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October 2023 **NEWS**

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IT'S THE PRINCIPLE CONCERN FOR COMMUNITY IS THE COOPERATIVE WAY OF LIFE

by Craig Buross, CEO & General Manager

Where did the summer go? It seems just yesterday we invited members to our June appreciation picnic or helped promote area dairy breakfasts. Time flies when you're having fun.

October is notoriously known for Breast Cancer and Cybersecurity Awareness months, but it is also Co-op Month. When I think about Co-op Month, I often revert to a certain set of principles that were established during the co-op's inception, and still exist in cooperatives today. I always ask myself, "Are we still abiding by those principles that define who we are?" The answer is a resounding YES.

Looking back at the year, it is apparent one of those seven principles stands out more than others— Concern for Community. Our cooperative's commitment to community stems from a rich history dating back to our inception in 1937. Unlike traditional utility companies, we are not driven by profits or distant shareholders. Instead, we are owned and governed by the individuals who rely on us to provide safe, reliable electricity. This difference compels us to be more than just an electricity provider—we are partners in the community.



VEC employees often volunteer their time at community activities, either on their own or on behalf of the cooperative. Here, Ande Lee greets young visitors at National Night Out.

Volunteerism is one avenue in which we express our community involvement. Our employees are committed to making a difference in their community outside of the cooperative. Many Vernon Electric employees are involved in community organizations, whether it's serving on community

boards, coaching athletics, or volunteering for fundraisers, all of which we encourage and support.

We firmly believe that investing in education will help prepare our young leaders for tomorrow. Through various initiatives, such as Youth Leadership, scholarships, STEM programs, and school partnerships, we aim to inspire the younger generation and provide them with the tools they need to succeed.

This year we sponsored five local students to attend the Youth Leadership Conference held at the University of



VEC sponsored five students at this past summer's Youth Leadership Congress on the campus of UW-Stout in Menomonie. Left to right are Mckinley Ray, Helen Clements, Jadence Nagel, Benny Culver, Blake Larson.

Wisconsin-Stout where students enhanced their teamwork and leadership skills. One student, Helen Clements, a recent graduate of Kickapoo High School, was selected to serve on the YLC youth board, for which she will venture to Washington, D.C., next summer and plan next year's conference.

We provided seventeen \$750 scholarships, one \$1,000 lineworker scholarship, supported 4-H and FFA students at county fair meat animal sales, provided a facility tour to local home-school students, and participated in many community events.

Community involvement isn't a buzzword for us—it's a way of life.

As an electric cooperative, our top priority is to provide safe, reliable, and affordable electricity to you, the members we serve. In early August we were given the opportunity to participate in the mock crash scenario at Vernon County

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In August, the co-op participated in a mock crash scenario at Vernon County National Night Out to teach the public what to do in the event of a vehicle accident involving a power line.



AT HOME IN THE *Orchard*

By Leah Call

When Vernon Electric Cooperative members Rod and Julie McGuire looked for the perfect place to live after retirement, they found it on a ridge outside of La Farge. The property checked all the boxes. It had land to ride their horses, a beautiful newly built home, maple trees to make syrup, and a breathtaking view. It just happened to come with 3,000 apple trees.

“We didn’t know anything about running an orchard, but we wanted to be in this area,” said Rod McGuire. “So we decided to give it a try.”

The couple sold their home in Prairie du Sac and moved to the area they fell in love with after years of camping and riding horses at Wildcat Mountain

State Park. “If we failed miserably, we could take the orchard out and put it back into crop land and be happy living here in the area we love,” McGuire added.

Lucky for apple lovers, J&R Country Ridge Orchard is not a failure. Since opening in 2019, this stunning you-pick orchard welcomes hundreds of visitors annually to wander through rows of trees with apples so plentiful the branches sometimes break. A visit to this country orchard is quickly becoming an annual fall activity for many families.

“We wanted it to be family oriented,” noted McGuire. “We wanted the business to be self-pick where families come to the orchard and enjoy the gorgeous scenery in this part of the Driftless area.”



Julie and Rod McGuire

Learning the Biz

In 2018 when the McGuires purchased the property, the trees were about seven years old, planted by the former owner who never lived to see them bear fruit. The first task for the fledgling orchard owners was to identify the variety of trees.

As they cleaned under the trees, they discovered some had labels. “It took us about three months to go through the orchard, clean, find those labels, and then identify the variety,” noted McGuire. “Now there is a sign naming the variety at the end of each row. Some rows have a couple varieties.”

In total, there are 19 varieties of apple trees in the 16-acre orchard.



