



# INFLATION AFFECTING ELECTRIC RATES

by Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager



In today's modern, connected world, having a source of safe, reliable, and affordable electricity is crucial. That's what Vernon Electric Cooperative strives to deliver to you all day, every day. We're proud of our efforts to serve your needs with reliable and competitively priced electricity, responsive member service, and proactive and necessary investments in electric distribution facilities, all while maintaining the financial ability to retire member capital credits (give money back to co-op members) on a regular basis.

The staff and board have been successful in keeping your electricity rates flat for the past four years. Unfortunately, as the cost for line equipment continues to skyrocket and wholesale power costs rise, we were forced to make a **rate change as of January 1, 2023**. To maintain sound financial metrics and meet the requirements of our lenders, we will need to increase revenue by 3.7% in 2023.

Due to the significant cost of materials, raising the base Facility Charge for each rate class was the fairest way to meet the needs of the budget. The monthly Facility Charge covers

your share of expenses to purchase, build, and maintain power lines, substations, and equipment to ensure the availability of power on your property. All members pay this basic electric charge for each electric account each month, regardless of energy used, therefore sharing the cost of the electric system.

The single-phase residential rate class will see an increase of \$6 per month beginning with the bill received in February. For a residential consumer using an average of 1,000 kWh of energy, the average annual increase is 3.94% which is well below this past year's inflation of over 8%.

Since you are a consumer-member of this cooperative, your concerns are always our main focus. We certainly appreciate your business and strive to be responsive to your need for safe, reliable, and affordable electric service. As energy prices rise, it's increasingly important to be as energy efficient as possible. Visit our website for ideas on how to save, and be sure to take advantage of energy efficiency rebates.



## FARMLAND FOR LEASE

Vernon Electric Cooperative is accepting bids to lease farmland located at the Vernon Electric headquarters facility in Westby. Approximately 20 acres of tillable farmland is available for a three-year lease. Those interested may submit sealed bids to Vernon Electric no later than 10 a.m. February 14, 2023. All bids will be opened at noon that same day. For complete details and to obtain the required forms, visit [www.vernonelectric.org/forms](http://www.vernonelectric.org/forms) or contact our office.

## MEMBERS RECEIVE MULTIPLE BENEFITS WITH ENERGY EFFICIENT PURCHASES

Members wanting to save energy and money in the new year should review Vernon Electric Co-op's new 2023 incentive forms. Vernon Electric annually publishes a list of energy efficient items that are eligible for an incentive when a member makes a qualifying purchase and submits the required paperwork. A list of rebates and incentive forms can be found online at [www.vernonelectric.org/rebates](http://www.vernonelectric.org/rebates) or by contacting our office.



Eligibility criteria for each category is listed on the forms. Incentives begin at \$0.50 and go up to \$800 for certain items. To receive an incentive, a member must purchase a qualifying item, fill out the incentive form, and return the form and documentation to the cooperative within three months of purchase or installation (this will be clarified on the form). Equipment must be installed at a member's location which is served by Vernon Electric Cooperative and, in most cases, must be ENERGY STAR® rated.

State and Federal energy efficiency and conservation incentives are also available through Wisconsin's Focus on Energy program and through Federal tax credits. When considering or implementing energy efficiency measures, check with Focus on Energy's website, [www.focusonenergy.com](http://www.focusonenergy.com), or call them at 800-762-7077. Energy efficiency and conservation tax credits can be found at [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov) or by contacting your tax professional.

Questions regarding Vernon Electric's incentive program or general energy efficiency questions can be directed to Dave Maxwell, director of member services, by emailing [dmaxwell@vernonelectric.org](mailto:dmaxwell@vernonelectric.org) or by calling 608-634-3121.



# Elderberry EXPERT

By Leah Call

**W**e made it through January. Though February can still pack an icy punch, the countdown to spring is on. As thoughts of gardening dance in many Midwesterners' minds, one grower in Westby thinks of just one thing—elderberries. If you're curious about anything elderberry, Vernon Electric Cooperative member Mike Breckel is your guy.

Breckel spent the last 30 years learning everything he could about elderberries. He eventually turned his obsession into a business, Ocooch Mountain Elderberries, a pick-your-own elderberry patch on Breckel's property between Westby and Coon Valley. Breckel doesn't just grow elderberries. He invented the Ocooch Mountain Rotary Destemmer, an innovation that could transform the elderberry-growing industry.

