMA picks up Pepsi contributions from the soft drink giant's Alliance distribution center. Whitney explained they receive bottles and cans from broken cases and drinks they cannot sell, snacks sometimes plus water and coffee.

Long term, Nancy said, a goal is to have a larger working board. "We need people who can be physical boots on the ground."

"Everyone brings a whole different perspective," Nancy said. "Whitney is a whiz with nuts and bolts – this person is cooking, this person is serving. It takes a village."

Progress can be gauged by lists of volunteers and supplies along with daily tallies of meals served. The intangible impact has been apparent by watching how people have interacted over the months, Whitney explained. "I think you can look at when we first started. There are all these tables and people sitting separately. Now they are sitting together and all of a sudden they are great friends," she said. "(We) see those relationships outside of Community Table. It's a community within a



Above: Chili, corn bread, veggies and chocolate chip bar cookies for lunch Dec. 30.

Below: Food and fellowship at the Community Table in downtown Alliance.



community. Relationships created are amazing."

"There's a unifying factor," Nancy agreed. She shared the story of a memorial service in the Masonic Center for a man who did not "have any community" here outside of the people he had come to know in that building while breaking bread.

Inclusiveness brings people back while volunteers always work to create a welcome place for newcomers and regulars alike. For information, to volunteer/support Community Table call or text Whitney at 308-455-9175.

PLAN WHEN YOU PLANT

WHERE TO PLANT



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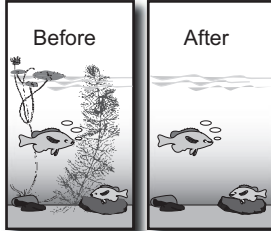
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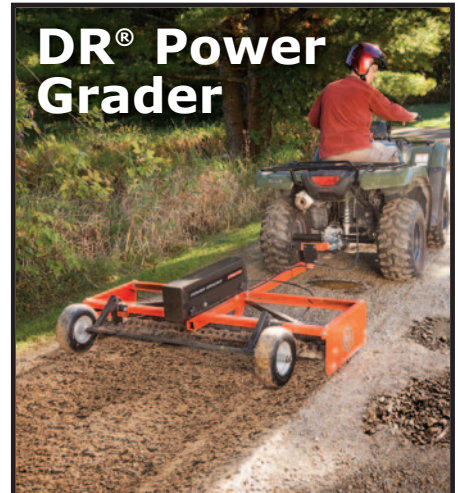
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**ATTENTION
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

Join us at the NREA
**YOUTH ENERGY
LEADERSHIP CAMP**

July 18 - 22, 2022



Each year member-systems of the Nebraska Rural Electric Association select high school students to attend the NREA Youth Energy Leadership Camp at the State 4-H Camp in the Halsey National Forest. The 2022 Youth Energy Leadership Camp will be held July 18-22.

The popular week-long camp was created to give young people a better understanding of public power, electricity, power generation and the rural electric industry. The goal is to offer a program that challenges students educationally, socially, and recreationally.

The NREA Youth Energy Leadership Camp provides a “hands-on” approach to the public power industry and member-owned businesses. The students will join other high school students from Nebraska and Wyoming, along with adult counselors and junior counselors. The adult counselors are employees of rural electric systems who donate their time and talents to the camp. The junior counselors are campers from the previous year who are selected by their peers to return in a leadership role.

On the first day of camp, a board of directors is elected to oversee the operation of the newly formed electric power district. The board then interviews and chooses a general manager to oversee the committee activities and act as a liaison between the counselors and campers.

Every participant has a role in the workings of the camp. Students can participate in the Ambassador competition or actively seek a position on the Board of Directors. Each student must also volunteer to serve on at least one of the committees responsible for various aspects of the camp

activities. There is even a talent show where the campers can show off their talents.

A highlight of the camp involves a tour of the Kingsley Hydro Station at Lake McConaughy and Gerald Gentleman Station, a coal-fired power plant at Sutherland, Neb.

High school students who attend the energy camp may compete for a chance to participate in the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association’s Youth Tour in

Washington, D.C. with expenses paid by the Nebraska Rural Electric Association. Three students are chosen as part of the Ambassador competition held during camp.

