

Since 1940

# WISCONSIN ENERGY *Cooperative* NEWS

July 2026

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

## FOREFRONT OF FUSION

**HOW TO HELP  
DURING PEAK DEMAND**

**READER RECIPE CONTEST**

**KIDS AND CRITTERS**





# RELIABILITY DOESN'T HAPPEN BY ACCIDENT

by Craig Buross, CEO & General Manager

Summer in Wisconsin brings many things we look forward to—longer days, county fairs, vacations, baseball games, and time spent outdoors with family and friends. Unfortunately, summer also brings thunderstorms, high winds, and the occasional severe weather event that can impact electric service.

When the power goes out, it's natural to focus on when it will be restored. What many people don't see is the planning, preparation, and investment that takes place throughout the year to ensure those outages are as infrequent and as brief as possible. Reliability doesn't happen by accident. It is the result of continuous work by your cooperative and a partnership with members who are prepared when storms occur.

Reliability is one of our highest priorities. Our members depend on electricity for nearly every aspect of daily life. Whether it's keeping food cold, operating farm equipment, running businesses, charging devices, or simply keeping the lights on, electricity is an essential service.

Our crews work year-round to maintain and improve the electric system. This includes inspecting poles and lines, trimming vegetation near power lines, replacing aging equipment, and investing in new technology that helps us identify and respond to outages quickly. While these efforts may not always be visible, they play a critical role in reducing outages and improving service reliability.

Even with those investments, Mother Nature remains one of the biggest challenges to maintaining reliable electric service. A single storm can bring down trees, break poles, damage equipment, and create hazardous conditions across multiple miles of power lines. In rural areas, where electric lines often travel long distances to serve members, restoration efforts can take time as crews work safely to identify and repair damage.

When an outage occurs, safety is always the first priority. Before restoration work can begin, crews must assess the damage and ensure the area is safe for both employees and the public. Downed power lines, damaged

poles, and fallen trees create dangerous situations that require careful attention.

One of the most common questions we receive during an outage is, "How long will the power be out?" Unfortunately, that's often one of the most difficult questions to answer. Before an estimated restoration time can be provided, crews must first locate the outage and assess the extent of the damage. In many cases, what appears to be a single issue may actually involve multiple problems. Crews may repair one section of line only to discover additional damage farther down the line, such as trees or broken poles.

Another major factor is accessibility. Can crews safely reach the damaged facilities with a truck, or must they walk a right-of-way carrying equipment and climb poles to make repairs? Accessing the outage location safely is a critical step in the restoration process and often affects how quickly repairs can be completed.

While we understand the desire for a restoration estimate, safety and quality workmanship must always come first. Our crews work as quickly as possible,

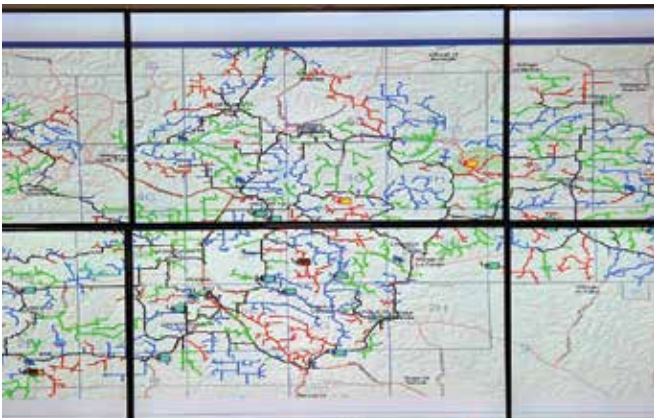


Left to right: Vernon Electric crews complete maintenance and system upgrades designed to improve reliability and strengthen the electric grid. Right-of-way maintenance and vegetation management reduce the risk of trees contacting power lines during storms and severe weather. Pole inspections and equipment evaluations help identify potential problems before they lead to outages.

but they will never sacrifice safety to save time. Restoring power safely and correctly ensures reliability once service is restored and helps prevent future outages.

Technology has also improved our ability to manage outages. Smart devices throughout the electric system help identify the location of outages, allowing crews to respond more efficiently. Members also play an important role by reporting outages through SmartHub or by calling the office. Even when automated systems indicate an outage has occurred, member reports provide valuable information that helps crews understand what is happening in the field.

