

● DECEMBER 2025

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ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LIVING

Your guide to
smarter electronics

Christmas lights:
Candlelight to co-op power

Holiday appetizer recipes

Seeking candidates for PECO board of directors ▶ See Page 12

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ON THE COVER

Special thanks to Kim Scharfenkamp, a Southwest Iowa REC member-consumer, for supplying this month's cover image. Submit high-resolution photos for consideration to editor@ieclmagazine.com. You could receive \$100!

LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

BY JIM MILLER



By the time you read this column, the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives (IAEC) will have held its 2025 Annual

Meeting in West Des Moines with the theme of “Leading through Change.” And that’s the perfect phrase to describe my first year serving as IAEC board president.

Growing connections

I’ve been reflecting on what the trade association for Iowa’s locally owned and governed electric co-ops has accomplished in 2025, and we worked hard to engage with our member co-ops on new levels. For example, Leslie Kaufman, IAEC executive vice president and general manager, made it a priority to attend Iowa electric co-op board meetings and staff safety meetings across the state during her first year on the job. During these visits, she learned about our members’ priorities and challenges as our industry experiences rapid change.

Coordinated advocacy, united voice

I’m proud of how the statewide association engaged with our member co-ops during the 2025 Iowa Legislative Session as we advocated to safeguard electric service territory protections for the rural families, farms, businesses and communities we serve. We’re seeing more co-op board directors and co-op staff engage with their local legislators and other community leaders on this issue, and we were successful in changing the direction of proposed legislation that would have diminished Iowa’s long-standing service territory law.

When session ended in May, the statewide policy and advocacy

team rolled up their sleeves and developed a framework tool. It includes member input to analyze and define our statewide position on policy issues and aid in prioritizing resources to accomplish advocacy objectives. This tool will help our statewide staff work proactively on behalf of Iowa’s electric cooperatives as we lead through change.

We have built incredible momentum in 2025 that will propel us to the start of the 2026 Legislative Session next month. We anticipate another active session of challenges to the proven cooperative business model of self-governance and member ownership. IAEC will continue to unify and leverage the voices of board directors, employees and other member-consumers of Iowa’s electric cooperatives to advocate for safe, affordable, reliable and sustainable

power. We embrace leadership from all levels of our membership as we work with key stakeholders on local, state and federal tiers.

A focus on co-op members

Now is the time to lead through change, and we will have ample opportunities to do so in the electric utility industry. It all points back to our electric cooperative purpose and our collective mission: to power lives and empower communities. Because electric co-ops are owned by the members we serve, our focus is always on you.

It has been an honor and a privilege to serve as your statewide board president this year. I wish you and your family a blessed holiday season and a prosperous 2026.

Jim Miller is the board president of the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives.

EDITOR'S CHOICE CONTEST

WIN A SMART BIRD FEEDER

The 2K HD camera on this smart bird feeder captures the vibrant colors and behaviors of every bird at your feeder. Every detail is recorded with crystal-clear clarity. Receive instant notification whenever birds are detected. Note: Some advanced AI features require a subscription, and new users get a 30-day free trial.

If you don't subscribe, core functions like live viewing and sharing still work as usual. For more details, visit www.ieclmagazine.com/editors-choice-contest.

Visit our website and win!

Enter this month's contest by visiting www.ieclmagazine.com no later than Dec. 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 **Les Elgin**, a **Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative** member-consumer.

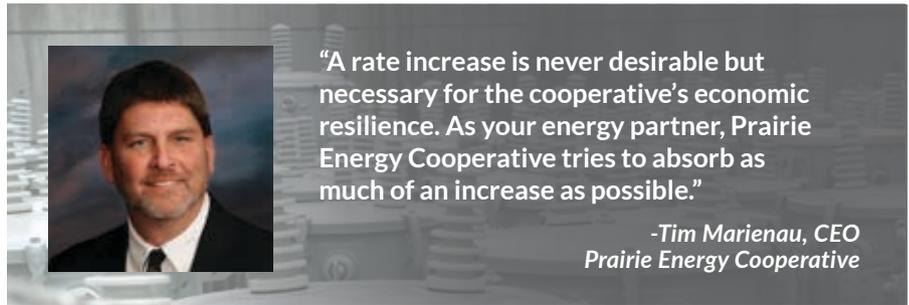


ENTER ONLINE BY DEC. 31!

