

Since 1940

# WISCONSIN ENERGY *Cooperative* September 2023 NEWS

**VERNON**  
*Electric*  
COOPERATIVE — WESTBY, WISCONSIN  
Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

ROAMING AROUND  
AT SANDHILL WILDLIFE AREA

POWER STRUGGLE

ENERGY EFFICIENT WINDOWS

EXCELLENT EGGPLANT RECIPES





# CONSTRUCTION SEASON ROUNDUP

## Constant maintenance ensures reliability



By Mark See, Director of Operations



**T**he construction season of spring through fall tends to be very busy, not only for our lineworkers but for office staff and contractors as well. Each department plays a key role in the efficiency of our operations. For example, you may be building a new house in our

beautiful area that will require a line extension, in which case you will call our office and set up a new account, speak with our operations department about the equipment needed to meet your electrical needs, and our lineworkers will build the line to your location and set up a load center.

We budget approximately \$3.5 million per year to ensure reliability on our system by upgrading infrastructure, which can include new and replacement power lines, underground power lines, tree and brush management, transformer replacements, and more. The planning process for the upcoming year is extensive and is often related to inspection results from the previous summer. If you follow our Facebook page or have received our letters, you'll see we do our best to inform our members when contractors will be in their area working in the right-of-way on private property.

Vernon Electric Cooperative has approximately 30,000 poles throughout our service territory, but did you know each of those poles must be inspected every few years? Contractors will test thousands of poles in a section of our territory and report back to us which ones will need to be replaced. This year our contractor, Karcz Utility Services, will have inspected over 4,000 power poles. Pole inspection is more than just scanning the outside of the pole looking for defects. It can include sounding (tapping the pole with a hammer to indicate internal decay), taking a core sample, and partially excavating around the base of the pole to inspect the extent of decay below the ground line.

Pole testing is a critical component of our strategic plan. It determines what poles or line sections need replacement sooner rather than later. We have worked on several projects this year including the replacement of several miles of line along Highway 14, south of Viroqua. You may recall the 100-year and 500-year floods that occurred a few years ago, which caused this section of line to deteriorate quicker than others. We also replaced a few miles of overhead line in the Liberty area.

While replacing overhead power lines I am often asked why we didn't or why we don't install more underground lines. There are several factors that determine how we will replace

**This season's construction plans included stringing a new line over Hwy. 14/61 north of Readstown to improve reliability in that area.**





Above and right: If conditions and cost allow, some new line may be installed underground. VEC contracts with A-1 Power to assist with underground cable plowing. Here they are plowing new cable near a new solar array by Red Mound.

infrastructure, but it mostly comes down to terrain or cost. The line replacement project along Highway 14 is in an extremely rocky area and any flooding in the future would erode the soil, causing the cable to eventually rise above ground level. The line in the Liberty area is in a similar situation except it is more of a swamp area.

Sometimes overhead lines are the best option, and sometimes underground is the better way to go. Our goal is to provide safe, reliable, and affordable electricity to our members, and we must consider each one of those factors when planning line design. Is it safe for us

to install underground lines here? Will this be more reliable than overhead? Is the cost feasible? We hire contractors to assist us with the installation of our underground wire. For the last few years we have contracted A-1 Power to assist us with underground cable plowing and installation. This year we have replaced several miles of overhead powerlines in the Springville and Sauk substation areas. Additionally, they are currently installing three-phase underground from our new Bluff Prairie Solar site in the Red Mound area.

This is a good opportunity to remind members to call Diggers Hotline at 811 prior to digging. It is important to note that Diggers Hotline will NOT locate member lines. For example, if you have a meter on a transformer pole or pedestal away from your house, the underground electric wires from the meter to your house must be located by a private electrician. Diggers Hotline only marks the wires belonging to the utility.

Last month in this magazine, CEO & General Manager Craig Buros discussed the increase in electrical demand locally and throughout the country. While we look to continuously improve our infrastructure, we must also take advantage of opportunities to improve our system in other ways. Transformer maintenance and upgrades are very important if we continue down the path of increased energy demand. We continue to invest



in vegetation management with tree trimming and herbicide application, which improves the overall reliability of our system. Although herbicides are not favored by all, they do make it safer for our lineworkers to work in rights-of-way, especially with poison parsnip being as dangerous as it is.

