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April 2025

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Telling the story of Rural Nebraska

Volume 79
Number 4
April 2025

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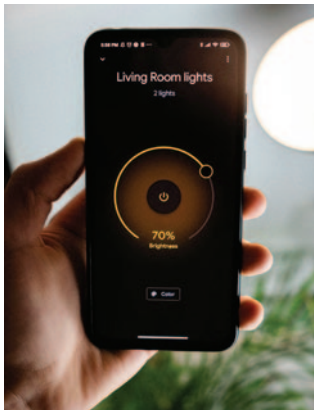
Each summer, high school students from across Nebraska have the unique opportunity to explore the world of public power at the Nebraska Rural Electric Association (NREA) Youth Energy Leadership Camp. This year's camp will take place July 21-25, 2025.



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Public power districts and electric cooperatives have a rich history of improving the quality of life for their consumers. Today, the modern electrification movement continues this legacy by providing significant cost savings and empowering smarter, more informed rural electric utility consumers.

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Pole climbing is just one of the educational activities students get to participate in during Youth Energy Leadership Camp. See the related article on Page 6. Photograph by Wayne Price

NREA
NEBRASKA RURAL ELECTRIC ASSOCIATION

Published monthly by the Nebraska Rural Electric Association, 1244 K Street, Box 82048, Lincoln, Nebraska 68501, (402) 475-4988.
Advertising in the *Nebraska Magazine* does not imply endorsement for products by the Nebraska Rural Electric Association. Correspondence should be sent to Wayne Price, Editor, *Nebraska Magazine*, Box 82048, Lincoln, NE 68501.
The *Nebraska Magazine* is printed by the Aradius Group, 4700 F Street, Omaha, NE 68117. Form 3579 should be sent to *Nebraska Magazine*, Box 82048, Lincoln, NE 68501.
Periodicals postage paid at Lincoln, Neb. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Nebraska Magazine*, 1244 K Street, Box 82048, Lincoln, NE 68501.
Publication numbers are USPS 071-630 and ISSN 0193-4937.
Subscriber Services: Cost of subscription for consumers of participating member-systems is $2.14 per year (17.8 cents per month), plus periodicals postage paid from equity accruing to the consumer. For nonmembers, a subscription is $10 per year or $20 for three years, plus local and state tax. Single copy, $2.50.

Editor's Page

Wayne Price

The Evolution of Lighting Technology and Energy Efficiency

The transition from incandescent light bulbs to more energy-efficient alternatives marks a significant advancement in lighting technology. Incandescent bulbs, once the standard, have been largely phased out due to their inefficiency. These bulbs convert approximately 90 percent of the electricity they consume into heat rather than light, making them a costly and energy-intensive option.

Governments worldwide have adopted policies that promote energy-efficient lighting solutions such as LED bulbs. These modern alternatives last significantly longer, consume less electricity, and contribute to lower utility bills and reduced environmental impact. By decreasing overall energy consumption, they help alleviate strain on power grids and reduce carbon emissions from power generation.

Some political discussions have emerged advocating for the return of incandescent bulbs, often framed as a matter of consumer choice. However, the reality is that the market has already transitioned toward energy-efficient lighting. Manufacturers have adapted to new technologies, and factories that once produced incandescent bulbs have shifted their focus to more sustainable solutions. As a result, the production infrastructure for incandescent bulbs has largely disappeared.

The economic and environmental benefits of energy-efficient lighting are well-documented. LED bulbs, for example, provide superior performance, longer lifespan, and cost savings over time. In contrast, reinstating inefficient incandescent bulbs would not only be impractical but also counterproductive to the broader goals of energy conservation and sustainability.

Energy efficiency plays a crucial role in reducing reliance on fossil fuels and climate change. Since incandescent bulbs require more electricity to operate, their widespread use would result in higher carbon emissions and increased energy costs for consumers. By contrast, the adoption of LED technology supports a cleaner, more sustainable future.

Rather than revisiting outdated technologies, policymakers and industry leaders should continue to advance energy efficiency initiatives. Expanding access to energy-saving solutions benefits both consumers and the environment, reinforcing the importance of innovation in lighting technology.

Switching away from old incandescent light bulbs has been an easy and low cost way to save energy. Keeping up this initiative helps Nebraskans lower electricity bills, reduce wasted energy, and protect the environment. As new lighting technology improves, choosing energy-efficient options is the smartest and most responsible choice.

Incandescent bulbs are gone for a reason. Let's keep it that way.

Visit our website at nebraskamagazine.org

SCAN ME

Guest Editorial

Craig Cox

Craig Cox is the General Manager of South Central Public Power District headquartered in Nelson, Neb.

Achieving Reliability in Public Power

People count on electricity every day to make our lives easier. The convenience of electricity over other forms of energy is helping drive the demand for more power generation in Nebraska and nationwide. As more of our daily activities revolve around the availability of electricity, it's understandable that we can feel a sense of panic and helplessness when we lose it.