RIISING POWER COSTS CONTINUE TO IMPACT PECO

Like almost everything else in our world's current economy, global energy markets continue to be under stress. Because wholesale energy costs will be higher as 2026 progresses, the Prairie Energy Cooperative's (PECO) board of directors will be approving a rate increase for our membership. The increase equates to an average of about 10% for all members – residential, irrigation, commercial and industrial. The average cost increases will vary with each member's monthly usage.

The 2026 increase is due to a combination of reasons, including rising costs in prices to generate, transmit and distribute electricity, and in supplies and equipment. Both PECO's generation and transmission cooperatives (Corn Belt Power Cooperative and Basin Electric Power Cooperative) are experiencing significant increases in the costs of fuel, equipment, transportation, and maintenance of plants and transmission lines. These



"A rate increase is never desirable but necessary for the cooperative's economic resilience. As your energy partner, Prairie Energy Cooperative tries to absorb as much of an increase as possible."

*-Tim Marienau, CEO
Prairie Energy Cooperative*

amount to more than 70% of the total expenses for PECO. With increases in both energy and demand charges passed along to PECO, the co-op's power costs will soar by over 10% this year, with additional increases scheduled for the next several years.

Additionally, expenses related to required distribution equipment such as wire, transformers, conductor, poles and vehicles continue to rise due to tariffs, inflation and supply chain issues. In some cases, prices for equipment have risen over 300%. The cost of PECO's inventory on hand has increased by three times just in the last two years.

"A rate increase is never desirable but necessary for the cooperative's economic resilience," said PECO CEO Tim Marienau. "We understand these are extremely difficult times with inflation and the costs of all goods and services rising. As your energy partner, we try to absorb as much of an increase as possible."

However, the increases to PECO this year, and those expected in the future, are so large that the cooperative is unable to absorb the full amounts, Marienau said.

"We realize a rate adjustment at this time will be difficult for some of our members, and we will do all we



**Prairie Energy
Cooperative**

A Touchstone Energy Cooperative



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Website: www.prairieenergy.coop

This institution is an equal opportunity provider
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WINTER CLOSURES

Prairie Energy Cooperative will be closed the following days:

- **Friday, Dec. 12: All-day safety meeting**
- **Wednesday, Dec. 24 and Thursday, Dec. 25: Christmas**
- **Thursday, Jan. 1: New Year's Day**



can to assist with energy efficiency, conservation and rebates,” he added.

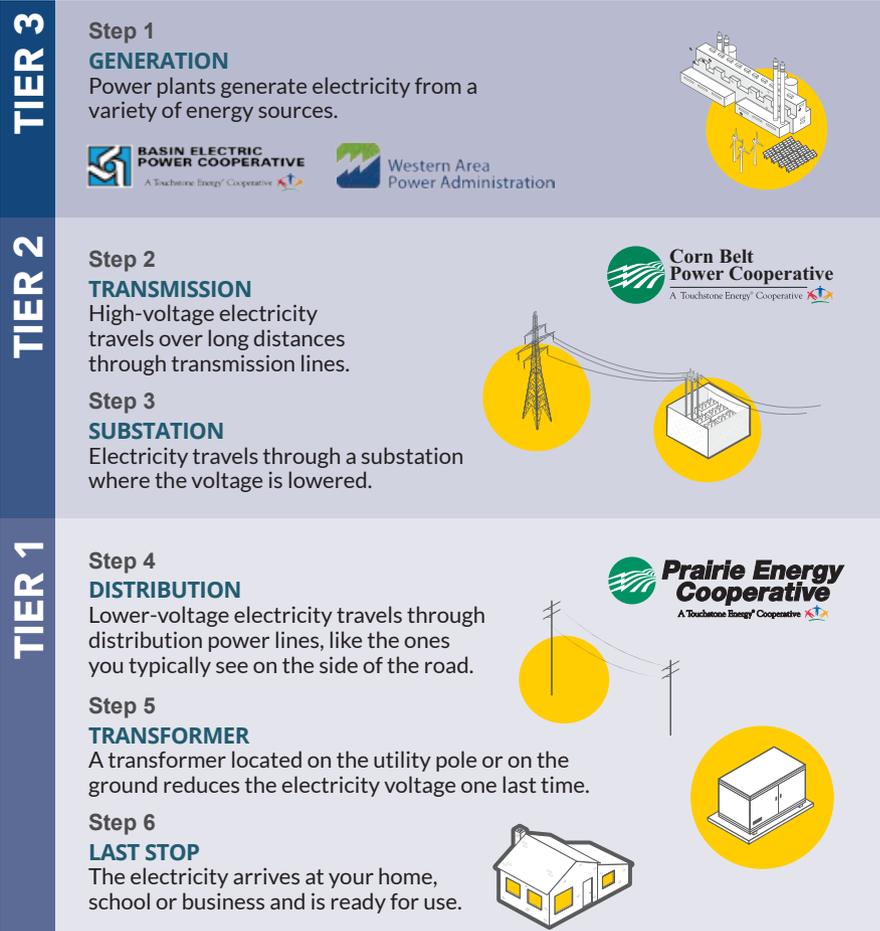
In addition, the co-op is reviewing other options to help with the rate increases, including:

- Building financial reserves to soften the 2026 rate increase.
- Finding smarter, more efficient ways to operate without adding to our fixed expenses.
- Reviewing how much is spent in rebuilding electric distribution lines on an annual basis without impacting reliable service.
- Reimplementation of the energy cost adjustment on monthly bills.

“The delivery of safe, reliable and affordable energy to PECO members is paramount,” Marienau said. “Continuing to do so, as well as upgrading and maintaining our infrastructure and keeping the co-op financially sound, means that we must regularly review our rates and implement adjustments if they are needed.”

If you have questions, please contact PECO at 515-532-2805.

HOW THE POWER GRID ALL CONNECTS

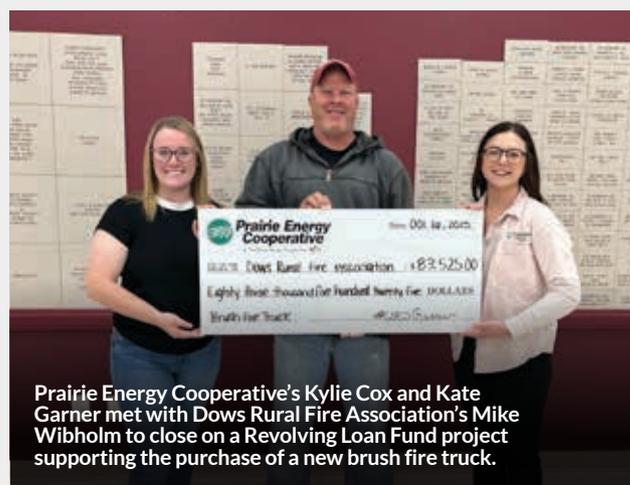


REVOLVING LOAN FUND HELPS DOWS FIREFIGHTERS REPLACE LOST TRUCK

Prairie Energy Cooperative (PECO) is proud to support the Dows Rural Fire Association through our Revolving Loan Fund program. The association used the funds to help purchase a new brush fire truck after their previous vehicle was totaled in an accident.

The Dows Rural Fire Association serves the City of Dows, Vernon Township, Blaine Township and parts of Wall Lake Township in Wright County, as well as most of Morgan and Oakland Townships and the City of Popejoy in Franklin County. Formed in 1998, the association is made up of 20 dedicated volunteer firefighters who provide essential emergency services to their rural communities.

PECO’s Revolving Loan Fund was established to promote community and economic development in our service area.



Prairie Energy Cooperative’s Kylie Cox and Kate Garner met with Dows Rural Fire Association’s Mike Wibholm to close on a Revolving Loan Fund project supporting the purchase of a new brush fire truck.

Through this program, the co-op can provide low-interest loans to local organizations and businesses that strengthen and improve the communities we serve.

We are honored to help local organizations like the Dows Rural Fire Association continue their mission of serving and protecting our members and neighbors.



YOUR GUIDE TO SMARTER ELECTRONICS

BY SCOTT FLOOD

Wouldn't it be great to wake up on a sunny morning, say "Good morning, house!," and stand back as the right light fixtures flash on, the coffee maker starts, the outdoor security lighting switches off and the toaster oven starts preheating for your frozen toaster pastry? That may sound like something from science fiction, but today's smart home electronics make it possible.

