Access Energy Cooperative℠
A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

JANUARY 2026

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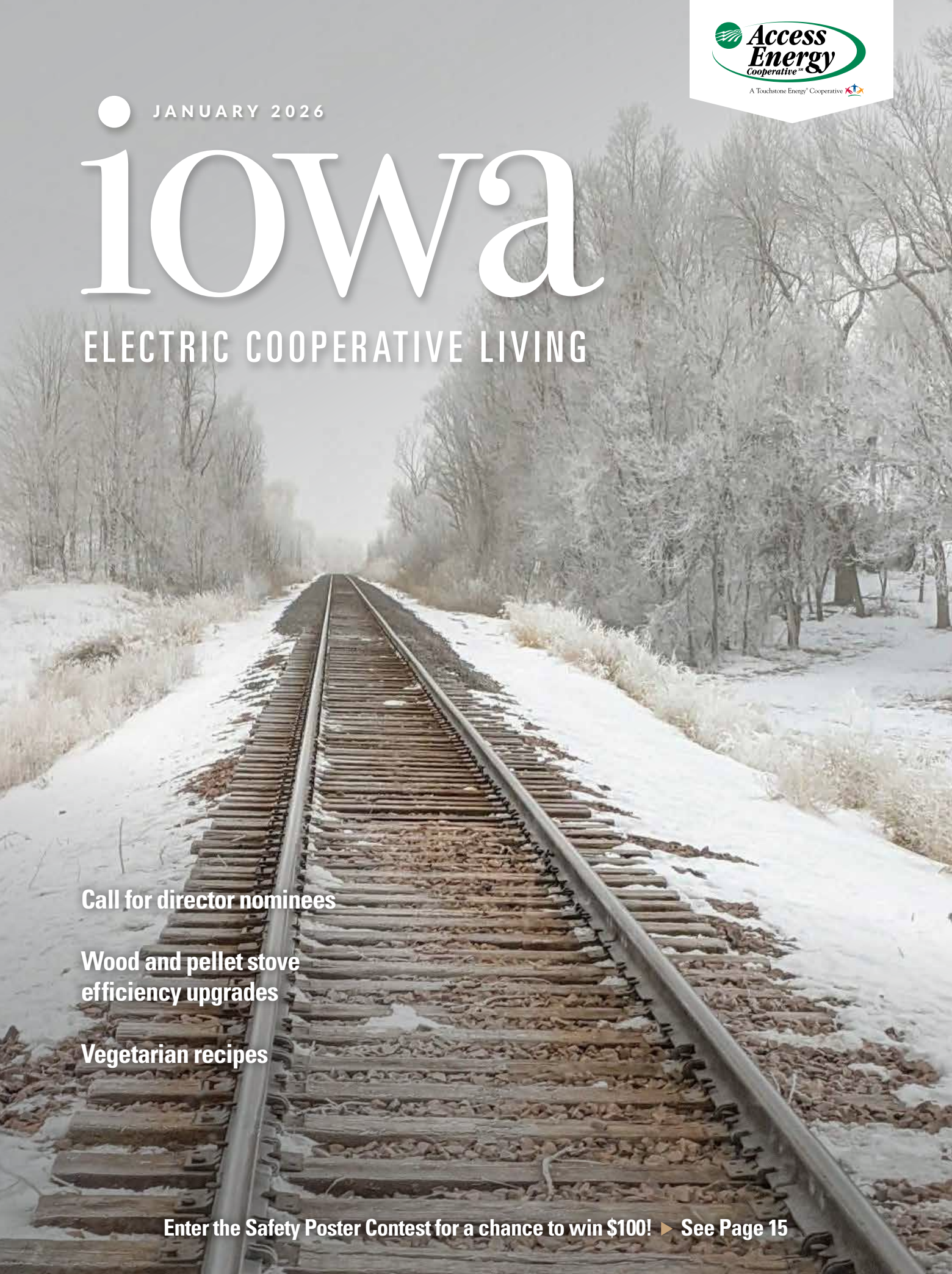
ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LIVING



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ON THE COVER Special thanks to Michelle Benton, a Consumers Energy member-consumer, for supplying this month's cover image. Submit high-resolution photos for consideration to editor@ieclmagazine.com. You could receive $100!

PROTECTING IOWA'S POWER: KEY ENERGY POLICIES TO WATCH THIS LEGISLATIVE SESSION

BY HALEY MOON

As the Iowa Legislature prepares to convene on Jan. 12, electric cooperatives across the state are focused on defending the policies and protections that keep power reliable and affordable for our communities. For more than eight decades, Iowa's electric cooperatives have prioritized the delivery of safe, reliable and affordable electricity while supporting local economies and strengthening the power grid. This work relies heavily on Iowa's defined electric service territories, an important law that helps ensure every corner of the state receives consistent, cost-effective electric service.

Protecting service territories and grid reliability

For rural communities in particular, defined electric service territories are vital. By assigning each utility the responsibility to serve a specific geographic area, every Iowan is guaranteed electric service that avoids redundant infrastructure, reduces costs and allows utilities the certainty to make long-term investments in grid resilience. These protections help cooperatives maintain affordable rates and plan strategically to meet future needs. As legislators return to Des Moines, Iowa's electric cooperatives remain vigilant against any attempts to weaken this foundational law or erode the consumer benefits it provides.