The competition involves submitting an application at camp, presenting a self-introduction speech and delivering a five-minute speech on an assigned topic. Each

camper votes for three candidates following the speech with the top male, top female and person with the next highest vote total becoming next year’s ambassadors. The top six finalists are invited to return to next year’s Youth Energy Leadership Camp as junior counselors.

Recreational activities include basketball, volleyball and canoeing.

Camp expenses and transportation are provided by each sponsoring rural electric system. High school freshmen, sophomores and juniors whose families are customers of NREA member-systems may apply.

For more information about attending Youth Energy Leadership Camp, send the RSVP form to your rural electric utility.



2022 Youth Energy Leadership Camp RSVP Form

Name _____ Age _____ Current Grade _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Phone number (_____) _____

Name of parents _____

Sponsoring rural electric system : _____

Opportunities Highlighted for Energy Innovation in Nebraska

We often focus our attention towards the negative or towards the issues in the Legislature that draw the most attention and loudest debate. We should not ignore, however, that most of the legislation passed and signed by the governor is not controversial and is nonpartisan. As I write this month's article, two issues important to the energy industry are moving through the legislative process. Both bills, each in their own way, are looking to help Nebraska lead the nation in advanced energy development. LB 1100 would promote advanced nuclear development, and LB 1099, would work to establish Nebraska as a hydrogen hub for the nation.

Nebraska's existing nuclear power resources have served our state well. In fact, Cooper Nuclear station, an 820 megawatt generation facility located near Brownville, Neb., provides nearly 20 percent of the electricity we use in Nebraska. As our country looks to electrify our next generation of consumers with reliable, low-carbon energy resources, nuclear power is an attractive option. Nuclear power is a carbon-free resource of electricity, but unlike solar and wind generation that are only available when the wind blows or the sun shines, nuclear power can produce a steady stream of reliable electricity. LB 1100, if adopted, would appropriate the funding needed for a feasibility study to look at the development of advanced nuclear reactors in Nebraska. Advanced nuclear, and micro-nuclear reactors are an exciting area of energy development. These reactors can provide a safe and reliable source of electric generation in a small package. These next generation reactors meet a utility's need for a predictable source of generation that can follow consumer demand while also transitioning our state to a generation source that reduces our carbon footprint.

Nebraska has an opportunity to be among the nation's leaders in the development and implementation of the next generation of nuclear

technology. The study proposed in LB 1100 is an important step in understanding this issue and signaling to developers that Nebraska is serious about attracting the next generation of nuclear technology.

Hydrogen may also prove to be an important source of fuel for the next generation of transportation and electric generation in our country. Like nuclear power, hydrogen also has the benefit of being non-carbon emitting source of energy. LB 1099 would establish the Nebraska Hydrogen Hub Industry Working Group. The working group would be tasked with developing a competitive proposal asking the U.S. Department of Energy to establish our state as one of four clean hydrogen hubs in America. The working group established under LB 1099 would have the important task of developing an attractive application that sets Nebraska apart from other competing states and helps our state to secure the funds needed to become a national leader in this innovative area of energy development. As I draft this article, LB 1099 has passed Final Reading in the Legislature and will now be presented to the governor for his signature.

Whether it is nuclear power or attracting the hydrogen industry to our state, Nebraska is positioning itself to lead in these innovative areas of energy development. As the Legislature finishes up this year's legislative session, keep an eye towards LB 1100 and LB 1099. If adopted, these measures will, once again, serve as strong examples of the non-partisan cooperation that can be achieved within our state's unicameral system.

ALL-NEW mobility technology

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The So Lite™ Scooter is easy to transport and almost impossible to tip over.

Like millions of older Americans, I struggle with mobility. For years, I watched my quality of life slip away, as I was forced to stay home while friends and family took part in activities I'd once enjoyed. I thought I'd made some progress when I got a mobility scooter, but then I realized how hard it was to transport. Taking it apart and putting it back together was like doing a jigsaw puzzle. Once I had it disassembled, I had to try to put all of the pieces in the trunk of a car, go to wherever I was going, and repeat the process in reverse. Travel scooters were easier to transport, but they were uncomfortable and scary to drive, I always felt like I was ready to tip over. Then I found the So Lite™ Scooter. Now there's nothing that can hold me back.