One of the core values of public power is the reliability of the electric service we provide to our customers. Nebraska consistently ranks among the top states for electric service reliability. While power outages can never be entirely avoided, the state's public power model is uniquely positioned to manage them more effectively than many other providers.

Unlike investor-owned utilities, public power districts are non-profit entities. Every dollar made over the cost of providing service is invested back into the electric system. More money spent on preventative maintenance and good construction practices results in fewer power outages over time. When outages do occur, we often have alternate feeds and other ways to re-route power while repairs are being made, which can greatly reduce outage time.

Another key tool in maintaining reliability is the Mutual Aid Agreements between public power districts. In extreme weather events, a local power supplier can quickly become overwhelmed with damage to poles and conductors. A small crew of linemen might need weeks to restore power when there is widespread damage. Fortunately, other public power districts come to the rescue in these situations to help restore power as quickly and safely as possible for the district requesting help. The Nebraska Rural Electric Association coordinates these efforts.

Since extreme weather is the cause of most major power outages, you may wonder why we don't bury all the power lines. If we were starting over today with a brand-new power system, it might be feasible to do so at the distribution level. Underground cables that could operate reliably at high voltage weren't available in the 1930s and 1940s when our electric systems were first built. Replacing our entire overhead line system with underground lines would be cost prohibitive. Maximizing reliability while providing the lowest possible rates is a balancing act, and keeping electricity affordable is as important as keeping it reliable.

In the larger picture, the reliability of electric service also depends heavily on our generating plants and regional transmission grid. The biggest challenge to reliability at the generation and transmission level is the enormous amount of intermittent wind generation now operating in our region. There are times when demand for power is high and wind generation is almost nothing, and there are times when wind can supply most of the regional power demand. We rely on dispatchable generation resources to cover our power needs when the wind isn't blowing. The greatest challenge to electric reliability in the future may be keeping these dispatchable coal, gas, and nuclear plants operating in a political environment that wants to shut them down, and in the ability to add additional plants to meet the exploding demand for power in Nebraska and the rest of the nation.

Empowering Our Future Leaders

NREA's Youth Energy Leadership Camp

Each summer, high school students from across Nebraska have the unique opportunity to explore the world of public power at the Nebraska Rural Electric Association (NREA) Youth Energy Leadership Camp. This year's camp will take place July 21-25 at Camp Comeca, near Cozad, Nebraska, offering an immersive, hands-on experience in electricity, power generation, and the rural electric industry.

Designed to educate, challenge, and inspire, this week-long program blends learning with leadership development and recreation. Students will gain insight into the operations of member-owned public power electric systems while working alongside industry professionals, adult counselors, and junior counselors—former campers who return to take on leadership roles.

Hands-On Learning & Leadership

From day one, campers become active participants in a simulated electric power district, electing a board of directors that oversees operations. The board selects a general manager to facilitate communication between counselors and campers, ensuring smooth decision-making throughout the week. Students can also compete in the Ambassador competition or take on key roles within various camp committees, enhancing their leadership skills and teamwork abilities.

A highlight of the camp includes a tour of Nebraska's energy infrastructure, featuring visits to the Kingsley Hydro Station at Lake McConaughy and the Gerald Gentleman Station, the state's largest coal-fired power plant at Sutherland.

For those looking to take their experience to the national level, the camp offers an opportunity. Three students from the Ambassador competition will earn a fully funded trip to Washington, D.C., representing Nebraska at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's Youth Tour. To be considered, campers must submit an application, give a self-introduction speech, and deliver a five-minute speech on an assigned topic. Their peers will then vote for the top male and female candidates, along with the next highest vote-getter, to serve as Ambassadors.

The top six finalists will also be invited to return next year as junior counselors.

While the camp is packed with educational experiences, it's also a place for fun and making lifelong friends. Students can participate in basketball, volleyball, and swimming, as well as tackle a rock climbing wall and adventure course. These activities foster teamwork, confidence, and lasting friendships.

How to Apply

This exciting opportunity is open to high school freshmen, sophomores, and juniors whose families are consumers of NREA member-systems. Camp costs and transportation are covered by sponsoring rural electric systems, making it an accessible and invaluable experience for young leaders interested in energy and leadership.

To learn more or apply for the NREA Youth Energy Leadership Camp, contact your rural electric utility. Don't miss this chance to spark your leadership journey in the energy industry!

July 21-25, 2025

To apply, contact your rural electric utility. Students must be freshmen, sophomores, or juniors in high school.

Opposite: A camper looks out at the rail cars delivering coal during a tour of NPPD's Gerald Gentleman Station.

Top left: Campers make S'mores during the campfire.

Top right: A tour of NPPD's Gerald Gentleman Station, near Sutherland, Neb., provides campers with a look at a coal-fired power plant.

Left: Employees of Dawson Public Power District provide a high voltage safety demonstration to campers.

Photographs by Wayne Price

Prepare For Your Future on the NREA Youth Tour

What if you had the chance to travel to Washington, D.C., meet influential leaders, and connect with other ambitious students from across the country—all for free? Sounds too good to be true, right? Well, it's not. The Nebraska Rural Electric Association Youth Tour offers Nebraska high school students an unforgettable, life-changing experience that will help shape your future.