Native to Wisconsin, the American elderberry shrub has large green leaves and clusters of white fragrant flowers. You may even have some growing in your backyard. Edible varieties of Elderberry shrubs and trees grow throughout North America and Europe. While the red elderberry fruit is inedible, the blue and black-colored berry can be cooked and used in pies, jams, jellies, wine, and tea. Elderberry flowers and berries have been used for medicinal purposes since ancient times.

Breckel was first introduced to elderberries a quarter century ago when he helped a neighbor

harvest wild berries to make wine. His interest was piqued after reading articles on the immune-boosting benefits of elderberries. One study found that people given elderberry juice recovered from influenza symptoms two times faster than those who did not drink the juice. Other preliminary studies found the berry and flower—high in vitamin C, fiber, and antioxidants—may reduce the need for insulin among Type 2 diabetics, stave off dementia, decrease stress, and help with inflammation.

With a long history of healing powers, the elderberry plant was referred to as a “medicine chest” by Hippocrates, the father of medicine himself. In recent times, this super berry is seeing a resurgence of interest from vitamin and supplement producers.

“I was hooked on elderberries as a retirement project,” noted Breckel, who planted his first quarter-acre of elderberry bushes in 1997. Like the bushes growing on his rural property, Breckel's interest and knowledge of elderberries continues to blossom. He regularly engages with other growers and attends elderberry conferences and symposiums.

**A Grower's Dilemma** While the bulk of elderberries sold commercially today come from Europe, the United States boasts nearly 1,000 acres of commercial elderberry production, a number that is growing based on current market demand.



With the increased demand for elderberries, Breckel believes it could become a cash crop, like tobacco was in the past, that farmers can grow to supplement their income. Over the past decade, he has focused his efforts on simplifying the process of harvesting the berries, which grow in umbrella-shaped clusters called umbels. Each umbel can hold 700 or more berries. A single elderberry bush yields 12 to 15 pounds of berries.

Though cooked berries can be eaten safely, the berries should never be eaten raw. Elderberry stems also contain toxins, which makes it critical to remove all stems when harvesting. That makes harvesting an arduous process. “Over the 25 to 30 years that I’ve been harvesting elderberries, the bottleneck in harvesting has always been getting the berries off the stems,” noted Breckel.

In 2013, a commercial destemmer was introduced in Missouri. “It was a shaker table with a grate on the bottom that the berries fell through,” explained Breckel, who thought the product could be improved with a rotating drum and auger to push the berries through.

That winter, he created a crude drum-like prototype in his basement. It worked. No crushed berries, and the stems were quickly removed. Breckel’s son-in-law, Eric Weninger, and his friend Keith Bourne, both engineers, motorized and refined the destemmer into a food-grade prototype. “The picture in my brain was always for this to go right down the row. As you pick the berries, you throw them in to remove the stems,” said Breckel. Nearly a decade later, that vision has become a reality, the Ocooch Mountain Rotary Destemmer.

“This never would have happened if it had not been for Eric and Keith improving the prototype,” said Breckel. “I just wanted to prove that I could make it, but they took it to the next level.”

Word of Breckel’s machine got out in the elderberry world, and soon growers were contacting him. He sold his first destemmer to a grower in Illinois. After some trial and error, that grower was able to destem 350 pounds of elderberries in less than an hour in a machine that is quieter, easier to use, and easier to disassemble and clean than anything on the market.

Breckel sold two more destemmers last year and continues to make improvements. He hired Viroqua-based contract manufacturer Oppen Works to build the three machines he already sold.



Breckel’s invention, the Ocooch Mountain Rotary Destemmer.

Breckel continues to work with Oppen Works owner, Peter Bergquist, to further refine his invention and manufacture the first batch of ten that will hit the market this year. “In my mind, this is still the



Mike Breckel stands among his elderberry bushes.

beta, though it is perfectly functional and working well,” said Breckel. “My goal is to constantly make improvements.”

In February, Breckel and Bergquist will attend a conference in Missouri, where hundreds of commercial elderberry growers will gather. “I’m bringing the machine and a video to see how much interest we can generate there,” said Breckel.

Though the price of the destemmer is prohibitive for those with just a few bushes in their backyard, it is ideal for a small commercial grower. “Anything over an acre, it pays for itself,” added Breckel.

“My hope is that this will help small farmers stay in business,” he said. “This is a crop whose time has come. I think elderberries are here to stay in terms of a viable crop.”