The McGuires run the orchard with no employees, though Julie sometimes enlists her sister’s help during their busiest weekends.

Selling apples is only a fraction of the work that goes into running an orchard. This couple works hard—and it shows. Rod spends hours daily grooming the orchard and caring for the trees, and Julie has earned the title pruning queen. You might even catch her pruning by the light of the moon.

“We pruned about 579 trees this year, just the two of us,” she said. “We want to get through the entire orchard. We want to keep it absolutely immaculate for people who come here.”

A Trip to the Orchard

J&R Country Ridge Orchard is open Wednesday through Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Orchard visitors first go to a small cabin where they are greeted by Rod and Julie. A list of apple varieties—marked ready, not ready, or past prime—appears on a nearby shed. Prime picking is in early October, when 15 of the 19 apple varieties reach their peak flavor. It’s the perfect time to enjoy not just the fruit, but the amazing views dressed in dazzling fall colors.

The apples are sold in three bag sizes: ½ peck for \$10, a peck for \$20, and a ½ bushel for \$35. Customers are steered in the direction of a specific variety, or pickers can mix and match. As people walk through the rows of trees filled with plump, red fruit, they might be tempted to take a bite, and that’s okay. Rod encourages visitors to try before they buy.

“We send people out with a wet paper towel. You can taste the apple, then wrap the core, and throw it away here at the cabin,” he explained of a practice started because of Covid. “That way you can taste an apple and find out if you like it

before you pick them and put them in the bag.”

In addition to apples, the McGuires sell their own maple syrup and honey made from bees brought in to pollinate the trees. They also sell unpasteurized apple cider, which they make fresh every Monday and Tuesday throughout apple season.

When picking season is over, the McGuires take a short break through the holidays. Then it’s back to work pruning and preparing for the next season. It’s a lot of work, but it’s a labor of love for this couple, who enjoy visiting with customers and welcoming families back year after year.

“You are never too old to learn and try a new venture. We’re certainly not retired anymore,” quipped McGuire. “I joke that we were retired; now we’re just tired.”



Apple Varieties at J&R Country Ridge Orchard

Baigent Gala	Paula Red
Blondee	Red Candy Crisp
Candy Crisp	Roger Red
Cortland	Macintosh
Crimson Crisp	Royal Empire
Empire	SnappyMac
Honeycrisp	SnowSweet
Ida Red	SummerMac
Liberty	Whitney Crab
LindaMac	Zestar

J&R Country Ridge Orchard
53262 Compton Rd, La Farge, WI 54639

National Night Out. Anytime we can inform our members about electrical safety, we will jump at the opportunity. Vernon County National Night Out is said to be the largest in the state of Wisconsin, which grants us the opportunity to promote safety to members and the community. This year, we educated the public and first responders on what to do if you are in an accident involving power poles and power lines.

Although we enjoy participating in community events, we are not limited to tangible actions. We understand the importance of listening. Surveys and community forums are a couple of different ways we listen to all. Technology has transformed the way we interact with our community as well. SmartHub is a great resource and communication platform for our members to obtain their near real-time energy use. It is a perfect way for members to better understand their energy use patterns and how their demand impacts the grid, and it provides the tools needed to efficiently use electric energy.

Our Facebook page provides members with safety and energy efficiency tips. Our commitment to our members goes beyond events and sponsorship to provide the best quality of service to members in our community.

The heart of Vernon Electric Cooperative beats for the community it serves. By supporting our local economy, education, technology, and our members, we ensure our mission remains true. I am not just your CEO, but a fellow member of the community and I am committed to ensuring that our cooperative continues to strive for community excellence.



In the April edition of the *WECN* magazine we introduced our Bluff Prairie Community Solar project. The 1.5-megawatt array is nearing completion in the Town of Wheatland and is on track to be operational on January 1, 2024.

One Energy Renewables out of Madison, developed, designed, and constructed the project along with 12 other utility-scale solar arrays throughout the state. We partnered with nine other Wisconsin electric cooperatives to receive the best possible price and a better return on investment for our members.

Once operational, the solar facility will produce an estimated 3,035,000 kilowatt hours per year. The area beneath the panels will be planted with low-growing perennial pollinator mix.

Through the years we have gradually invested in solar to provide members with solar opportunities and to diversify our energy portfolio. A portion of this project will be dedicated to community solar, which will allow members who do not own property, do not own their own home, or have too much shade, to have access to solar energy.

Be on the lookout for our November magazine to learn more about how this project will benefit our community and how you can participate in the community solar aspect of the project.



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