Leaders Aren't Just Born—They're Made

Maybe you've always been the one to step up and take charge. Or maybe leadership isn't something you've thought about before. Either way, great leaders aren't just born with skills—they develop them. Youth Tour is designed to give you the tools, experiences, and confidence to become a leader in your community, career, and beyond.

Each of the 44 states that participate in the program selects one member of their delegation to represent it on the Youth Leadership Council. Members of the council come back to Washington for additional leadership development experiences, serve as youth ambassadors at events hosted by their state's rural electric utilities and represent their states at the annual meeting of America's public power districts and electric cooperatives.

What You'll Experience

For one incredible week in Washington, D.C., you'll:

Meet Your Representatives – You'll get the rare chance to visit Capitol Hill and have face-to-face conversations with Nebraska's senators and members of Congress.

Explore National Landmarks – Walk in the footsteps of history as you visit iconic monuments, memorials, and museums.

Make Lifelong Friendships – Connect with more than 1,500 other students from across the country who share your drive and curiosity.

See Democracy in Action – Gain firsthand knowledge of how government works and how you can make an impact.

Why It Matters

This isn't just another school trip—it's an opportunity to expand your world, build leadership skills, and prepare for your future. Past Youth Tour participants have gone on to become CEOs, elected officials, and community leaders. You could be next.

And the best part? It's absolutely free for students selected to attend, thanks to Nebraska's public power districts and electric cooperatives.

How to Apply

To be eligible to attend Youth Tour, students must attend the NREA Youth Energy Leadership Camp held each summer in July. The five-day camp is set up to give high school students a better understanding of electric safety, electric power generation and the rural electric program. During camp three students are selected by their peers to serve as Nebraska ambassadors on Youth Tour.

The Ambassador Competition involves submitting an application at Youth Energy Leadership 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.

To learn more about the NREA Youth Energy Leadership Camp and Youth Tour, contact your rural electric utility or visit www.nrea.org/services/youth-programs.

Photographs by James Dukesherer

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Surging Demand, Shrinking Supply

Our need for more power affects electric utilities and consumers

by Scott Flood

When public power districts and electric cooperatives first strung power lines from farm to farm, across rivers and streams, and through remote forests less than a century ago, most consumers had but a handful of light bulbs to power. With time, they added appliances like refrigerators, but we're sure they couldn't begin to imagine the number and variety of electrical devices in today's homes and garages.

Across the U.S., people use a growing amount of electricity at work, at home, and with the growth of electric vehicles (EVs), even on the road.

The demand for electricity increased by 2.5% in 2024 and is expected to grow by 3.2% this year. That was after electric utilities saw a 4.8% increase in 2022. Through 2029, the nation's peak demand is projected to grow by 38 gigawatts. That would be like adding another California-sized state to our nation's power grid.

The rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) is driving the development of massive data center facilities, often placed in electric utility service territories to take advantage of inexpensive land and fewer neighbors to complain. By 2022, these facilities accounted for 2.5% of the nation's consumption of electricity—and by 2030, they'll use 7.5% of all electric power.

Data centers and facilities like warehouses require a large, steady supply of electricity 24 hours a day. That means the electric co-ops supplying them can't rely on intermittent sources of electricity such as solar or wind energy to handle the additional load. Instead, they need more of what's known as baseload or always-available power, much of which is currently generated by burning fossil fuels. The more we depend on technology, the more we'll need reliable baseload generation.

Yet that's a problem, because at the same time Americans are using more electricity, power providers are being forced to shut down reliable sources of baseload power such as coal and nuclear power plants. Many large coal plants have been converted to use cleaner-burning natural gas, but others have been deemed too costly to convert and are prematurely being shut down. More than 110 gigawatts of always-available generation—enough to power about 35 million homes—is forecast to retire by 2033.

As electricity powers a growing share of life's tools and conveniences, overall demand is expected to continue its steady growth through 2050. A great example is the efficiency of electric heat pumps. Federal and other subsidies and tax advantages are powering significant growth in their share of the home heating market.

In other words, at the same time everyone is using more electricity than ever, the supply of the most reliable source is drying up. Add in the uncertainty created by public policy debates around energy and climate change, and you can begin to understand why 19 states face a high risk of rolling blackouts between now and 2028.

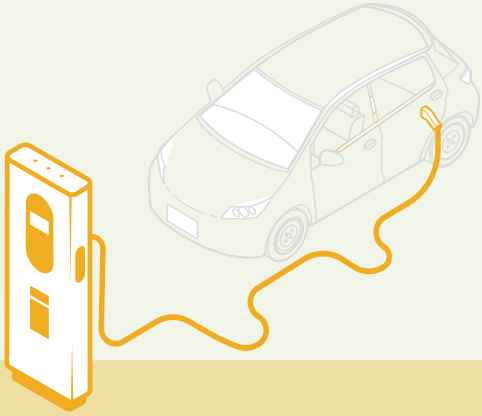
The energy industry studies demand closely because construction of all types of generation is costly and lengthy—often longer than a decade from groundbreaking to entering service.