**Pick Your Own** The elderberry harvest season begins in mid-August and lasts just a few weeks. While some growers get as much as 2,500 pounds of elderberries on one acre, Breckel says he typically harvests about 1,000 pounds annually. Every August, Breckel welcomes about 30 pickers to his pick-your-own business, Ocooch Mountain Elderberries. “People come out. They pick their berries. I run them through the destemmer, and they go home happy.”

Over the last 15 years, Breckel developed four varieties of elderberry plants which he sells to growers. He’s also happy to advise new growers on his favorite plant.

Visit the Ocooch Mountain Elderberry Facebook page for more information on Breckel’s berry business and view a video of the destemmer at work on his farm.

**Note: Do not eat raw elderberries. Uncooked elderberries can cause nausea and vomiting.**

# NEW RATE SCHEDULE

## Effective January 1, 2023

As outlined in Craig Buros' CEO/General Manager column on page 15, electric rates are increasing to provide an annual revenue increase of 3.7%. The increase is needed to cover the ever-increasing cost of generating, transmitting, and distributing electricity. To fairly share the cost of the electric system and meet the needs of the co-op budget, the base Facility Charge for each rate class will see an increase. To the average consumer in the single-phase residential rate class, this will amount to an increase of \$6 per month.

The new rate schedule is outlined here. It can also be found on our website, [www.vernonelectric.org](http://www.vernonelectric.org).

### Residential and Small Commercial – Single-Phase Service

Facility Charge .....	\$43.50/month
Additional Facility Charge over 25 kVA transformer ...	50 cents/kVA
Summer (June, July, August)	
First 1,500 kWh .....	12.6 cents/kWh
Excess.....	12.1 cents/kWh
Winter	
First 1,500 kWh .....	11.1 cents/kWh
Excess.....	10.6 cents/kWh

### Readstown & Four-Plex Units

Facility Charge .....	\$35.75/month
Additional Facility Charge over 25 kVA transformer....	50 cents/kVA
Summer (June, July, August)	
First 1,500 kWh .....	12.6 cents/kWh
Excess.....	12.1 cents/kWh
Winter	
First 1,500 kWh .....	11.1 cents/kWh
Excess.....	10.6 cents/kWh

### Three-Phase Rate

Facility Charge .....	\$77.50/month
Transformer Charge over 35 kVA capacity .....	50 cents/kVA
Energy Charge	
Summer (June, July, August)	
First 5,000 kWh .....	11.5 cents/kWh
Excess.....	11.0 cents/kWh
Winter	
First 5,000 kWh .....	10.0 cents/kWh
Excess.....	9.5 cents/kWh

### Peak Alert Rate – Over 50 kW Demand

Facility Charge Three-Phase .....	\$115.00/month
Facility Charge Primary Metered.....	\$115.00/month
Facility Charge Single-Phase .....	\$85.00/month
Transformer Charge over 50 kVA capacity .....	50 cents/kVA
Seasonal Peak Period Demand Charge	
Summer .....	\$63.80 per kW/yr
Winter .....	\$29.00 per kW/yr
Maximum Demand Charge .....	\$9.50 per kW/mo
Reactive Demand Charge.....	25¢/kVAR/mo
Energy Charge	
First 25,000 kWh.....	5.8 cents/kWh
Excess .....	5.5 cents/kWh

### Uncontrolled Electric Heat

Facility Charge .....	\$5.00/month
Energy Charge	
Summer (June, July, August).....	12.1 cents/kWh
Winter .....	10.6 cents/kWh

### Dual Fuel Heating

Facility Charge .....	\$5.00/month
Energy Charge	
October-May (Automatic backup).....	6.7 cents/kWh
October-May (Manual backup) (CLOSED) .....	7.9 cents/kWh
June-September.....	10.4 cents/kWh

### Storage Heating

The Storage Heat Rate is controlled for a total of 14 hours per day 365 days per year (except weekends & holidays).

Facility Charge .....	\$5.00/month
Energy Charge	
October-May .....	5.7 cents/kWh
June-September.....	10.4 cents/kWh

### Natural Air Grain Drying – Interruptible

Facility Charge Single-Phase .....	\$43.50/month
Facility Charge Three-Phase .....	\$77.50/month
Sub-metered .....	\$9.00/month
Meter Loop only (no new transformer) .....	\$12.00/month
Transformer Charge over 35 kVA .....	50 cents/kVA
Energy Charge .....	9.5 cents/kWh

### Idle Service

Facility Charge .....	\$32.63/month
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### Yard Light

100 Watt HPS (unmetered) .....	\$9.25/month
100 Watt HPS (metered).....	\$6.50/month

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**Courtney Moser, Editor**