One challenge that could resurface is a third-party or "community solar" proposal. During the 2025 legislative session, lawmakers considered legislation that would have allowed non-utility solar developers to provide retail electric service inside an established utility's service area, which is in direct conflict with Iowa's service territory statute. While these programs are often marketed as cost-saving options, the details can be far less rosy. Because third-party developers are not held to the same consumer protection standards or regulatory oversight as Iowa's public utilities, they can shift grid maintenance and infrastructure costs onto customers who do not subscribe.

Cooperatives are not opposed to solar – far from it. Iowa's electric co-ops have long supported the adoption of solar when and where it benefits their members and aligns with responsible grid planning. But allowing non-utilities to operate independently within the defined area of public utility, even on a limited basis, sets a precedent that threatens system stability statewide.

Strengthening safety protections for utility workers

Another priority heading into the upcoming legislative session is protecting utility workers. Lineworkers are often the first on the scene after storms and work long hours in hazardous conditions to restore essential services. Despite the critical role they play in delivering power to our communities, something alarming is happening. Threats, harassment and assaults against utility workers while on the job are increasing nationwide. Strengthening penalties for violence against utility workers reaffirms our commitment to the safety of cooperative employees and our communities.

No matter what this session may bring, you can rest assured knowing that your cooperative will be advocating for policies to keep electricity safe and affordable for you and your community.

Haley Moon is the senior manager of policy and advocacy for the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives.

EDITOR'S CHOICE CONTEST

WIN A NINJA CRISPI AIR FRYER!

The Ninja Crispi® Portable Glass Cooking System is a compact powerhouse that packs the 1,500 watts power of a full-sized air fryer into a portable design. It includes a small 6-cup and larger 4-quart CleanCrisp™ container. Whether you're making quick, single-serve meals in just 7 minutes or sharing crispy snacks on the go, the Ninja Crispi® makes it effortless.

Visit our website and win!

ENTER ONLINE BY JAN. 31!

Enter this month's contest by visiting www.ieclmagazine.com no later than Jan. 31. You must be a member of one of Iowa's electric cooperatives to win. There's no obligation associated with entering, we don't share entrant information with anyone and multiple entries from the same account will be disqualified.

The winner of Lodge cast iron skillet set from the October issue was **Sarah Silhanek**, a **T.I.P. REC** member-consumer.

UPCOMING EVENTS

JAN. 21	Board meeting
FEB. 19	Board meeting
FEB. 28	Youth Tour application deadline
MARCH 12	Youth Tour interviews
MARCH 15	Scholarship application deadline
MARCH 15	Lineworker Scholarship application deadline
MARCH 19	Board meeting
MARCH 31	Poster contest entry deadline

You can access your account information at any time using SmartHub on our website at www.accessenergycoop.com or through the SmartHub app for mobile devices. Use SmartHub to report outages to save time and ensure that it goes directly into our system to notify us. You can also call our office at 866-242-4232 for account information or to report service-related concerns.

Access Energy Cooperative is dedicated to exceeding members' expectations for safe, reliable and efficient service, while being a good citizen in our communities.

Office: Access Energy Cooperative
1800 W. Washington St., P.O. Box 440
Mount Pleasant, Iowa 52641
Phone: 319-385-1577 or 866-242-4232
Fax: 319-385-6873
Website: www.accessenergycoop.com
Facebook: facebook.com/AccessEnergyCoop
Email: contactus@accessenergycoop.com
Office Hours: Monday-Thursday, 7 a.m.-4:30 p.m.
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Call our office 24/7: 319-385-1577
Payments can be placed in dropbox by flag pole in front of office. Visa, MasterCard and Discover accepted.
Call Before You Dig (Iowa One Call): 8-1-1

General Manager/CEO: Kevin Wheeler
Editor: Kimberly Davis
Officers and Directors:
Marvin Larson, District 1, President
mlarson@accessenergycoop.com
David Hollingsworth, District 1, Vice President
dhollingsworth@accessenergycoop.com
Michael Holtkamp, District 3, Secretary
maholtkamp@accessenergycoop.com
William Benjamin, District 3, Treasurer
wbenjamin@accessenergycoop.com
Jerry Barker, District 2, Director
jbarker@accessenergycoop.com
Robert Breazeale, District 2, Director
rbreazeale@accessenergycoop.com
Marvin Newton, District 3, Director
mnewton@accessenergycoop.com
Virgil Symmonds, District 1, Director
vsymmonds@accessenergycoop.com
Larry White, District 2, Director
lwhite@accessenergycoop.com

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COMMITMENT TO SAFE, RELIABLE AND EFFICIENT SERVICE

BY KEVIN WHEELER

At the heart of our mission is a simple but powerful promise: to provide safe, reliable and efficient service to our members. Every day, your cooperative works to ensure that your needs are met, whether that means keeping the lights on during a storm or planning for the future of our energy supply.

Like you, we face rising costs in nearly every aspect of daily operations. Over the past few years, we have seen double-digit increases in the price of materials, tools and equipment we rely on to serve you. These challenges mirror what many households experience at the grocery store, the gas pump or when purchasing everyday necessities.

At the same time, our power supplier is investing in new peak generating units, facilities designed to provide extra capacity during times of high demand. These units are critical to ensuring that when energy use spikes, such as during extreme heat or cold, we have the resources to keep electricity flowing to every member. Reliability is not just a goal; it is a commitment. But with that commitment comes added expense, and the cooperative must absorb those increased power costs.

Upcoming rate increase

We understand that no one welcomes rate increases. In fact, we were fortunate to avoid any increases in 2025. However, beginning April 1, 2026, the cooperative will implement a rate adjustment across all rate classes. This decision was not made lightly. Two main drivers are behind this change:

- **Power costs:** These account for nearly 68% of our total expenses, meaning even small increases have a significant impact on our budget. Our supplier has informed us that power costs will continue to rise for the foreseeable future.
- **Operational costs:** Everyday expenses, such as overhead, tools, materials and equipment, have increased substantially. These are the resources we need to maintain safe and efficient service.