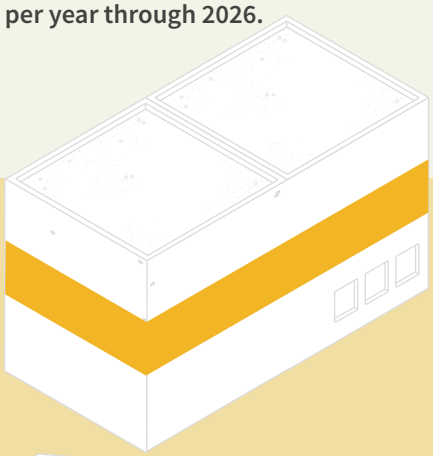
As renewables become more efficient and cheaper to produce, their share of the power mix will only continue to grow. Someday soon, battery technology may reach the point where large-scale storage of renewable generation becomes possible, but until then, we'll need more of those always-available power sources.

After decades of flat or declining electricity demand, the United States is in the midst of a boom in power use. Recent government data shows that power consumption nationwide is set to increase by at least 38 gigawatts between now and 2028. This trend would ordinarily be great news for the power industry. But government policies aimed at shutting down fossil-fuel-based generation and years-long delays in permitting and siting for new transmission lines are turning this power boom into a capacity crisis. Here are the primary demand drivers:

Electrification

Electric vehicle adoption, electrification of home heating and industrial electrification are expected to increase overall U.S. energy consumption by 1% per year through 2026.

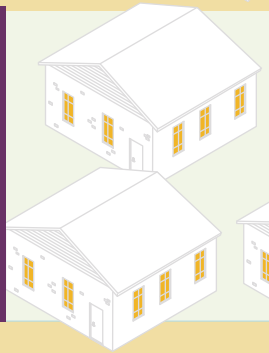




Data Centers

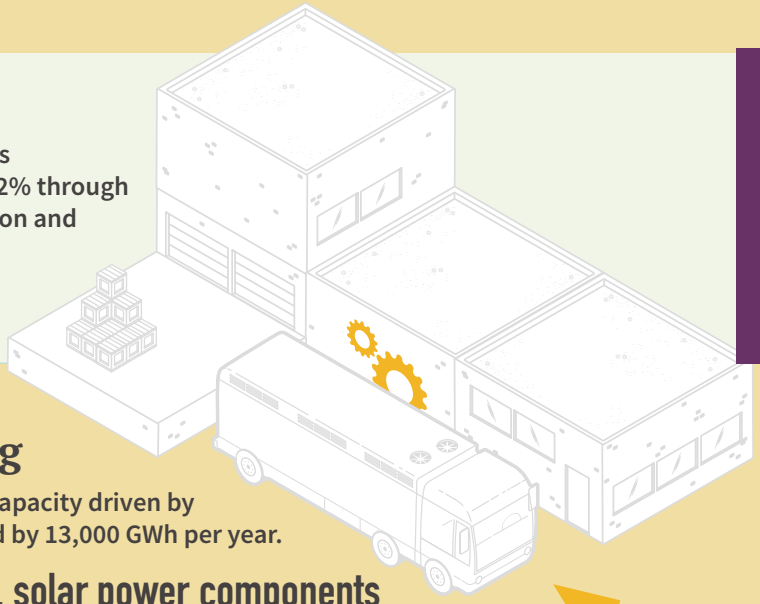
65%

Driven by explosions in artificial intelligence, cryptocurrency and cloud computing, total U.S. data center load is projected to increase by 65% by 2050.



Economic Growth

Residential power consumption is expected to increase by 14% to 22% through 2050 due to increases in population and steady economic growth.



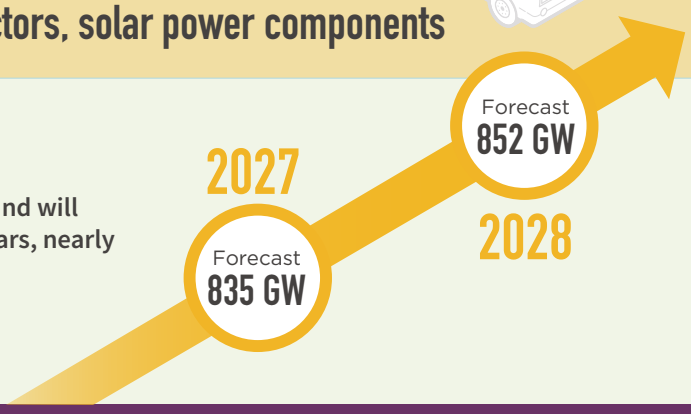
Manufacturing Growth/Onshoring

New, expanding and "onshored/reshored" manufacturing capacity driven by federal incentives is expected to increase industrial demand by 13,000 GWh per year.