While Vernon Electric works hard to maintain reliability, there are also steps members can take to prepare for storms and outages. Having a plan before severe weather arrives can make a significant difference when the lights go out.



Vernon Electric's outage management system provides a real-time view of the electric grid, helping crews quickly identify outage locations and coordinate restoration efforts when storms and other events impact service.

Consider keeping flashlights, extra batteries, bottled water, and a battery-powered weather radio readily available. Ensure cell phones and portable charging devices are charged when severe weather is expected. If you rely on medical equipment that requires electricity, discuss backup plans with your healthcare provider and family members before an emergency occurs.

For members with backup generators, now is a good time to review operating procedures and perform routine maintenance. Always follow manufacturer recommendations and never operate a generator indoors or in an enclosed space. Proper installation and safe operation are essential for protecting your family and utility crews working to restore service.

Communication is another important part of outage preparedness. SmartHub provides outage reporting capabilities and allows members to receive notifications regarding electric service interruptions. Taking a few minutes to verify your contact information can ensure you receive important updates when they are needed most.

While no electric utility can guarantee that outages will never occur, Vernon Electric remains committed to providing reliable service and restoring power safely and efficiently when storms impact our system. Every pole inspected, every tree trimmed, and every upgrade completed is part of that commitment.

The next time a summer storm rolls across the Coulee Region, remember that reliability begins long before the first raindrop falls. It starts with preparation, investment, and the dedicated employees who stand ready to respond when severe weather strikes.

## VERNON COUNTY NIGHT OUT

For the past several years, Vernon Electric Cooperative has participated in the annual Vernon County Night Out, a free, community-building event that brings families together with law enforcement, first responders, and emergency personnel to promote safety, health, and camaraderie.

Vernon County Night Out is one of the largest "Night Out" events in the state and provides a great opportunity to connect with local organizations dedicated to serving their community. It's a chance to meet the people and groups who work every day to keep Vernon County safe and strong.

Be sure to stop by the Vernon Electric Cooperative booth to check out some of our equipment, learn more about electricity, and grab a water bottle. This event is one of the many ways we serve our community—and it's also one of our most enjoyable.

We hope to see you there on **Tuesday, August 4** at the Vernon County Fairgrounds.



# BEHIND THE HIVE

By Leah Call

**B**ees may be agriculture’s smallest workers, but they have an outsized impact on food production. Whether it’s apples, cranberries, almonds or cucumbers, food production in the United States and the world depend on these pollinators. The USDA reports honeybees pollinate approximately \$15 billion worth of crops annually. Yet these tiny powerhouses – and the beekeepers who care for them – often go unnoticed.

“You see boxes out in the field, but people don’t realize how much goes on behind the scenes with beekeeping,” said Jordan Bendel, a Vernon Electric Cooperative member and owner of Wild Comb Apiary in Westby.

From raising queen bees and harvesting honey to supplying colonies to pollinate crops, Bendel’s work highlights the essential role beekeepers play in supporting food systems and agriculture.

For Bendel, beekeeping is more than a business, it’s a family tradition. “My grandfather had bees, my father had bees,” he said. “I was in sixth or seventh grade when I got interested, and my grandfather helped me buy my first two hives.”

That interest grew into a lifelong passion. Bendel has been involved in beekeeping continuously for nearly three decades. What started as a hobby and way to sell honey to friends and family has evolved into Wild Comb Apiary, which he operates with his wife, Jody.

Today, the couple manages 300 to 400 hives. While they sell bulk honey in



Jordan and Jody Bendel operate Wild Comb Apiary near Westby, continuing a family beekeeping tradition that spans generations.

five-gallon quantities, their primary focus is raising and selling queens, nucleus colonies (nucs), and providing pollination services – primarily for almond groves in California.

## The Bee Business

Although managing 300 to 400 hives may sound impressive, Bendel considers his operation relatively small by industry standards. A healthy bee colony grows throughout the season. In spring a hive may contain 18,000 to 30,000 bees. By late summer, that population can exceed 60,000.

Bendel’s business has evolved over the years. Early on, he sold bees that

wintered in Florida. Later, he began transporting colonies to Texas and bringing back queens and nucs to sell in the Midwest.

“We’ve been in and out of the industry,” he explained. “Sometimes it was more of a hobby, sometimes more commercial.”