Years of work by innovative engineers have resulted in a scooter that's designed with seniors in mind. They created Electronic Stability Control (ESC) that makes it virtually impossible to tip over. If you try to turn too quickly, the scooter automatically slows down to prevent it from tipping over. The battery provides powerful energy at a fraction of the weight of most batteries. With its rugged yet lightweight aluminum frame, the So Lite™ Scooter is the most portable scooter ever—but it can hold up to 265 pounds—yet weighs only 40.8 pounds without the battery! What's more, it easily folds up for storage



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Capturing Carbon

Providing reliable, affordable electricity is the top priority for Nebraska's public power districts and electric cooperatives. Rural electric utilities continue to incorporate additional energy generated from renewable sources, but until these technologies fully mature, fossil fuels remain a part of our overall generation mix to ensure power reliability.

As the U.S. moves forward with carbon reduction goals, public power districts and electric cooperatives are also looking for ways to provide clean energy and offset the carbon that's generated during power production. Capturing carbon emissions at their creation source is one of those approaches.

Carbon capture involves a series of steps that removes carbon dioxide (CO₂) from its original source to prevent it from reaching the Earth's atmosphere. During the capture step, CO₂ is removed either before or after combustion.

Post-combustion capture is the most common method used at existing power plants. After electricity is generated, the CO₂ is removed from the gas mixture found in a plant's flue.

In pre-combustion capture, the fuel sources are heated with pure oxygen (or steam and oxygen) to release CO₂.

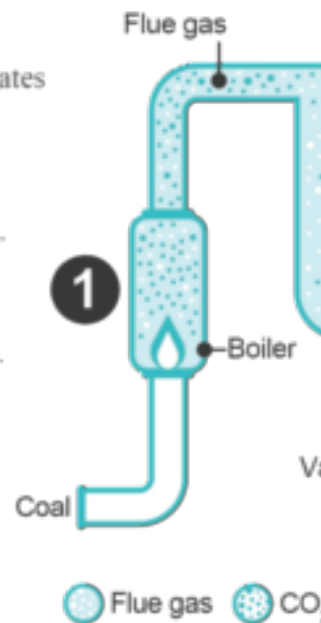


Basin Electric Cooperative's Dry Fork Station in Wyoming is located near a site being developed for a large-scale carbon storage project.

Post-Combustion Carbon

Post-combustion is the most common method used for carbon capture. The diagram below shows how membrane system technology. Post-combustion capture often requires the retrofitting of power plants, which limits large-scale adaptation.

- 1 Coal combustion creates heat, gases (including CO₂) and particulate.
- 2 Primary membrane separates CO₂ from the flue gas.
- 3 A secondary membrane further separates out CO₂.
- 4 Flue gas, with nearly all CO₂ removed, is released.
- 5 Pure, liquified CO₂ is used to create beneficial products.



Source: Membrane Technology & Research (MTR)

Once captured, the CO₂ is transported to its next destination. Typically, CO₂ moves as compressed gas in pipelines but can also be transported by tanker trucks or ships.

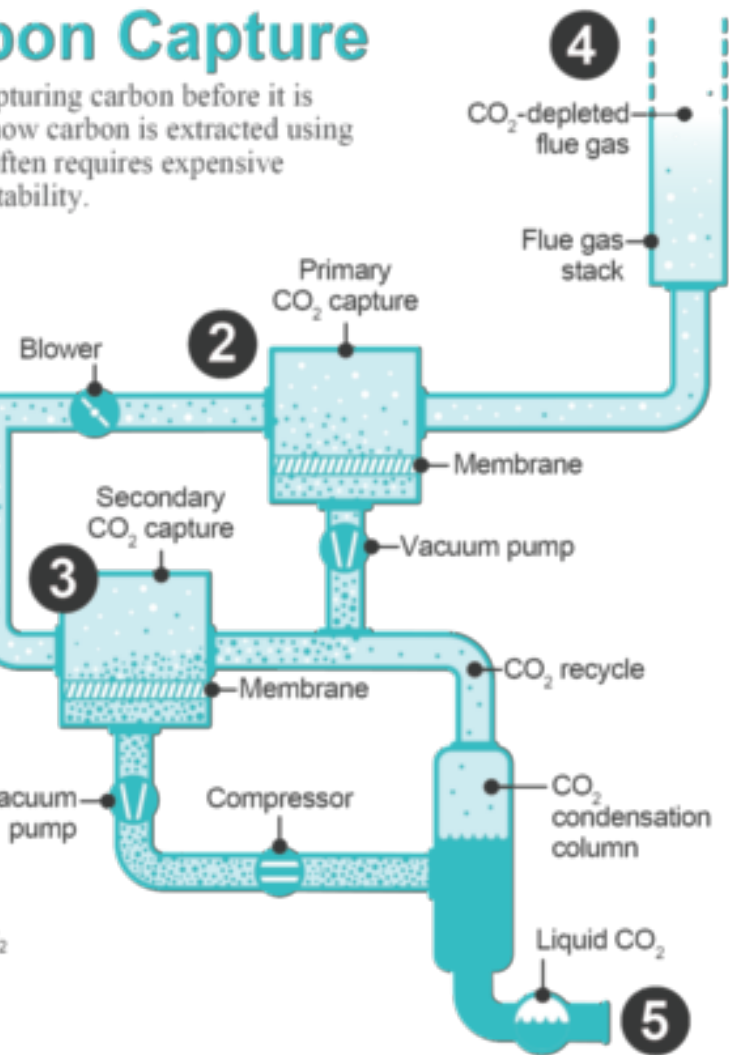
Captured CO₂ can be injected into geological formations or recycled for other uses.