Smart devices use digital technology and Wi-Fi to take your home to a new level of convenience and comfort. They can also help you

make better use of your electricity so you can reduce waste and lower your energy bills.

Even if you've already put the many advantages of smart electronics to work for your home and family, you might be surprised by some of the newer devices with the potential to change your daily life.

Smart thermostats

Heating and cooling use more energy than anything else in your home. Replacing your home's standard thermostat with a smart model can lower your monthly electric

bills while keeping you even more comfortable. Smart thermostats learn your daily habits and take over for you. You won't have to lower your thermostat every evening, because it will happen automatically. Because smart thermostats know exactly when you need electricity and when you don't, they waste a lot less.

Smart appliances

The second-biggest share of your home's electricity powers appliances, from your refrigerator to your water heater. Smart appliances use Wi-Fi and high-tech sensors to operate

more efficiently. A smart washer can sense the size of your load and adjust the water and cycle times accordingly. Smart refrigerators can warn you when the kids leave the door open. And smart water heaters don't waste energy by heating water while you're asleep.

Smart plugs and power strips

An easy and affordable way to explore smart technology is with smart plugs, which plug into your wall outlets. You can then plug lighting, appliances and other devices directly into them. You'll be able to control all those devices through a single app, so you can tell the coffeemaker when to start brewing, turn your exterior accent lighting off at dawn or have your favorite music already streaming as you walk in the door.

Smart power strips look like their ordinary cousins but use smart plugs. They're particularly helpful at eliminating waste caused by

what's known as "phantom load" – like leaving your phone charger plugged in when it's not charging.

Smart shades

You wish your family room didn't face south, because it's always warm during the day. Smart shades and blinds can help. You can set them to automatically open or close depending on the time of day (and year) or based on your home's indoor temperature. They can help your air conditioner keep you cooler for less.

Smart assistants

When you combine the capabilities of individual smart home electronics with voice assistants like Amazon Alexa or whole-home smart energy management systems, they become even more powerful. You can teach voice assistants to carry out multiple tasks that make up your daily routines, like the "good morning, house" message. Energy management systems simplify control

of all aspects of your home's energy use, and some offer specific tips to help you save even more.

Be smart with your smart devices

While all those smart devices may be able to make your home more energy efficient and your life more comfortable, they're not perfect. Most require an internet connection, so if your service is down, your smart devices won't work, either.

Smart devices typically don't receive frequent system updates like your smartphone or laptop, so be aware of potential security issues. Before you choose a smart home device, make sure it's completely secure and compatible with what you have. Then prepare to be amazed by what smart home electronics will do for you!

Scott Flood writes on a variety of energy-related topics for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.



When you combine the capabilities of individual smart home electronics with voice assistants like Amazon Alexa or whole-home smart energy management systems, they become even more powerful.



Replacing your home's standard thermostat with a smart model can lower your monthly electric bills while keeping you even more comfortable.



Smart appliances use Wi-Fi and high-tech sensors to operate more efficiently. Photo Source: Samsung



Holiday

APPETIZERS

CRANBERRY FETA ROLL-UPS

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup dried sweetened cranberries
- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup feta, crumbled (not reduced fat)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup green onion, diced
- 2 large tortillas, spinach or wheat flavor

Combine all ingredients except for tortillas. Lay tortillas out flat. Divide ingredients between the two tortillas and spread all the way to the edge. Roll tortillas up tightly, wrap in plastic and refrigerate for at least 1 hour. Trim ends of roll slightly, then cut each roll into 12 slices. These can be made one day ahead of time and sliced before serving. *Yields 24 slices*

Mary Ellen Metzger • Rockwell City
Calhoun County Electric Cooperative Association

MEATLOAF APPETIZERS

- 2 slices bread
- 2 pounds hamburger
- 1 pound sausage
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons onion, chopped
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup milk, approximately
- bacon
- barbecue sauce, optional

Break bread into small pieces. Mix bread pieces in a dish with hamburger, sausage, eggs and onion. Add milk and use fork to moisten hamburger mixture, add more milk as needed. Shape mixture into balls, wrap in bacon and seal ends of bacon with toothpicks. Bake at 350 degrees F for 1 hour, then add barbecue sauce to half or all, if desired. Return to oven for 15 minutes, or until hot.