Key products: EVs, batteries, semiconductors, solar power components

Total Demand

Analysts predicted in 2023 that U.S. peak demand will increase by at least 38 GW over the next five years, nearly double the growth rate predicted in 2022.



Battery Storage: a Key Issue in 2025 Legislative Session

by James Dukesherer, NREA Director of Government Relations

As we flip a light switch most Nebraskans do not give much thought as to where the electrons that light our homes and businesses come from. Electricity is a commodity that is used, for the most part, instantaneously from the moment it's generated. Electrons travel at the speed of light from the generation plant, through a system of transmission and distribution lines and into our homes. Your electric utility is working every minute of every day to balance it is generation output with the electric needs of consumers across Nebraska.

The storage of electricity for use at a later time is a topic that for many years has been the subject of a great deal of research and discussion by electric utilities. The limitations of battery technology and the expense of deployment have led to its limited application. Today, however, our nation is beginning to see utility scale battery storage projects enter into the electric generation portfolios of utilities across the country. Battery storage provides a number of promising applications that are desirable to electric utilities and could alter how we deliver power to consumers. The development of larger and better batteries at lower costs could, for example, allow a utility to better utilize variable renewable generation resources like wind and solar. As these resources ramp up and down at the whims of mother nature, batteries could be used to provide a more predictable and stable generation resource that could be efficiently deployed when it is most useful to the utility. Batteries could allow a utility to generate electricity at times when market prices are low, store the energy, and discharge the battery when prices are high, thus saving ratepayers money. Utilities could even use batteries to reduce their system demands at peak times therefore delaying the need for new generation to be built.

This 250kW/735kWh battery storage system is owned by North Carolina's Electric Cooperatives, in partnership with South River EMC.

In this year's legislative session, two bills have been introduced that address utility battery storage. The NREA and the entire Nebraska Power Association opposed both bills. LB 349 (Senator ,) and LB 503 (Senator Bosn) both propose to allow for the development of privately-owned battery storage technology in Nebraska. As our readers are well-aware, Nebraska's electric system is operated by our not-for-profit and locally-controlled public power model. We are the only state where every consumer is served by a public power electric utility, and we are very proud of our 100 percent public power designation.

LB 349 and a portion of LB 503 would define privately-owned battery storage facilities as "privately developed renewable energy facilities" which are currently allowed under Nebraska statute. Unfortunately, this square peg should not be forced into that round hole. Battery storage facilities are not renewable facilities, like wind and solar, and should not be defined as such. Battery storage facilities are not even generation resources. They do not generate electricity. They simply hold electricity, which was generated by the power company, until it can be used at a later time.

At various points during the public hearings for these bills, public power was asked "is public power opposed to entering into agreements with private companies for the deployment and use of battery storage technology?" Our answer was no, and there is nothing in current statute that would prohibit such agreements. The real question, perhaps not fully explored at the hearings, is what would the impact of privately-owned battery storage facilities be on public power and Nebraska's electric consumers? If large, private-owned battery storage facilities bought electricity when prices were low and discharged that

generation when prices were high, what impact would that have on the markets and on public power customers? How would these facilities be approved under Nebraska law, and how could public power best utilize these facilities to improve the reliability of our electric system?

Questions like this, and many others have not yet been fully explored. Even the rules for how these facilities will be integrated into our regional grid are still largely undefined. What is known, however, is that private, out-of-state companies using battery storage to speculate energy for profit would not best serve the public interest.

As battery storage technology continues to develop, public power will continue to evaluate its value to our electric system. There is a role for battery storage in Nebraska, but energy storage is an evolving technology that requires unique considerations. The Legislature should allow public power to fully assess the potential impacts of energy storage before we rush to legislate. The thoughtful integration of this technology will ensure public power infrastructure and consumers are not negatively impacted.

What is Right-of-Way?

What is right-of-way and why is it necessary?

A right-of-way, when it comes to utilities, is an agreement that allows a utility to use or access a piece of property according to the terms of the easement.

Easements are areas designated for overhead and underground utility access, and are usually defined when a lot or neighborhood is first platted. Easements are implemented because it is more efficient and less expensive to run utility lines straight through neighborhoods than it is to run them around parcels of land.

Having right-of-way means that utilities can access the area to fix a utility-related problem or to perform maintenance.

Easements outline general property rights by others while right-of-way (as its name implies) is a specific property right.

Workers who service utility lines should arrive in a marked vehicle and have proper identification. If you have any concerns, please call your local electric utility.

Above: Upgrading to energy efficient appliances can reduce electricity consumption and save money on utility bills. Photograph by Erika Wittlie, Pixabay

Top: Smart devices allow you to monitor and control your energy consumption, leading to more efficient use of electricity and lower energy bills. Photograph by Moritz Kindler, Unsplash

Opposite: Transitioning from gasoline-powered cars to EVs can significantly reduce fuel costs. Photograph by Zaptec, Unsplash

By Jennah Denney

Smart Energy, Smarter Savings

The Benefits of Electrification for Rural Consumers

Public power districts and electric cooperatives have a rich history of improving the quality of life for their consumers. Since the early 20th century, public power districts and electric cooperatives have brought electricity, or electrification, to rural communities, transforming daily life and boosting local economies.