One appeal of carbon capture is the abundance of underground natural storage locations, such as deep aquifers, porous rock and unproductive coal mines. The U.S. Geological Service estimates the U.S. has the potential to store 3,000 metric gigatons of CO₂, the equivalent of centuries worth of emissions.

Research on how to recycle CO₂ is ongoing, but established uses include using the gas in enhanced oil

Carbon Capture

Capturing carbon before it is released into the atmosphere often requires expensive technology.



recovery, growing fish food from lab-grown bacteria that feed on CO₂ and creating carbon-negative concrete or other carbon-based materials.

As promising as carbon capture sounds, the costs and risks limit the technology's ability to be implemented on a larger scale. Post-combustion capture often requires expensive retrofitting of power plants. Pre-combustion capture, while more effective than post-combustion, has been limited due to high costs of equipment and pure oxygen.

In addition to these costs, the processes require a large amount of energy. Transportation of the gas increases in cost for longer distances between the source and destination, making plants located far away from

sequestration locations less feasible. Sequestration also carries the concern of CO₂ leaks, which would negate the effort to remove it from the atmosphere.

Despite these hurdles, carbon capture is seen as an important technology in reducing emissions.

In 2015, XPRIZE, a technological development competition, kicked off and aimed to award \$20 million to develop new and emerging technologies that utilize CO₂. The competition was based on how much CO₂ was converted and the economic feasibility of the project. XPRIZE concluded in 2021, and the winning project was a carbon-negative concrete created by a team of UCLA researchers called CarbonBuilt. The research team conducted tests at Basin Electric Power Cooperative's Integrated Test Center in Wyoming to turn flue gases and fly ash into carbon-negative concrete. The process reduces the carbon emissions of concrete production and traps additional carbon long-term within the final product.

The federal government is making carbon capture a funding priority in 2022. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provides \$927 million for large, commercial-scale pilot projects as well as \$3.5 billion for six demonstration projects at coal and natural gas plants.

The Slowing CO₂ and Lowering Emissions (SCALE) Act was introduced in 2021 and provides funding to overcome expansion barriers. The SCALE Act aims to reduce costs by financing scaling projects for pipeline infrastructure, creating regional storage infrastructure and providing grants for creating products derived from large-scale capture.

Capturing carbon is an important tool in reducing CO₂ emissions generated from fossil fuel use. When this emerging technology can be deployed on a larger scale, the future of carbon capture will look much more promising.

Katherine Loving writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local public power districts and electric cooperatives.

Easter weekend is a wonderful time to celebrate with family and friends while enjoying great food, favorite candies and beloved holiday traditions. But keep in mind — your colored eggs aren't the only things hiding this weekend. Here are a few tips to help you avoid any unseen dangers during your holiday festivities.

Easter Egg Safety 101

Dyed and decorated eggs — and the ensuing hunt — are a big part of many families' Easter celebrations. We love this fun and creative celebration. But it's important to remember that eggs can spoil quickly and cause serious illness if consumed. A few things to keep in mind:

Do not use eggs that have been cracked or broken. Inspect your eggs before purchasing and keep them refrigerated until you're ready to use them.