When you consider that nearly two-thirds of our expenses are tied directly to power costs, it becomes clear how changes in the energy market ripple through to the cooperative and, ultimately, to our members.

Committed to transparency and reliability

While these realities are challenging, we want to assure you that we are constantly seeking ways to improve efficiency and manage costs responsibly. Our goal is to balance financial responsibility with the high level of service you expect and deserve. Safety remains our top priority, and reliability is non-negotiable.

We remain committed to transparency and to keeping you informed about the factors that influence your rates. Your cooperative is not just a utility, it is member-owned; and every decision we make is guided by the principle of serving you, our members.

As we move into 2026, we thank you for your understanding and continued trust. Together, we will navigate these changes while staying true to our mission: delivering safe, reliable and efficient service for today and for the future.

Kevin Wheeler is the general manager/CEO of Access Energy Cooperative.

CALL FOR DIRECTOR NOMINATIONS

Your board of directors is elected by and from the members of Access Energy Cooperative. Three seats are up for election in 2026, one in each of the three districts. Board members are to be elected to a term of three years.

Terms that will expire with the 2026 annual meeting to be held Tuesday, Aug. 4, include:

- **District 1:** David Hollingsworth
- **District 2:** Jerry Barker
- **District 3:** Michael Holtkamp

This month, the board of directors will be appointing a nominating committee who will select candidates to run for the expiring terms. Anyone interested in running for a seat on the board may contact a member of the nominating committee. The list will be posted on our website at www.accessenergycoop.com and in this magazine; or you can call our office at 866-242-4232.

Qualifications to serve

To serve on the Access Energy Cooperative board of directors, you must meet all the qualifications as specified in the cooperative Bylaws, Section 3 as summarized below.

No member shall be eligible to become or remain a director or to hold any position of trust in the Cooperative who:

1. Is not a bona fide resident of premises served by the Cooperative
2. Is in any way employed by or financially interested in a competing enterprise or a business selling electric energy or supplies to the Cooperative or a business primarily engaged in selling electrical or plumbing appliances, fixtures or supplies to the members
3. Within five (5) years preceding a director candidate nomination was an employee of the Cooperative
4. Is a close relative of a director or employee of the Cooperative, with close relative being defined as: spouse, cohabitant, mother, father, mother-in-law, father-in-law, sister, brother, sister-in-law, brother-in-law, and natural, step and adopted children
5. Within fifteen (15) years preceding a director candidate nomination been convicted of a felony whether by judgment, order, settlement, conviction, plea of guilt or plea of nolo contendere
6. Becomes the full-time employee or agent of another director or employee
7. Becomes the full-time employer or principal of another director
8. Is the incumbent of or candidate for an elective public office other than on a school board, board of supervisors, township trustee, township clerk or member of the State legislature

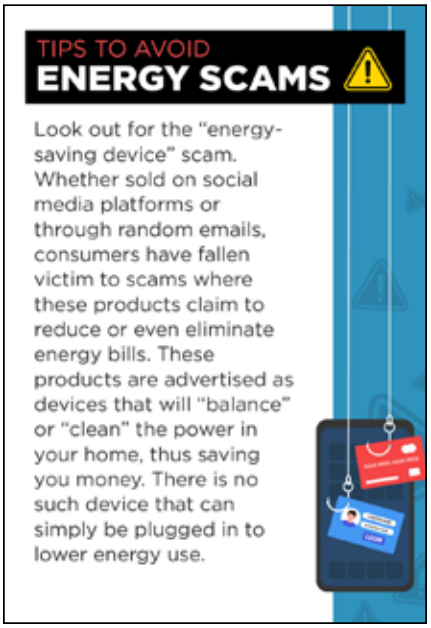
When a membership is held jointly, either one, but not both, may be elected a director, provided, however, that neither shall be eligible to become or remain a director or hold a position of trust in the Cooperative unless both shall meet the qualifications herein above set forth.

PROPERTY TAXES PAID

Property taxes are used to help fund important things such as education and city and county government. Even though Access Energy Cooperative is a not-for-profit organization, your cooperative pays property taxes for the poles, wires and transformers on our lines, plus another tax bill for the office and warehouse. Your cooperative pays taxes in all 10 counties we serve.

The following is a breakdown of the property taxes paid in 2025.

COUNTY	AMOUNT
Davis	$235
Des Moines	$8,434
Henry	$236,834
Jefferson	$66,317
Keokuk	$28
Lee	$40,344
Louisa	$28
Van Buren	$22,350
Wapello	$8,529
Washington	$5,464
TOTAL	**$388,563**



HOW ANIMAL GUARDS KEEP YOUR POWER ON

BY DANIEL PHILIPS

Did you know squirrels, lightning and trees have something in common? They all have the potential to knock out your electricity. Access Energy Cooperative works hard to keep your lights on 24/7, but unplanned circumstances can occasionally create power outages. The top three troublemakers to electric reliability are trees falling on power lines and other interferences from vegetation, lightning strikes and animals encountering electric equipment.

Have you ever seen a metal band, like the one shown below, on a utility pole and wondered what they are?

