

Since 1940

WISCONSIN ENERGY *Cooperative* December 2024 NEWS



THESE ARE A FEW OF
MY FAVORITE THINGS

**SURGE OF SUPPORT
FOR LIGHT UP NAVAJO!**

BE AN ENERGY STAR

**BEST OF 2024
KIDS AND CRITTERS**





LOOKING BACK ON A YEAR OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND MILESTONES



By Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager

As we close out 2024, Vernon Electric Cooperative reflects on a year filled with achievements, community engagement, and historic milestones. This year, we were thrust into the national spotlight, showcased

our commitment to renewable energy, and strengthened our foundation for future growth.

President Joe Biden Visits Vernon Electric Cooperative

Undoubtedly, one of the most memorable moments in our cooperative's 88-year history was hosting President Joe Biden. This marked the first time in history that a sitting U.S. president visited a Wisconsin electric cooperative. President Biden announced the groundbreaking \$579 million New ERA Grant awarded to Dairyland Power Cooperative. This significant funding is set to advance renewable energy and sustainability, underscoring the pivotal role electric cooperatives play in America's clean energy transition. The event was a considerable undertaking, involving coordination with Dairyland Power, White House staff, and the Secret Service. The successful outcome was a testament to the dedication and adaptability of our employees.



President Biden addresses the crowd outside Vernon Electric's office in Westby.



Above: Lisa and Mary Ann greet visitors during the Vernon County Fair. Below: Vernon Electric employees and local first-responders attend safety training focusing on emergency response to electric vehicle accidents.



Community Engagement and Member Relations

Our community-focused initiatives in 2024 proved essential for fostering connections and trust with our members. Events like the Monroe and Vernon County Fair Meat Animal Sale, National Night Out, and our Member Appreciation Picnics were well-attended and showcased our commitment to being an active, reliable partner in the community. The meat giveaway was particularly popular and demonstrated our ongoing support for local traditions.

Moreover, our participation in the Cooperative Day of Service and first responder training involving potential EV crashes highlighted our focus on community safety and awareness. We also conducted a member segmentation survey, ensuring that our strategies and programs continue to align with the needs of our diverse member base.

Solar Energy Successes

We completed the Bluff Prairie Community Solar Array,

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The Bluff Prairie Solar array located by Red Mound in Vernon County.

and almost 1,400 panels were subscribed to in the first year. The program offers a subscription-based model in which members pay a \$50 per panel subscription per year. The first-of-its-kind model allows members more flexibility to purchase more or less based on their previous year's energy usage. It also allows them to stop participating if they wish.

The array also emphasizes accessibility for low-to-moderate-income members. We partnered with the Wisconsin Office of Energy Innovation and Couleecap to utilize a \$250,000 grant. This project enhances access to community solar, further showcasing our commitment to affordable, sustainable energy. Governor Evers' attendance at the ribbon-cutting ceremony underscored the project's importance to both the state and our cooperative.

As we move forward, strategic plans are underway for the Greenfield Solar Project, set for construction in 2025. This cost-

effective project will provide local renewable energy through a partnership involving the PACE (Powering Affordable Clean Energy) grant, 15 distribution electric cooperatives, and OneEnergy.

Stability Amid Economic Challenges

In yet another year marked by high inflation, we successfully maintained flat rates for our members, limiting the average residential rate increase to just 0.7%. This achievement highlights our focus on financial prudence and the value we place on affordability for our members.

Honoring Dedication

Lastly, we celebrated the retirement of Mike Berger, a 46-year veteran of the cooperative, whose decades of service as a journeyman lineworker to the members of Vernon Electric have been invaluable. His legacy reminds us of the dedication required to maintain the high standards of safe reliable service that our members expect.



Mike Berger

Looking Ahead

As 2024 concludes, we remain focused on strengthening our community ties, enhancing our renewable energy initiatives, and ensuring stable, fair rates for all members. Thank you for being part of this journey. Your trust and participation fuel our mission and vision for a resilient, cooperative-powered future.

Here's to continued progress and new achievements in the coming year!

VEC SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE

Scholarships will be made available to students whose parent(s) or legal guardian(s) are a member of Vernon Electric Cooperative. High school seniors will each receive a \$750 scholarship for the college or university they decide to attend. Funding for the scholarships comes from unclaimed capital credit checks, which are forfeited to the Federated Youth Foundation. **A Non-Traditional and Line Worker scholarship will also be offered.**

Scholarship applications are available at www.vernonelectric.org/scholarships, by calling our office, or through school counselors.



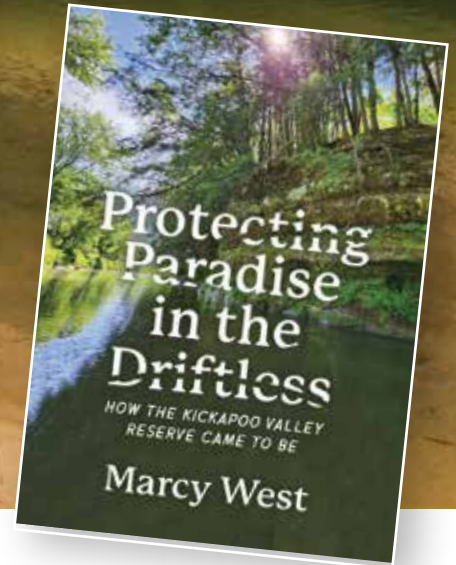
**APPLY BY
JANUARY 22, 2025**





Marcy West, former executive director of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, recently wrote "Protecting Paradise in the Driftless."