Hard boiling eggs before giving them to children to dye is a good way to avoid handling raw eggs — and avoid a potential mess!

If you plan to eat any of your decorated eggs, be sure to use food-grade dyes. It's generally safe to use commercial egg dyes, liquid food coloring, drink mixes and fruits/vegetables to color your eggs.

Eggs that have been left unrefrigerated for more than two hours, either as part of an egg hunt or another display, should not be eaten. Consider making a second

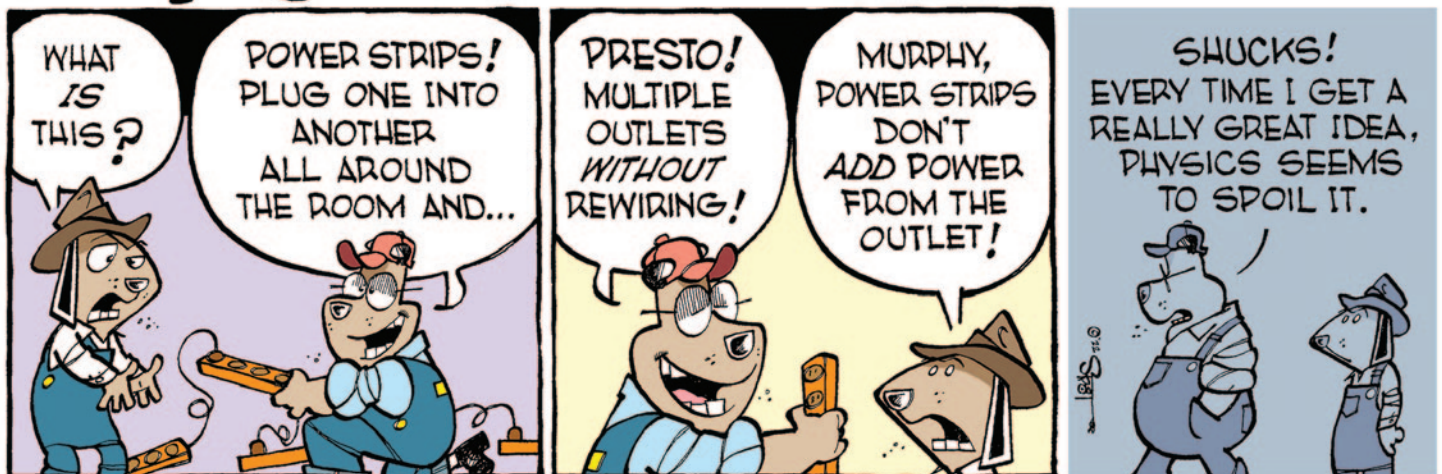


Use a food-safe coloring and decorations if eggs will be eaten. Dye eggs and return them to the refrigerator immediately until ready to hide.

batch to serve your guests. Un-cracked hard-boiled eggs will stay fresh for one week if refrigerated.

When setting up your hunt, avoid hiding eggs near outlets or plugs, in hard-to-reach areas and near glass or other breakables. If hiding outside, be sure to place eggs away from dirt, chemicals and animals. Don't hide eggs in pre-existing holes or trees, or near any plant that you can't identify. Keep count of the eggs you've hidden!

Murphy



Oetken Becomes a Certified Loss Control Professional

Job Training & Safety Coordinator Larry Oetken has completed an intensive program in electric utility safety and loss control. The Certified Loss Control Program is a series of workshops offered by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association in conjunction with the National Utility Training & Safety Education Association. The program is designed to instruct participants in many areas related to electric utility industry safety.



Larry Oetken

According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, nearly four million injuries occur annually in the workplace. One of the goals of a

Certified Loss Control Professional is to help ensure a safe work environment for utility workers and the public in general. Avoiding workplace accidents avoids down time and can ultimately lead to lower utility rates.

Oetken is one of only a few electric utility professionals in the country that will receive this certification this year. The program requires participants to complete a rigorous series of seminars and tests, a 30-hour OSHA course, and a detailed final course project.

Loss control participants go through four week-long sessions that are designed to challenge and educate participants in new, innovative safety techniques. Participants must also maintain their certificate by attending courses every year in order to stay on top of changes in the industry.

Oetken has been with NREA for 6 years. He graduated with an Associate of Applied Science in Utility Line degree from Northeast Community College. He and his wife, Barb, have two children.