One notable change he’s seen is the growing interest in beekeeping among hobbyists. “We used to sell five to 20 colonies to larger beekeepers. Now there is a lot more interest from hobbyists who want just one or two colonies.”

As a result, education has become an increasingly important part of the business.

“On pick-up days, I try to be here to answer questions and guide people through things they might be trying to figure out,” Bendel said.

## Getting Started

For those interested in beekeeping, getting started requires a few essential pieces of equipment, including a bee suit and gloves, smoker, feeder, bee brush, queen catcher, hives, and frames.

A smoker is an important tool to prevent stings while inspecting hives and harvesting honey. The smoke keeps the



Left: Honeybees cluster on a frame inside one of Wild Comb Apiary’s hives. Right: Nucleus colonies, commonly called “nucs,” are starter bee colonies.

bees calm by masking the scent of pheromones released when bees feel threatened. Other tools include a bee brush for gently moving bees and a queen catcher for safely catching and moving the queen.

Bendel encourages new beekeepers to learn as much as possible through books, online resources, and local beekeepers. He has taught beekeeping classes at the Driftless Folk School and enjoys helping newbies get started.

## A Year in the Life

For Bendel, the beekeeping season begins in March or April when his colonies return from California. Once back in Wisconsin, the bees are evaluated, fed sugar syrup and pollen supplements, and treated for varroa mites – a tiny parasite considered one of the greatest threats to bee colonies.

While spring is devoted to building the colonies and

preparing nucs for sale, attention shifts in June to honey production, monitoring colony health, and ensuring hives have enough honey supers for the incoming nectar.

By mid-summer, honey harvesting begins.

“At that point, we are out every day pulling honey boxes and bringing them in to be extracted,” noted Bendel, who continues to monitor the health of the colony and the queen as he starts to prepare them for winter.

“About 90% of our bees go to California, and we keep 10% here over winter,” he said, noting that winter survival rates in Wisconsin vary from 30% to 70%.

Despite challenges, Bendel finds the greatest reward in knowing the environmental benefits of his bees and the role they play in food production. “Bees are fascinating creatures. Having bees on your property is so beneficial because of the pollination they provide.”



## OPERATION ROUND UP: SMALL CHANGE, BIG LOCAL IMPACT

One of the simplest ways members of Vernon Electric Cooperative can make a meaningful difference in their community is by signing up for Operation Round Up.

Operation Round Up is a voluntary program that allows members to “round up” their monthly electric bill to the next whole dollar. The extra cents—never more than \$11.88 per year on average—are placed into a trust that supports local individuals, families, and nonprofit organizations throughout Vernon County and the surrounding area.

Those small contributions add up quickly. Over the course of a year, participating members collectively generate thousands of dollars that are distributed in the form of grants. These funds often help support emergency needs, food pantries, medical expenses, educational programs, youth initiatives, and community development projects. Every dollar stays local and goes directly toward strengthening the communities we serve.

Signing up is easy and can be done at any time. Once enrolled, participation continues automatically, and members can opt out whenever they choose. It’s a simple, painless way to turn spare change into real community impact.

By participating in Operation Round Up, members help ensure that when neighbors face unexpected challenges, there is a safety net ready to support them. It’s one more way cooperative members live out the principle of concern for community every day.

**JOIN TODAY!**

# OPERATION ROUND UP

A LITTLE CHANGE, CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

**WHAT IS OPERATION ROUND UP?**  
Operation Round Up supports local organizations by collecting money from members who sign up to have their electrical bill rounded up to the next dollar.

**HOW IT WORKS?**  
\$92.71 becomes \$93.00  
\$0.29 is placed in the Operation Round Up Fund  
\$6.00 is the average per year  
\$11.88 is the maximum per year.

**ORGANIZATIONS HELPED:**

- Couleecap
- Family & Children's Center
- National Night Out
- Community Hunger Solutions
- Viola Sportsman's Club
- Readstown Library

**HOW MUCH IS COLLECTED?**  
Since 2006 members of Vernon Electric have contributed over \$23,000 by rounding up their bill.

**TO ROUND UP YOUR ELECTRIC BILL AND SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES YOU CAN:**  
• Sign up today • Sign up through SmartHub • Call our office

**VERNON Electric**  
COOPERATIVE — WESTBY, WISCONSIN  
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