Utilities use animal guards on poles to prevent power outages, protect equipment and safeguard wildlife. These guards, often made of metal, spinning rollers or plastic wraps, act as a physical barrier that discourage climbing animals like squirrels, raccoons and snakes from making contact with energized equipment and causing short circuits. This is important because animal-caused outages can be a major source of power interruptions, especially during the spring and fall when animals are most active.

There are two main types of animal guards: wraps that are installed around the pole to create a smooth, unclimbable surface, and hardware (like the Critter Guard) that can include rollers that spin when an animal tries to climb over them.

Power line structures provide perching, roosting and nesting areas for birds and raptors (larger birds of prey, including owls, eagles and falcons). When birds come into power equipment – lines, conductors or transformers – it can result in bird fatalities, power outages and pole fires. Birds are number one in causing more power system outages than any other animal.

Strong reliability

According to U.S. News & World Report, Iowa has the most reliable electrical grid of any state in the U.S. with Iowa's electric cooperatives boasting a 5-year reliability average of 99.97%.

Iowa's electric cooperatives work hard to maintain this exceptional reliability standard and reduce the amount of time members are without power from an outage. Among the techniques being used to foil critter catastrophes are snake barriers around substations, buzzard shields on transmission towers and mesh coverings on wood poles to prevent damage from woodpeckers. Some co-ops have also found that burying lines underground is a viable strategy.

How animal guards work

- **Create a physical barrier:** The guards are installed around the pole or on lines to prevent animals from climbing or crawling onto high-voltage equipment.
- **Discourage climbing:** Some guards use rollers that spin freely, making it impossible for animals

Type of animal guard used by Access Energy Cooperative

Our co-op uses pole wraps as its animal guards, which is a thick, smooth plastic sheet wrapped around the pole. Its slick exterior makes it difficult for animals to grip and climb. The exterior can be glossy to deter climbing, while the interior might have a textured surface to prevent the wood from rotting. It can also deter other animals like raccoons, opossums and woodpeckers. Some wraps are designed to reinforce a weak spot in the pole until it can be replaced.

like squirrels to get a grip and move across the lines.

- **Provide protection:** Guards can protect electrical transformers and other equipment from damage and also protect the animals from electrocution.

Why they are necessary

- **Prevent power outages:** Animals are a significant cause of power outages, sometimes ranking as the second-most common cause nationally.
- **Reduce maintenance costs:** By preventing damage, utilities can avoid costly repairs to equipment and infrastructure.
- **Protect both wildlife and infrastructure:** Animal guards offer a solution that protects both the power grid and the animals from the dangers of electricity.
- **Mitigate a variety of animals:** While squirrels are a primary focus in the U.S., guards can also help deter raccoons, snakes and even large animals like elk in other regions.

Other functions

- **Protecting equipment:** Guards prevent animals from chewing through power lines or making contact with equipment like transformers and arrestors, which can cause short circuits and outages.
- **Preventing damage to the pole:** Some guards protect against damage from large animals like deer, elk or beavers.
- **Preventing home damage:** By keeping animals off utility poles, guards also prevent them from potentially gaining access to residential rooftops and causing damage there.

Daniel Philips is the director of operations for Access Energy Cooperative.

YOUTH PROGRAMS AVAILABLE

As part of our ongoing commitment to supporting youth, education and community involvement, we're proud to offer a variety of programs designed to inspire and empower young people.

Youth Tour Trip, June 14-20

Access Energy Cooperative sponsors up to two students per year on an all-expenses-paid Youth Tour trip to Washington, D.C.

Applications are accepted through Feb. 28. Students must be a sophomore or junior and attend a school in southeast Iowa in one of the 10 counties served by the cooperative, but are not required to be a member of the cooperative. A personal interview is required of each applicant on March 12 at our office to qualify. Applications and details can be found on our website at www.accessenergycoop.com, at all area school guidance offices or by calling our office at 866-242-4232.

Scan the QR code for more information.

Scholarship program

Access Energy Cooperative offers $1,500 scholarships to high school seniors. Applications are accepted through March 15. The parent or guardian of the applicant must be a member of the cooperative and live at a property receiving service from the cooperative. Applications and details can be found on our website at www.accessenergycoop.com, at all area school guidance offices or by calling our office at 866-242-4232.

Scan the QR code for more information.

Lineworker Scholarship program

Access Energy Cooperative offers $2,000 scholarships to students enrolled, or planning to enroll, in a one- or two-year electric lineworker program.

Applications are accepted through March 15. The applicant must reside in southeast Iowa in the general service area of the cooperative but is not required to be a member. Applications and details can be found on our website at www.accessenergycoop.com, at all area school guidance offices or by calling our office at 866-242-4232.

Scan the QR code for more information.

CRAISINS, APPLE, WALNUT AND QUINOA SALAD

- ½ cup quinoa, uncooked
- ½ cup toasted walnuts, chopped
- 1 cup craisins
- 1 large apple, chopped
- 1 large celery stalk, chopped
- 2 tablespoons green onion, chopped
- 1 tablespoon honey (or white corn syrup)
- 2 tablespoons white balsamic raspberry blush vinegar
- kosher salt, to taste
- pepper, to taste

Prepare quinoa according to package directions. Refrigerate for 30 minutes, until cooled completely. In a large bowl, toss cooled quinoa, walnuts, craisins, apple, celery and onion together. In a separate bowl, mix honey or corn syrup and vinegar. Season with salt and pepper. Pour dressing over salad and mix well. Serve immediately or chill in refrigerator until ready to serve. *Serves 8*