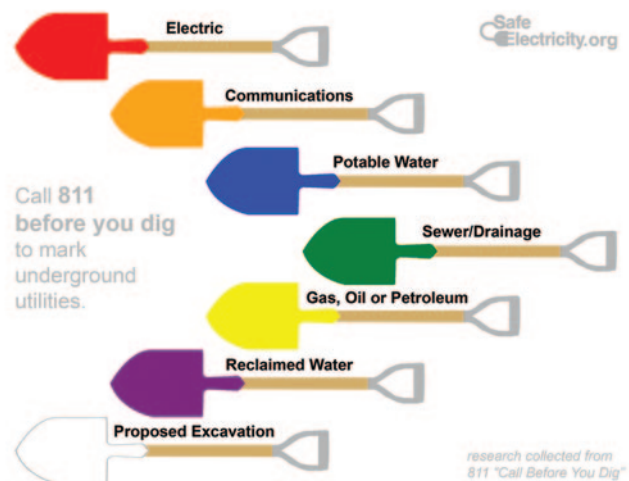
Plan to Call Before You Dig

Digging without locating underground utilities could leave neighborhoods in the dark, cause thousands of dollars in damages, or cause severe electrical shock. This is true regardless of how much area your project will cover or whether you consider the job to be large or small. To help stay safe, make use of the national underground utility locating service for free by calling 8-1-1.

The 8-1-1 “Call Before You Dig” number will route you to your local utility locating service. Make sure to tell the operator where and when you plan to dig and what type of work you will be doing. From there, it takes a few business days for a professional to come mark your public utilities with flags or spray paint.

Even if you previously had utilities located by calling 8-1-1, it is best to call before every digging project. Underground utilities can shift, and it is important to be certain of where they are before ever putting a shovel in the ground.

It is important to understand that 8-1-1 locators do not locate privately installed facilities. If you have any



private utilities, you will need to hire a private utility locator. Examples of private utilities include underground sprinkler system, invisible fences, data communication systems, private water systems, or gas piping to a garage.

Once all of your underground utilities have been located, it is time to start digging, but be sure to wear all of the proper protective gear before putting the shovel into the earth.

Q : I'm planning to buy a new home this year, and I want to know how efficient it is. What questions should I ask my home inspector?

A : Many factors go into buying a home. For most people, energy efficiency does not top the list, and unfortunately, houses don't typically come with energy efficiency ratings.

It can be difficult for a buyer to know how efficient a home is when viewing the listing online or taking a tour. But your home inspector can help you identify potential energy costs and energy-efficiency upgrades.

Some homes may already be efficient, while other homes may need improvements. There's nothing wrong with buying an inefficient home, but you will want to know what you're getting into and that you can afford the energy costs once you get the keys.

Here are five questions to ask your home inspector:

1. What is the condition of the electrical panel and wiring throughout the home?

A panel upgrade or rewiring can be a costly endeavor. An older panel and wiring aren't inefficient, but it can delay or make some energy-efficiency projects more expensive. In several homes I have worked on, older wiring had to be replaced before insulation could be added.

Make sure the panel can accommodate any new appliances you might want to add, such as air conditioning or an electric vehicle charger.

2. How old is the HVAC system, and how efficient is it? Has it been maintained?

The typical lifespan of an HVAC system is 15 to 25 years. As the largest energy user and often the most

expensive equipment in the home, you will want to know the energy, maintenance and replacement costs. If the HVAC system is old, consider the cost for a replacement.

3. How old is the water heater?

The lifespan of a storage water heater is about 10 years. The cost to replace a water heater ranges from \$400 to \$3,600, depending on the unit type and installation costs. If an older water heater is in a finished space or on a second floor, replace it before it fails and potentially causes water damage.

4. What are the levels and conditions of insulation in the attic, walls and floor?

Insulation is one of the easiest and most beneficial energy-efficiency upgrades you can make. It isn't as pretty as new countertops, but it can make a home more comfortable, waste less energy and reduce outdoor noise.

To cut down on drafts and make insulation more effective, air seal before insulating. Seal cracks, gaps or holes in the walls, floors, ceiling and framing between heated and unheated spaces.

If your new home needs insulation and air sealing, make this your efficiency priority. The

sooner you do it, the more energy you will save over time. Recommended insulation levels vary by location. You can find information about insulation and air sealing at www.energy.gov.