ORIGINS OF A NATURAL TREASURE



By Leah Call

“It’s as if Mother Nature stashed a bunch of beautiful things in one spot, intending to come back and take them somewhere else. In the end, she forgot about her hidden treasure, and we get to keep it all.”

That’s how Marcy West describes the Kickapoo Valley Reserve (KVR) in her recently published book, “Protecting Paradise in the Driftless: How the Kickapoo Valley Reserve Came to Be.”

West’s book documents the rich history of this remarkable natural gem and serves as a call to action for preserving it for future generations.

The Making of a Natural Treasure

Spanning 8,600 acres, KVR near LaFarge lies in the Vernon Electric Cooperative service area. The Reserve is a place for recreation—camping, hiking, fishing, canoeing, and snowshoeing—as well as nature-based learning. The story of KVR’s creation has as many twists and turns as the river that flows through it.

In her book, West recounts a proposed U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dam project in 1960, which forced 149 property owners to sell their land and triggered a decades-long saga of delays, miscalculations, and bureaucracy before the plan was ultimately abandoned.

The land once acquired for the failed dam project would eventually become KVR. West details a pivotal agreement

with the Ho-Chunk Nation and efforts of various stakeholders committed to protecting the area’s ecosystem and cultural history. Today ownership of the 8,600-acre reserve is shared between the state and the Ho-Chunk Nation: 7,400 acres publicly owned and 1,200 acres under Ho-Chunk ownership. In 1994, the Kickapoo Reserve Management Board—with representation from the Ho-Chunk Nation—was formed to oversee the Reserve.

“The board is a really unique entity in that the majority of the 11 board members reside locally,” noted West. “They set the priorities for the staff and make decisions on new events and new recreation... The board plays a tremendous role in ensuring that protection is the highest priority. And the arrangement with the Ho-Chunk nation can’t be emphasized enough.”

Telling the Story

West became part of the KVR story in 1996 when she became executive director of the newly formed Kickapoo Reserve Management Board, a job she held for 25 years. In 2018, a visiting professor from UW-Madison encouraged her to document KVR’s unique history. Six years later, “Protecting Paradise in the Driftless” was published.

“There’s a lot that has been written about the dam and the demise of that, but not the next chapter—how we got from such

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VEC WINS LEIFER AWARD FOR JOURNALISM

WECA LOCAL PAGES EDITOR TREVOR CLARK HONORED AT WECA AWARDS CEREMONY

Vernon Electric Cooperative has been chosen as the recipient of the 2024 N.F. Leifer Memorial Journalism Award, bestowed upon the co-op adjudged to have had the strongest overall local pages in the *Wisconsin Energy Cooperative News* over the previous 12 months. Serving as local editor of Vernon Electric's pages is Trevor Clark, manager of communications & member relations.

This is the second time in three years Vernon Electric Cooperative has won this award, and the fifth time since this publication began offering awards of excellence in 1966. In addition, Vernon Electric has won multiple category awards over the years, including this past August when Clark was presented with a first-place certificate in the category of human interest. While Vernon Electric member Leah Call, who writes feature stories for the co-op, plays a big role in Vernon Electric's magazine pages, this year's judge praised the co-op for inserting elements of human interest throughout the local pages and not just in

member features.

In addition to his responsibilities with Vernon Electric's communication and member services efforts, Clark is very engaged with co-op youth programs. He's involved with the annual Electric Youth Tour in Washington, D.C., and he currently serves on the Federated Youth Foundation Board of Directors as the secretary/treasurer.

The Leifer award is determined each year by an independent judge, always a communications professional and usually one with a co-op background or specialty. The judge evaluates a sampling of each of the 19 individualized local sections within the magazine, produced by staff at each co-op and filled with information unique to each.

About the Award: The N.F. Leifer Memorial Journalism Award is named for former Vernon Electric Cooperative manager Norman F. "Lefty" Leifer, who was instrumental in launching what was then known as the *Wisconsin REA News* in 1940.



Vernon Electric's Manager of Communications and Member Relations Trevor Clark accepted the N.F. Leifer Memorial Journalism award on behalf of VEC at an awards ceremony held in conjunction with WECA's recent annual meeting in Wisconsin Dells.

National Treasure Continued from previous page

a problem project to what is now the Reserve," West explained.

Having witnessed much of the Reserve's evolution firsthand, West drew on experience along with extensive research to complete the book. "I really wanted to highlight how environmental policy from the early 1970s helped to shape what the Reserve would become, and why the Reserve was worthy of protection," she said.

Since its release, West's book has received praise from numerous readers and educators who see it as a resource for high school and college students. West wants readers of her book to appreciate the history behind KVR and the dedication of those working to preserve its fragile ecosystems.

"We can lose these precious places," she warned. "I hope the book will help readers who enjoy visiting the Reserve to understand the importance of supporting the work that keeps it protected."

Gift a Piece of Wisconsin History

As the season of giving approaches, consider Protecting Paradise in the Driftless for the environmental and history enthusiasts in your life. The book is available at the KVR visitor center gift shop, local bookstores in Viroqua, Baraboo and Richland Center, and online at littlecreekpress.com and bookshop.org.

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