Nancy Anderson • Ankeny
Prairie Energy Cooperative

CUKE, TOMATO AND ONION SALAD

- 1 medium cucumber, sliced
- 1 medium onion, sliced
- 2 medium tomatoes, cubed
- 2 teaspoons dill weed
- 1 tablespoon salad oil
- 1 tablespoon vinegar
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons salt
- dash of pepper, optional

Mix all ingredients and refrigerate 2 hours before serving. *Serves 10*

Patricia Glandorf • Williamsburg
T.I.P. Rural Electric Cooperative

OAT BURGERS

- 1 cup creamy cottage cheese
- 1 cup corn flakes cereal, crushed
- 1 cup quick oatmeal
- 2 eggs
- salt, to taste
- pepper, to taste
- oil
- 1 can cream of mushroom soup
- 1¾ cans milk or water

Mix cottage cheese, cereal, oatmeal, eggs, salt and pepper. Form into patties and brown in oil. Mix soup and milk or water, then cover patties with the soup mixture. Bake covered at 350 degrees F for 45-60 minutes. Cream of mushroom soup can be substituted with cream of celery soup. *Serves 2-4*

Natalie Herrington • Nevada
Consumers Energy

CARIBBEAN RICE AND BEANS

- 1 tablespoon oil
- ¼ teaspoon garlic powder
- ⅓ cup green onion, diced
- ⅓ cup green pepper, diced
- ½ teaspoon rosemary leaves
- ½ teaspoon thyme leaves
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed
- 1 cup raw rice, cooked
- ¼ cup picante sauce
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- ½ cup cheddar cheese, grated

In a skillet, sauté oil, garlic powder, green onion, green pepper, rosemary, thyme and pepper. Add beans to sautéed ingredients. Then, add rice, picante and soy sauce. Stir fry until hot, then top with cheese. *Serves 4*

Sandra Busard • Donnellson
Access Energy Cooperative

BLACK BEAN AND VEGGIE BURGERS

- **2** 15-ounce cans black beans, rinsed and drained
- **1¼** teaspoons garlic powder
- **1** teaspoon chili powder
- **1** teaspoon cumin
- **½** teaspoon paprika
- **½** teaspoon salt
- **2** teaspoons cilantro
- **¼** cup green pepper, finely chopped
- **½** cup breadcrumbs
- **1** large carrot, grated
- **¼** cup red onion, chopped
- **1** egg
- **6** buns, optional
- lettuce, optional

In a large mixing bowl, mash black beans. Add garlic powder, chili powder, cumin, paprika, salt and cilantro. Mix until combined. Add peppers, breadcrumbs, carrot, onion and egg to the combined bean mixture. Form into patties and fry over medium heat in a greased pan. Flip after 5 minutes and fry the other side for the same amount of time. Serve on a bun or on a bed of lettuce. *Serves 6*

Crystal Hammes • Libertyville
Access Energy Cooperative

HOMEMADE SLOW COOKER TOMATO BASIL SOUP

- **5-7** tomatoes on the vine (or 2 cups baby tomatoes)
- **1** yellow onion, diced
- **2** tablespoons olive oil
- **1** head garlic, peeled
- splash of vegetable broth
- **1** tablespoon Italian seasoning
- **1** teaspoon salt
- **½** teaspoon black pepper
- **¼** teaspoon red pepper flakes
- fresh basil, to taste
- heavy cream, optional

Place all ingredients in a slow cooker, except basil. Cook on low until tomatoes and onions are soft. Blend soup until smooth with an immersion or regular blender. Adding heavy cream will make for creamier soup. Adjust seasonings to taste and garnish with fresh basil before serving. *Serves 6, approximately*

Tristen Jungers • Archer
North West Rural Electric Cooperative

SPAGHETTI SALAD

- **4** medium fresh tomatoes
- **1** large red onion
- **2** cucumbers
- **2** bell peppers
- **2** pounds spaghetti
- **1** 16-ounce bottle Wishbone Italian salad dressing
- Shilling Salad Supreme Spice, to taste

Chop together tomatoes, onion, cucumbers and peppers. Break spaghetti into thirds and boil until cooked. Cool slightly but add salad dressing before spaghetti is cold. Mix spaghetti with tomato mixture and add salad spice to taste. *Serves 16, or cut recipe in half to serve 8*

Denise Anderson • Ocheyedan
Osceola Electric Cooperative, Inc.

Visit www.ieclmagazine.com and search our online archive of hundreds of recipes in various categories.

EASY PEASY PAELLA

- **2** tablespoons oil
- **1** cup white rice
- **1** onion, diced
- **2** carrots, diced
- **2** stalks celery, diced
- **8** ounces mushrooms, quartered
- **1** bell pepper (any color), diced
- **2** cloves garlic, minced
- **2** pinches saffron, optional
- **1** teaspoon Old Bay seasoning
- **1** teaspoon paprika
- sprinkle cayenne
- **1** cup white wine or vegetable broth
- **8** ounces grape tomatoes
- **⅓** cup green olives
- **1** cup frozen peas
- salt, to taste
- pepper, to taste

Swirl oil to coat an 11-inch cast iron or other oven-safe pan. Layer (in order) rice, onion, carrots, celery, mushrooms, bell pepper, garlic, seasonings and wine or broth. Bake at 375 degrees F for 40 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, olives and peas. Bake 15 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. *Serves 6*

Chris Daniels • Casey
Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative Association

WANTED:

BEEF BURGER RECIPES

THE REWARD:

$25 FOR EVERY ONE WE PUBLISH!

Deadline is Jan. 31
Fire up the grill, load up the toppings and gather around the picnic table – we want your best **beef burger recipes**! Selected submissions will appear in our May issue in celebration of Beef Month. Please include your name, address, telephone number, co-op name, recipe category and number of servings on all submissions.