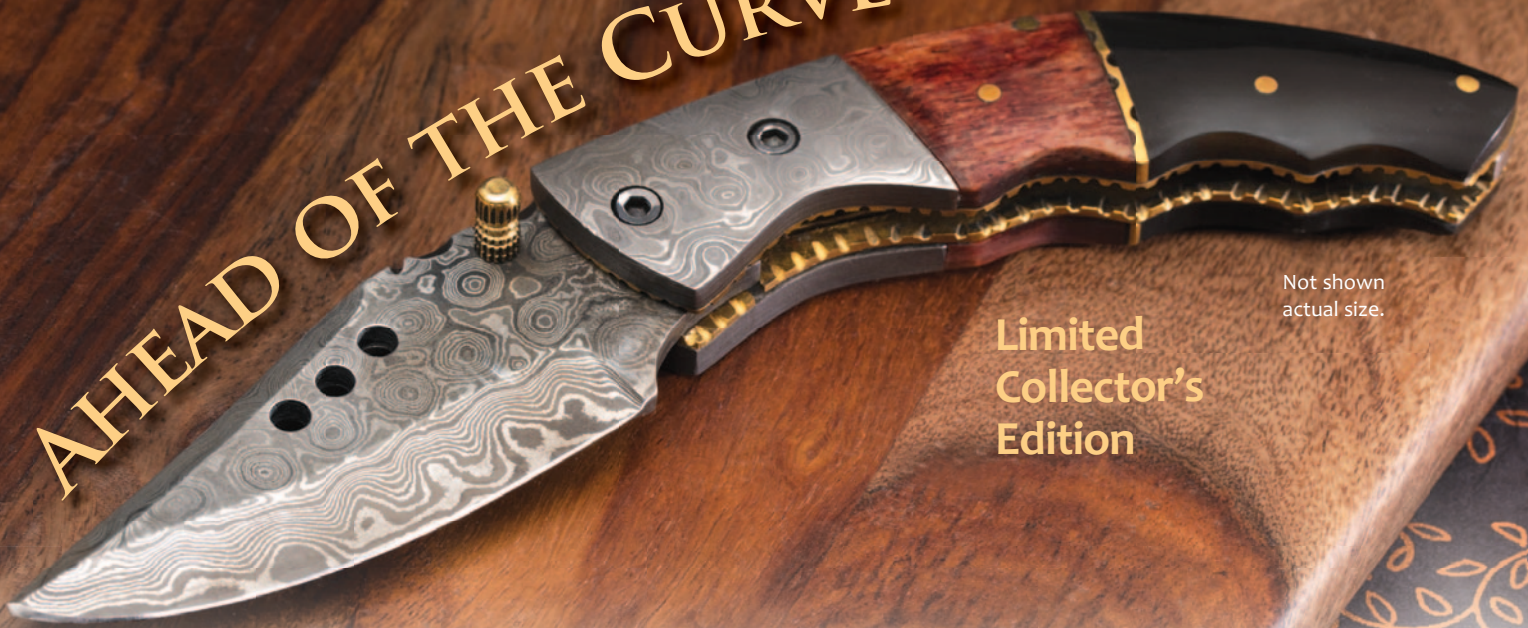
5. Are there any extras in this home that will increase my utility bills?

Any motors in the home or on the property should be assessed, including pumps for wells and septic systems. When it comes to extras, remember life's luxuries aren't free. You will want to be able to afford the cost of operating amenities, such as pools, hot tubs and saunas.



Ask your home inspector if the electrical panel can accommodate new appliances you might want to add. Photograph by Mark Gilliland, Pioneer Utility Resources

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5 Steps for Mastering Family Meal Planning

As you and your family embark on a mission to create delicious, nutritious meals all while saving money, it's key to remember meal planning is essential for success. From tracking a list of ingredients you'll need to noting your loved ones' favorite foods, there are some easy steps you can take to make dinners at home enjoyable and budget friendly.

Work together. Before heading to the store or heating up the oven, sit down with your loved ones and make a list of easy-to-make recipes you all enjoy. Each time you discover a new favorite, add it to the list so you'll have a reference guide when it's time to plan a week's worth of meals.