Once the frost thaws and the road bans are removed by the townships, we work to complete as many projects as we can, knowing we only have a few months before they are halted. New construction and line extensions for members also play a role in the completion of our

This is a good opportunity to remind members to call Diggers Hotline at 811 prior to digging.

projects. It is important for us to monitor suppliers and prepare for an increase in cost for materials and to watch for new funding opportunities. Nothing is easy when it comes to working for an electric cooperative, but the entire team at Vernon Electric makes it appear that way because of their dedication to the membership and improving the lives of others.



Regular testing of poles is a critical component of system maintenance. Any deemed to be defective are replaced.



# OLD COUNTRY FARMS NEW NAME, SAME GREAT CHEESE

By Leah Call

Everyone loves cheese curds—the squeakier, the better! If you haven't tried the Muenster curds made by Old Country Farms, you are missing out. While this Vernon Electric Cooperative member on County Road D in Cashton has crafted a variety of award-winning cheeses for 40 years, it's the bite-sized nuggets that make it the Home of the World Famous Muenster Cheese Curds.

“We started making them in the mid-2000s because we stopped making cheddar on a regular basis, and we wanted to satisfy our curd-loving customers,” said Lisa Torkelson, who handles customer service and sales for Old Country Farms. “When we first started making the Muenster curds, there weren't any other plants doing it. They really are yummy, and they have really grown in popularity over the years.”

The company's twist on traditional cheese curds isn't the only thing that makes it unique. The majority of the milk used to make the cheese comes from the Amish community on farms that still milk cows by hand and transport the milk in cans.

Approximately 100,000 pounds of fresh milk from 250 Amish producers is delivered to the plant daily to make not only the curds, but also cheddar cheeses, brick, pepper jack,

It's the bite-sized nuggets that make it the Home of the World Famous Muenster Cheese Curds.



Colby, Colby Jack, and more. The plant also produces a line of organic and goat cheeses.

“The popularity of our goat cheeses has really grown,” said Torkelson. “And so has the number of goat milk producers.”

While Muenster is the plant's biggest seller, Torkelson recommends giving the goat Colby Jack a try. “It's one of my favorite cheeses made here,” she said.

## History of Community

In July, the Amish member farms that supply the bovine and goat milk took ownership of the entire operation at the plant, purchasing K&K Cheese from former owner Kevin Everhart. Amish co-op members who supply milk to Old Country Farms come from the Viroqua, Westby, Hillsboro, Wilton, Tomah, Liberty Pole, and Chaseburg areas.

The Amish community broke ground on the cheese factory in 1982. In 1983, they began selling cheese, entering into a partnership with Mike Everhart, the factory's first cheesemaker. At that time 77 Amish producers supplied 32,000 pounds of milk daily to make the cheese. In 2001, Mike Everhart passed the chief cheesemaker title to his brother Kevin, who remained at the factory and oversaw operations until his recent retirement.

“The Amish started this plant because they wanted to have a steady income and a place for their milk,” noted Torkelson. “They are a farm-based people. They want to be able to stay on the farm with their families. It’s wonderful that the Amish community has invested in taking over the plant. We are excited about where that might lead.”

Old Country Farms’ cheeses are sold throughout Wisconsin and the U.S. Old Country Cheese, a retail store located next to the plant sells 20+ varieties of cheeses along with a variety of Amish-made crafts, jams, syrup and more. The store and the factory are a popular stop for tourists. If they’re lucky, they might even get a chance to see the world famous Muenster cheese curds being made.



Old Country Farms is known for its Muenster cheese curds. They also produce a variety of other cheeses, including a line of organic and goat cheeses.

## Energy Efficiency Tip of the Month

Did you know fall is the perfect time to schedule a tune-up for your heating system? Home heating accounts for a large portion of winter energy bills, and no matter what kind of system you have, you can save energy and money by regularly maintaining your equipment.

Combining proper equipment maintenance and upgrades with recommended insulation, air sealing and thermostat settings can save about 30% on your energy bills.

Source: Dept. of Energy



### Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager

110 Saugstad Road, Westby, WI 54667  
608-634-3121 • 608-447-5051  
email: [info@vernonelectric.org](mailto:info@vernonelectric.org)  
website: [www.vernonelectric.org](http://www.vernonelectric.org)

### Trevor Clark, Editor