Today, the modern electrification movement continues this legacy by providing significant cost savings and empowering smarter, more informed rural electric utility consumers.

The concept of beneficial electrification focuses on replacing direct fossil fuel use with electricity in ways that reduce overall costs. By adopting electric technologies, members may see financial savings. Here are some of the key ways electrification can lead to cost savings:

• Electric Vehicles: Transitioning from gasoline-powered cars to EVs can significantly reduce fuel costs. Electricity is generally cheaper than gasoline, and EVs often have lower maintenance costs due to fewer moving parts.

• Heat Pumps: Replacing traditional heating systems with electric heat pumps can improve energy efficiency

and lower home heating bills. Heat pumps use electricity to transfer heat rather than generate it, making them more cost effective in the long run.

• Energy Efficient Appliances: Upgrading to energy efficient appliances can reduce electricity consumption and save money on utility bills. Modern appliances are designed to use less energy while providing the same level of performance.

• Smart Home Technologies: Using smart thermostats and home energy management systems can optimize energy use and reduce waste. Smart devices allow you to monitor and control your energy consumption, leading to more efficient use of electricity and lower energy bills.

Beyond financial savings, electrification has been a cornerstone of improving the quality of life in communities served by public power districts and electric cooperatives. Since the early 20th century, the introduction of electricity has revolutionized rural areas, providing access to modern conveniences and fostering economic growth.

Today, the benefits of electrification continue to enhance daily life in several ways. Electric technologies, such as heat pumps and smart home devices, offer greater comfort and convenience. Consumers can enjoy consistent heating and cooling, as well as the ability to control their home's energy systems remotely. Additionally, electrification can improve indoor air quality and reduce health risks associated with burning fossil fuels. Electric stoves, for example, eliminate the need for open flames and reduce the emission of harmful pollutants. Smart technologies also empower consumers to make informed decisions about their energy use. Access to real-time data and insights provide a better understanding of energy consumption patterns and identify more opportunities for savings.

Public power districts and electric cooperatives have a long history of empowering their consumer-members through electrification, and beneficial electrification is a powerful strategy for creating a sustainable and cost-effective energy landscape.

From the early days of bringing electricity to rural areas to today's modern electrification movement, rural electric utilities continue to play a vital role in enhancing quality of life. As consumers embrace electric technologies, they can enjoy immediate benefits while contributing to a smarter energy future.

Electrical Safety Tips for Seniors

Electrical safety is crucial for everyone, but especially important for seniors. Adults over the age of 65 are at the greatest risk of death from fire and this risk increases with age, according to the National Fire Protection Association. As we age, our reflexes slow down, eyesight decreases and senses become less acute, making it essential to take extra precautions when handling electrical appliances.

Here are some ways for older adults to maintain a safe living environment:

• Ensure that electrical appliances are in good working condition. Regularly inspect cords and plugs for damage or wear and tear.

• Don't overload outlets or extension cords. Plugging too many appliances or devices into a single outlet can cause overheating and increase fire risk.

• Limit the use of carpets and rugs, which are tripping hazards, and avoid placing extension cords under them to prevent overheating. To help prevent trips and falls, cords should not stretch across a room. For a safer and more permanent solution, consider having an electrician install additional outlets where needed.

• Unplug appliances when not in use and before cleaning or repairing them.

• Keep electrical appliances away from water and wet surfaces to prevent electric shock.

• Ensure proper lighting in all areas of the home, especially in hallways and staircases, to prevent trips and falls. Consider installing nightlights in bedrooms and bathrooms for better visibility.

• When cooking on the stove, never leave pots and pans unattended, and avoid wearing loose clothing when cooking. Never open the oven door if something catches fire inside the oven.

• Space heaters can offer added warmth to a senior, who may get cold due to circulation issues that are common with aging. Use space heaters with built-in safety features such as an automatic shut-off switch. Keep space heaters on a steady surface and at least three feet away from flammable objects such as curtains, bedding or furniture. Plug them directly into an outlet — do not use an extension cord or power strip — and unplug them when not in use.

• Install smoke detectors on every floor and carbon monoxide detectors near all bedrooms. Test and replace the batteries twice a year — once in the spring and once in the fall.

By following these safety measures, seniors can significantly reduce their risk of electrical accidents. Family members and caregivers can assist older adults in implementing these precautions to ensure their homes are safe and comfortable.

Power Line Safety Tips for Farm Workers

By Larry Oetken

As spring fieldwork ramps up in April, it is crucial to stay vigilant and aware of your surroundings. Many hazards can blend into the landscape, including overhead power lines. While they may be easy to overlook, failing to notice them can have deadly consequences. A single moment of inattention could result in serious injury or even death if you or any equipment you are handling comes into contact with a power line.