EMAIL: recipes@ieclmagazine.com

MAIL: Recipes
Iowa Electric Cooperative Living magazine
8525 Douglas Ave., Suite 48
Des Moines, IA 50322

Craig Codner, CEO of Butler County REC, participants in shooting the national commercial.

IOWA CO-OPS SHINE BRIGHT IN NEW TOUCHSTONE ENERGY COMMERCIAL

Hollywood came to Butler County in northeast Iowa this past summer in the form of Harvest Creative Services (Harvest) from Lansing, Michigan.

Butler County REC was chosen as the host cooperative for the Touchstone Energy® Cooperative's annual ad shoot, which took place in June. Before the shoot, however, there were numerous phone calls, emails – 825 in total – meetings, text messages and a week in May scouting locations for the five scenes.

Behind the scenes of a major production

Anne Gardiner, public relations specialist with Butler County REC, and Marena Fritzler, marketing director with Corn Belt Power Cooperative, spent the week with Harvest. It was a full week that included new opportunities, making grilled cheese sandwiches for one scene, shooting scenes numerous times (the first scene alone took 31 takes), making last-minute adjustments, long days and short nights, and a lot of camaraderie.

Cooperation among cooperatives on full display

The ad was also a nod to cooperation among cooperatives, one of our seven cooperative principles. The first scene was shot at Grundy County REC with lineman Derek Snakenberg driving the REC truck. Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative sent three volunteers – Ryan Craig, CEO and Touchstone Energy board member; Katie Harris, communications specialist; and Jen Sievert, vice president of customer and corporate relations.

"It was an epic, one-of-a-kind experience, learning from the production crew on set, photographing the journey, and helping behind the scenes," said Fritzler. "The magic of this creation came to life the way it did with the collective strength of many. It was neat to see local employees and board members from Butler County REC, Grundy County REC and Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative step up and into this production."

Creativity, improvisation and a memorable experience

Interestingly, appliance finishes ultimately determined the filming location for the kitchen scene. A couple of Butler County REC employees offered their own kitchens for filming, but during location scouting, the production team determined the finishes and reflections in co-op employees' refrigerator doors when opened were not the right fit for the envisioned transition into the hand-drawn bucket truck. Production crews found the winning refrigerator in a local rental property in Shell Rock, where the kitchen scene was filmed.

Improvising is also a hallmark of ad shoots. When the Harvest team was searching for a table for the kitchen scene, Gardiner offered her kitchen table. Fritzler and Gardiner disassembled the table to get it through doors, loaded it onto an REC truck, covered it due to impending rain and headed to the scene, where the crew unloaded it. After the scene was shot, the table was loaded back onto the truck and covered with a tarp. Rain was definitely on its way.

Fritzler and Gardiner then went back and forth on whether the table should be housed at Butler County REC's CEO Craig Codner's home or driven back to Gardiner's home. They decided to drive the table to Gardiner's and unload it. The decision proved to be the correct one — it sprinkled, but the table remained unscathed.

The ad, released during the Touchstone Energy annual meeting on Nov. 19, is the centerpiece of Touchstone's 2026 national campaign, "The Cooperative Advantage." With more than 100 co-op members, employees and actors, this was Touchstone Energy's largest production to date. It also has the distinction of being the only ad in eight years in which shooting days had to change to accommodate weather.

"Touchstone Energy and Harvest Creative Services were great to work with," Gardiner said. "Butler County REC was proud to be the host for the 2026 ad campaign. It was an amazing opportunity that we are so grateful to have been a part of. I learned so much and had the best time. I also don't look at commercials or movies the same way I used to!"

Scan the QR code to watch the 30-second spot.

Touchstone Energy® Cooperatives

ABOUT TOUCHSTONE ENERGY

Touchstone Energy is a national network of electric cooperatives across 46 states that provides research, communications resources and employee training to help co-ops strengthen relationships with their members. These shared tools and programs support superior member satisfaction, reinforce the cooperative difference and strengthen both local communities and the broader electric cooperative network. Touchstone Energy cooperatives stand out as trusted, reliable sources of power and information for 30 million member-consumers.

WHY DOES TOUCHSTONE ENERGY ADVERTISE?

Advertising is important for Touchstone Energy because it strengthens the unified national brand shared by hundreds of local electric cooperatives, helping members recognize the value, reliability and community focus of their co-op. It communicates the "cooperative difference," reinforces trust, and educates the public on key energy issues, while also helping attract new talent by highlighting the meaningful, community-driven careers available within the cooperative network. By keeping co-ops visible, consistent and connected, advertising supports member engagement, strengthens workforce recruitment and ensures that Touchstone Energy cooperatives continue to be seen as trusted, people-first energy providers.

WOOD AND PELLET STOVE EFFICIENCY UPGRADES

BY MIRANDA BOUTELLE

There is something special about the heat of a fire. It's cozy, comforting and a heat source for households across the country. Whether it provides primary or supplemental heat, a wood or pellet stove must operate safely and efficiently.

Here are some signs your stove may need to be replaced, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA):

- You often smell smoke in the house with all the windows closed. Smoke can harm heart and lung health, especially among children and older adults.
- Smoke comes out of the chimney more than 15 minutes after a cold start or reload.
- Watery eyes and stuffy noses are common in your household when operating the wood stove.
- You must continually feed the stove with wood.