Stick to a schedule. Set a day and time each week your family can meet and plan out dinners. This also offers an opportunity to bring to light any newfound favorites or fresh ideas while bringing everyone to the same room for quality time together.

Plan time-saving processes. Think ahead while planning meals and consider the equipment you'll need. Saving time while cooking can be as easy as sticking to recipes that call for hands-off appliances like a slow cooker or pressure cooker and using a food processor rather than a knife and cutting board.

Schedule a "leftovers night." When you prep dinners that call for



Chicken Apple Enchiladas

- 1/2 sweet onion, diced
- 1 jalapeno, diced
- 1 Envy or Jazz apple, diced
- 2 cups cooked shredded chicken
- 8 flour tortillas
- 6 ounces shredded Mexican blend cheese, divided
- 1 can red enchilada sauce
- cilantro (optional)

Heat oven to 350 F.
In skillet, cook onions until

translucent. Add jalapeno and apple; saute 2-3 minutes.

Add cooked chicken and mix well. Remove from heat.

Lay out tortillas and sprinkle cheese on each. Add chicken mixture and roll. Place in baking dish and cover with enchilada sauce.

Bake 20 minutes, or until heated throughout.

crossover ingredients, it's easier to turn one meal into two. For example, buying sweet onions and chicken breast to make Chicken Apple Enchiladas means you'll have those ingredients on hand for Greek Chicken Bowls later in the week.

Make a list. Once you've decided on recipes for the week, create a list of all the ingredients you'll need. While you're at the store, stick to your plan and avoid impulse buys to help stay on track while getting in and out quicker.



Greek Chicken Bowls

- 1 cup cooked white or brown rice
- 1 grilled chicken breast, sliced
- 1 RealSweet onion, sliced
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes
- 1 cucumber, cut into quarters
- 1/2 cup black olives
- 1 tablespoon feta cheese
- 2 tablespoons tzatziki sauce

Place cooked rice and chicken in bowls.

Top each bowl with sweet onions, tomatoes, cucumbers and black olives. Sprinkle each with feta cheese. Drizzle each with tzatziki sauce.

Creamy Ham Potato Soup

- | | |
|--|--|
| 6 cups water | 1/2 cup diced onion |
| 7 teaspoons chicken bouillon | 1/2 cup diced celery |
| 2 8 oz pkg cream cheese | 1 clove diced garlic or 1 teaspoon garlic powder |
| 1 1/2 pkg thawed hash browns--
CHUNKS NOT shredded!! | 1 teaspoon dill weed |
| | 2 cups diced ham |

Mix water, bouillon, (yes that 7 tsp of bouillon is correct!! Sounds like a lot but really not!), and cream cheese. Cook and whisk until cheese is melted, then add hashbrowns. Sauté onion, celery, and garlic, then add water mixture. Stir in dill weed and 2 cups of diced ham. Cook till hot. Let rest 6-8 hours and then reheat and serve.

Pat Brase, Dannebrog, Nebraska

Sweet Potato Souffle

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| 4 cups mashed sweet potatoes (2-18 oz cans) | 1 teaspoon vanilla |
| 1 cup sugar | Topping: |
| 3 eggs | 1/2 cup brown sugar |
| 1 stick butter | 1/4 cup flour |
| 1 1/2 cups coconut | 1/2 cup chopped nuts |

Heat potatoes thoroughly. Drain, mash, and add remaining ingredients and pour into baking dish. (Use an electric mixer to give fluffy texture). Mix ingredients for topping and spread over potato mixture. Chop **1 stick butter** on top. Bake 25-30 minutes at 350 degrees.

Deanne Cooper, Oshkosh, Nebraska

Frosty Strawberry Squares

Crust & Topping:

- 1 cup flour
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup chopped walnuts
- 1/2 cup melted margarine

Crust: Mix and put in 9" X 13" pan, reserving 1/3 cup to top filling. Bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes or until a golden brown.

Filling:

- 2 egg whites
- 1/2 cup sugar, less if strawberries are sweetened
- 1 10 oz. frozen strawberries, thawed
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 8 oz. Cool Whip

Filling: In a large bowl, combine egg whites, sugar, lemon juice and strawberries. Beat 10 to 12 minutes or till stiff peaks form, fold in Cool Whip. Pour in crust and top with reserved crumbs. Freeze. Serve frozen or slightly thawed.

Shirley Mahon, Niobrara, Nebraska

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