Farming Safety Precautions

Before beginning fieldwork, review the locations of power lines and other electrical hazards with your team. Conducting a brief safety meeting each morning can help reinforce awareness and prevent accidents. Pay special attention to the following types of equipment, which are at risk of coming too close to power lines: sprayer tips and booms; tall farm machinery; dump trucks; augers and grain conveyors; or any equipment with an extendable arm.

Stay Safe, Stay Aware

Spring is a busy time, but safety should never take a backseat. By staying mindful of power lines and following established safety guidelines, you can protect yourself, your workers, and your community from electrical hazards. Take a moment to look up, plan ahead, and work safely this season.

Larry Oetken is the Director of Job Training & Safety for the Nebraska Rural Electric Association.

Energy Sense
by Miranda Boutelle

Prepare Now for Summer Savings

Spring is in the air, and before you know it, summer will be here. There are many ways to get a jump-start on preventing summertime high bills and energy waste.

Add your cooling equipment to the spring-cleaning checklist. An annual tune-up by a heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) professional should include refrigerant charge, airflow adjustment and condenser and evaporator fan coil cleaning. This helps maximize your system's efficiency and the lifespan of your equipment, reducing wasted energy and costs.

Some HVAC companies offer discounts for cleaning equipment during the months when they are less busy. Once high temperatures hit, they are more likely to be swamped with calls to repair or replace broken equipment. Signing up for an annual maintenance plan may provide additional savings.

A dirty furnace filter can waste energy by causing your system to work harder. Make sure you have a stack of replacement filters ready to go so you are more likely to replace them as needed. Filters tend to be less expensive if you buy them in bulk. When I recently shopped for filters for my home, the per-filter price was about half as much for a 12-pack as it was for a two-pack.

Ductless heat pumps, also known as mini-splits, have a filter in the indoor unit, or head, which should be cleaned. If you clean the indoor filter yourself, be sure to turn the unit off before removing the filter and let it dry completely before putting it back.

As we transition from cool to warm weather, keep an eye on your thermostat settings. The Department of Energy recommends setting cooling temperatures to 78 degrees when you are home and higher when you are away. You can save as much as 10% a year on heating and cooling by adjusting your thermostat 7 to 10 degrees from its normal setting for eight hours a day.

One way to feel cooler is using fans in the room you're in during the day or when you're sleeping. Using a fan can make a warm room feel cooler without having to adjust the thermostat. Remember: fans cool people, not rooms. Turn fans off in unoccupied rooms.

If your ceiling fan has a reverse function, make sure you flip the switch so it blows air down into the living space. The reverse function is great at circulating warm air in the winter, and you can maximize the comfort benefit of a fan by switching the flow of air seasonally.

Cooking outdoors lets you avoid using your stove and oven, which heats up your home and leads to higher energy use. Photograph by Mark Gilliland, Pioneer Utility Resources

Another consideration before summer hits is your home's impact on peak load—when demand for electricity is highest. This typically occurs in the morning when people are getting ready for work and school, and in the evening when they return home. Your electric cooperative must manage the energy use of all its consumers, which can be a challenge. Consider starting the dishwasher before you go to sleep or starting a load of laundry outside of your utility's peak times.

If you have a photovoltaic solar system, run your dishwasher or do laundry when your system produces the most electricity, which is typically during the sunny mid-day.

Cooking outdoors in summer is a great way to save energy. Using the stove or oven heats your kitchen, which requires more energy for cooling. Get the grill cleaned now so that you are ready to enjoy outdoor cooking.

Incorporate these tips into your summer prep to save energy and lower your bills.

A DIY Guide for Deep Cleaning Your Grill

A clean grill can enhance the flavor of your food, making regular grill maintenance an essential part of your outdoor cooking routine.

Grills, especially those exposed to the elements, can accumulate dirt, rust and food residue that can affect performance and safety. Plus, residual char and grease can impart unwanted flavors and even lead to flare-ups.

Once you've gathered the right tools – a sturdy grill brush with stainless steel bristles, a scraper, a bucket of soapy water, microfiber cloths and grill cleaner or degreaser – consult this step-by-step guide to keep your grill in pristine condition, ensuring delicious meals every time.

In between deep cleanings, remember to clean your grill grates immediately after cooking while they are still warm to remove food particles and grease. Find more tips for the grill and beyond at eLivingtoday.com.

1. Preheat the grill for 15 minutes to loosen any stuck-on residue then turn it off and let it cool slightly.
2. Ensure the gas supply is turned off before cleaning.
3. Remove the grates and scrub them thoroughly with a grill brush and warm, soapy water. Rinse and let dry.
4. Clean burners by wiping them with a damp cloth.
5. Scrape the inside of the grill to remove any debris and use a vacuum to collect loose dirt and ash.
6. Wipe down the exterior of the grill with a microfiber cloth and grill cleaner.
7. Reassemble the grill once all parts are dry and give it a final wipe down.

HOMETOWN EATS

OLD DEPOT VINEYARD
BRADY, NEB.