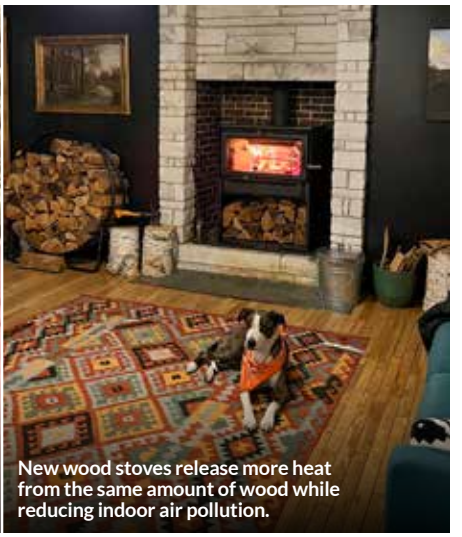
The EPA recommends replacing wood stoves manufactured before 1990 with cleaner, more efficient models. This can save you money and make your home safer by reducing fire risk and improving indoor air quality. It also reduces outdoor air pollution. If the back of your stove doesn't have an EPA label, it's likely more than 30 years old.

Evaluating replacement options

You can compare equipment to find the best fit for your home using the EPA Certified Wood Stove Database. It provides a list of wood and pellet stoves with efficiency ratings, sizes, heat outputs and other details. Local retailers can help you, too. Work with a reputable dealer who can explain the features most important to you. Don't forget to ask about the highest efficiency models.

Here are some things to consider when choosing a new wood or pellet stove.

Pellet stoves are an efficient upgrade that can burn cleaner than a wood stove and don't require hauling and storing wood.



New wood stoves release more heat from the same amount of wood while reducing indoor air pollution.

1 Modern wood stoves require less wood, produce less ash and emit almost no smoke. They come in catalytic and noncatalytic options. In catalytic models, smoke gases and particles are burned in a coated ceramic honeycomb, thereby increasing burn time and reducing air pollution. The operation of noncatalytic models is more standard. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, new catalytic wood stoves have efficiencies of up to 83% higher heating value – or amount of heat released – while noncatalytic models are typically in the 65% to 75% range.

2 A pellet stove is another option to consider. It burns compressed pellets made of wood or other biomass materials. Like a wood stove, there are free-standing units or inserts. It can burn cleaner and doesn't require hauling wood. Pellets are loaded into the hopper, which feeds them into the combustion chamber for burning. Most pellet stoves use electricity for the hopper and a fan to push warm air into the room. Plan to power them during an outage, if needed. Some models come with battery backup. An EPA-certified pellet stove has a 70% to 83% higher heating value.

3 Make sure the wood or pellet stove you select is properly sized for your home and heating needs.

Fuel source

Consider the cost of the fuel source – whether you have to buy wood, harvest it yourself or stock up on a specific type of pellet. Reduce fuel consumption and smoke by burning wood that is dry and seasoned, meaning it is split, covered and aged for at least six months. Do not burn trash or treated lumber indoors. It can create indoor air pollution and damage your wood stove. Burning softwood can lead to creosote buildup, which can cause chimney fires.

Safe installation and operation

Installation by a certified technician ensures the job is done right, preventing chimney fires and indoor smoke. Have the stove cleaned and inspected by a professional annually. Also, install carbon monoxide detectors. Follow the manufacturer's specifications for burning materials and operation.

If your stove is acting up or not supplying enough heat for your home, consider upgrading to a new model to increase efficiency and keep your home comfortable this winter.

Miranda Boutelle writes on energy efficiency topics for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

ENERGY STORAGE ADVANCES

BY JENNAH DENNEY

Not long ago, when people talked about batteries, they meant the kind that powered flashlights, phones or watches. Today, batteries are transforming the way we power our homes, farms and even the electric grid that keeps our lights on. Across the country, battery energy storage is helping electric cooperatives keep power more reliable, affordable and resilient.

The journey began with early rechargeable batteries like lead-acid models, which were used in vehicles, tractors and backup systems for lighting or telephones. These systems were bulky, short-lived and required frequent maintenance. Later, nickel-cadmium and nickel-metal hydride batteries became popular in cordless tools, early electronics and hybrid vehicles. While they marked a step forward, they remained expensive and weren't well suited for large-scale energy applications.

A major turning point came with the development of lithium-ion batteries. These are lighter, longer lasting and capable of storing more energy in less space. Initially used in laptops and mobile phones, lithium-ion technology now powers most electric vehicles (EVs) and many of the grid-scale systems that can keep thousands of homes running for hours. And innovation hasn't stopped there. Researchers are now exploring solid-state and sodium-ion batteries, which use safer, more abundant materials and promise to make battery energy storage even more affordable and accessible. Each advancement brings batteries closer to becoming a foundational part of everyday life.

Co-ops embrace battery technology

Across the country, electric co-ops are deploying battery energy storage systems to support grid operations and manage local demand. Batteries can store excess electricity from renewable sources like solar and wind, then discharge it when demand rises, which can help balance supply and demand and improve grid stability. They also provide an alternative to traditional infrastructure upgrades. In areas where energy use is growing, a strategically placed battery can handle short-term peaks in demand, reducing the need for new substations or extended power lines. This can lower capital costs and reduce construction timelines.

Often paired with rooftop solar panels, residential battery storage systems can provide backup power during outages, keeping essential equipment like lights, refrigerators and medical devices running. *Photo Source: Base Power*


Across the country, electric co-ops are deploying battery energy storage systems to support grid operations and manage local demand.


Utility-scale storage technologies are helping electric co-ops improve reliability, integrate renewable energy and manage infrastructure costs.

More than 70 electric cooperatives in 24 states have installed or are testing battery energy storage systems, according to the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association. Most systems currently in use are designed to deliver power for two to eight hours. However, long-duration energy storage (LDES) technologies are emerging that can store energy for 10 hours or more, and in some cases, multiple days. It's important to recognize that battery technology is still evolving and it might not be economically feasible in all uses or areas.

These battery storage systems could help utilities manage extended periods of low renewable generation or respond to prolonged grid stress events, especially in remote or weather-sensitive areas.

Potential reliability, cost benefits

Battery storage may also offer benefits to co-op members. Residential systems can provide backup power during outages, keeping essential equipment like lights, refrigerators and medical devices running. For homes with rooftop solar, batteries allow excess energy to be stored during the day and used at night. Some cooperatives offer time-of-use rates, where electricity costs less during off-peak hours. Batteries can store low-cost energy and use it later, helping reduce monthly bills.

Electric vehicle advances

Battery innovation is also being driven by the growth of EVs. Manufacturers are working to improve battery performance, extend battery lifespan, reduce charging time and lower costs. These improvements are influencing the broader energy storage market. Some EVs now include vehicle-to-home (V2H) or vehicle-to-grid (V2G) capabilities, allowing a car to supply power to a home during an outage or send energy back to the grid during peak demand.

Jennah Denney writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

DISTRIBUTION AUTOMATION KEEPS POWER FLOWING, OUTAGES AT BAY

BY CATHY CASH

Staying online uninterrupted by a power glitch seems more important than ever. And today, it's even more possible than ever before, thanks to advanced energy technologies that can instantly rearrange electricity flows to areas hit by storms or other disturbances.

Distribution automation, also known as DA, refers to a powerful set of tools that includes automated sensors, communications systems and data analytics-enabling electric utilities to monitor power lines, field equipment and generation facilities in real time.

Equipped with these DA tools, Iowa's electric cooperatives can detect an outage and isolate it in real-time from their control rooms before sending out field crew to repair the damaged powerlines.

"Distribution automation helps electric co-ops deliver reliable, high-quality service to members when today's world demands it most," said Ravindra Singh, senior principal of DA for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

Some call DA a "self-healing electric grid" because its application, such as fault location, isolation and service restoration (FLISR), allows the network of power lines and substations to automatically reconfigure in response to disruptions.

How it works

When power lines are damaged or shortened by storms, critters or some disaster, DA systems can reroute electricity from the power source to unaffected infrastructure. This allows electric service to continue uninterrupted to a community that would otherwise suffer an outage.

With distributed automation technology and its analysis of network data, co-ops can see their system's assets, how they are operating and what energy resources are on their power lines to support better quality service and reliability.

Distribution automation devices installed on a power pole bolster reliability and help members stay powered even during storms.

Distributed automation can save electric co-ops and their members money by reducing inspection time for field apparatus such as transformers, substations and power lines.

DA not only has a hand in preventing outages, but this suite of technologies can save electric co-ops and their members money by reducing inspection time for field apparatuses such as transformers, substations and power lines.

With real-time field measurements from DA technologies, a co-op gains situational awareness of its electricity network and can minimize unnecessary maintenance activities, truck rolls and crew dispatches to examine lines, locate damage and make repairs.

"Power distribution grids are evolving from being a passive network to a more active network," said Singh. "With DA technology and its analysis of network data, co-ops can see their system's assets, how they are operating and what energy resources are on their power lines to support better quality service and reliability."

Knowledge is power

Without DA, a co-op may not know where electric vehicles, rooftop solar, residential batteries, generators and other distribution resources are being added or operated on its system by its members. This can be a challenge when it comes to managing peak demand and having to curtail energy to sustain reliability.

Electricity demand is only going to grow because of new types of loads such as data centers, crypto mining and EVs, according to any industry forecast. So, it makes sense for utilities to optimize the use of their existing infrastructure or equipment to keep costs in check.

With DA, electric co-ops can better manage and grow their systems and respond to crises safely and efficiently while their members enjoy reliable electricity without hiccups.

Cathy Cash writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

SAFETY PROGRAMS

At the top of the Access Energy Cooperative priorities is safety, and we are committed to safety education.

Safety Poster Contest – Win $100!

Applicants or groups of any age can showcase their creativity in our Safety Poster Contest, promoting awareness of electrical safety in fun and engaging ways. Twelve winners will be chosen from the contest entries to win $100.

Applications are accepted through March 31. Details can be found on our website at www.accessenergycoop.com or by calling our office at 866-242-4232.

Safety demonstrations

Our live line safety demonstrations offer interactive learning experiences that teach important lessons about the power – and potential danger – of electricity. The cooperative offers these demonstrations to middle school and high school students, as well as area emergency personnel, and other groups as requested. Contact our member services department for more information on scheduling a safety demonstration for your group. Safety education demonstrations are also available for elementary students by emailing contactus@accessenergycoop.com.

LIGHTED PARADE

Access Energy Cooperative was proud to participate in the 2025 Mount Pleasant holiday parade on Dec. 5.

THANK YOU!

Thank you to everyone who participated in the 2025 Holiday Gift Drive hosted by the employees of Access Energy Cooperative. Nonperishable items were collected in our office, Kim's Confections in West Point and the Fort Madison Chamber office. We appreciate their hosting a collection site. All items collected this year were donated to distribute to the Fort Madison Food Pantry.

Access Energy Cooperative
A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative
IOWA ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LIVING

The magazine for members of Iowa's electric cooperatives

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