Located three miles south of Brady, Nebraska, the Old Depot Vineyard and Winery is a family-run establishment that beautifully marries the state's rich history with its thriving wine culture. Owned by Jason and Sharon Axthelm, the winery is housed in a repurposed historic railroad depot, a structure that once served Gothenburg, Nebraska. When the city put the building up for sale, the Axthelm's submitted a sealed bid and won. In 2018, they carefully relocated it to their property, transforming it into a unique winery that pays homage to its roots.

Jason, a farmer, rancher, and contractor, and Sharon, an English teacher, poured their passion into creating a destination that reflects their love for Nebraska and its local products. Their commitment to authenticity and community shines through in every aspect of the business. The winery operates as a true family endeavor, with their daughter, Kate, actively involved in daily operations alongside their 17 employees, many of whom are teachers, medical staff, and bank employees working part-time.

In the basement of the depot, the Axthelm's produce their wines using only Nebraska-grown grapes. They are proud to maintain a 100% state-sourced product, using fruit from vineyards within a 70-mile radius. "We're Nebraskans, and we wanted to support Nebraskans," Jason explains. Their own vineyard, planted seven years ago, produces varieties like Brianna, Petite Pearl, and Frontenac, while they purchase Marquette, La Crescent, and LaCrosse grapes from other local growers. This dedication to regional ingredients underscores their mission to showcase Nebraska's viticultural potential.

In 2021, the Axthelm's opened the winery to the public, offering a welcoming space for wine enthusiasts to gather. The building retains many of its original features, including vintage passenger benches in the dining area. The bar is housed in what was once the conductor's office, and the kitchen and some seating are located in the former freight room, preserving the depot's character while creating a warm, rustic atmosphere.

To complement their wines, the Axthelm's decided to introduce artisanal wood-fired pizza. They invested in a Portuguese wood-fire pizza oven and crafted a menu inspired by the railway theme. Guests can order pizzas with names like The Conductor, The Switchman, The Brakeman, and The Engineer, further reinforcing the historical connection. On Thursdays during the summer, the menu expands to include a special Burger Night, featuring beef sourced from a ranch near Hershey, Nebraska.

Though the winery is only open on weekends, it has gained a strong following, especially among visitors from Jeffrey Lake and through word-of-mouth on social media. The Old Depot Vineyard and Winery has quickly become a destination, offering an immersive experience that blends history, local flavors, and a welcoming, family-friendly atmosphere.

Easy Enchilada Casserole

- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 tablespoon minced onion
- 1 tablespoon garlic powder
- 1 cup rice
- 1 can (14 1/2 ounces) diced tomatoes
- 1 can (10.7 ounces) enchilada sauce
- 1 can (15 ounces) rinsed black beans
- 1 can (15 ounces) whole corn
- 1 1/2 cups shredded cheddar cheese, divided
- 2 tablespoons mesquite seasoning
- cilantro, for topping (optional)
- green onions, for topping (optional)

Heat oven to 350 F.

In skillet, brown ground beef with minced onion and garlic powder. Drain and set aside.

Cook rice according to package instructions.

In casserole dish, mix meat, tomatoes, enchilada sauce, black beans, corn, rice, 1 cup cheddar cheese and mesquite seasoning. Bake, covered, 20 minutes.

Top with remaining cheese, cilantro and green onions.

Reader Submitted Recipes

Easter Morning Ham & Cheese Omelet

- 8 slices white bread, cubed
- 1 teaspoon mustard
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 4 cups milk
- 8 eggs
- 2 cups diced ham

Put cubed slices of bread in bottom of greased 9" X 13" pan. Layer the 2 cups of diced ham over bread cubes. Beat the 8 eggs well and stir milk, mustard and salt into eggs. Pour over cubed bread and ham. Refrigerate for several hours or overnight. Before baking sprinkle 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese over the egg mixture. Bake at 350 degrees for 1 hour.

Norma Jones, Neligh, Nebraska

Sweet Potato Casserole

- 1-2 lbs. canned sweet potatoes, mashed
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup coconut
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 cup sugar
- 1/2 cup melted butter

Topping:

- 1/4 cup melted butter
- 1/2 cup flour
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 3/4 cup chopped pecans

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Butter 2-quart baking dish. Combine first group of ingredients and pour into baking dish. Combine topping ingredients and pour over sweet potato mixture. Bake at 375 degrees for 30 minutes or until knife comes out clean.

Sandy Bednar, Miller, Nebraska

Mandarin Orange Cake

- 1 package yellow cake mix
- 2 11 oz cans mandarin oranges
- 4 eggs
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 1 9 oz Cool Whip
- 1 package instant vanilla pudding
- 1 large can crushed pineapple with juice

Drain juice from one can of oranges and set aside. Mix together cake mix, drained cans of mandarin oranges, eggs and oil until thoroughly blended. Pour into greased and floured 9" X 13" pan and bake at 350 degrees for 25 to 30 minutes. Cool. Mix together Cool Whip, instant dry pudding, and crushed pineapple with juice. Spread over cake, then cover and refrigerate.

Connie Schulz, Norfolk, Nebraska

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