Susan Ausborn • Ventura
Prairie Energy Cooperative

CHICKEN NUT ROLL

- 1 12.5-ounce can chicken
- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened
- 3 tablespoons green onion, diced
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 tablespoon Hidden Valley Ranch dry seasoning
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup walnuts, chopped, divided
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 2 tablespoons pimentos, well drained, optional
- crackers

Mix all ingredients, except crackers, using half of the walnuts. Form mixture into a log, star or Christmas tree shape. Sprinkle remaining walnuts over top of mixture. Refrigerate for 4 hours, or overnight. Serve with crackers. *Serves 6-8*

Nancy Anderson • Ankeny
Prairie Energy Cooperative

HANKY PANKY'S

- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 pound spicy pork sausage
- 1 pound Velveeta cheese
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon oregano
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon garlic salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon pepper
- 2 packages party rye bread

Brown meat and drain. Add cheese, stir until melted, then add seasonings. Spread on rye bread. Bake at 350 degrees F until brown, approximately 10-15 minutes. *Serves 10-15*

Michael Treiber • Battle Creek
North West Rural Electric Cooperative

GINGERBREAD CHEESECAKE DIP

- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese, softened
- ¼ cup dark brown sugar, packed
- 2 tablespoons whole milk
- ¾ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
- ⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 1½ cups whipped cream sprinkles, optional
- gingerbread cookies

In a large bowl, beat cream cheese until smooth. Add brown sugar, milk, cinnamon, vanilla, ginger, nutmeg and salt. Beat until smooth and combined. Add whipped cream and gently fold to combine. Transfer dip to a serving bowl and top with sprinkles, if desired. Serve with gingerbread cookies.

Marilyn O'Brien • Geneva
Franklin Rural Electric Cooperative

HAM-WRAPPED OLIVE SHRIMP

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1½ teaspoons lemon zest
- 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- ¾ teaspoon dried crushed red pepper
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 30 large raw shrimp, peeled (about 1 pound)
- 10 deli ham slices, thinly sliced
- 30 pimento-stuffed Spanish olives

In a large bowl, whisk together the first five ingredients. Add shrimp and toss to coat. Cover and chill for 30 minutes. Preheat broiler with oven rack 5½ inches from heat. Cut each ham slice into three lengthwise strips. Wrap each strip around one shrimp and one olive, secure with a wooden toothpick. Place wrapped shrimp on a large, lightly greased baking sheet. Repeat process with remaining ham, shrimp and olives. Broil 3 minutes on each side or until each shrimp turns pink. Arrange appetizers on a serving platter and serve hot. These can be made ahead and refrigerated, then broiled just before serving. *Yields 30 appetizers*

Kary Blunk • Russell
Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative, Inc.

SAUSAGE WONTONS

- 12 wonton wrappers
- 1 pound ground sausage, crumbled
- 1 teaspoon seasoned salt
- 1½ cups cheddar cheese, shredded
- 1½ cups Monterey jack cheese, shredded
- 1 cup buttermilk ranch dressing
- ¼ cup green pepper, chopped
- ¼ cup red pepper, chopped

Lightly grease a 12-cup muffin tin. Press one wonton wrapper in each muffin cup. Bake at 350 degrees F for 5 minutes, until lightly browned. Remove and let cool on cookie sheet. In a skillet over medium heat, brown ground sausage and seasoned salt. Drain grease from sausage. In a bowl, combine sausage with cheddar cheese, Monterey jack cheese, ranch dressing and peppers. Mix with spatula until combined. Fill each cooked wonton with mixture and place in muffin pan. Bake at 350 degrees F for 5-6 minutes. *Serves 12*

Julie Allison • Marshalltown
Consumers Energy

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



SAUSAGE CHEESE BALLS

- 2 packages Jimmy Dean Sausage, uncooked
- 1 16-ounce package shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 1½ cups all-purpose baking biscuit mix
- ½ cup celery, finely chopped
- ½ cup onion, finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- barbecue sauce, optional

Mix first six ingredients together and form into 1-inch balls. Bake on a cookie sheet at 375 degrees F for 15 minutes, or until golden brown. They can be served with barbecue sauce in a slow cooker on low. *Yields 6 dozen, approximately*

Karen Caldwell • Albia
Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative, Inc.

SIMPLE BACON CHEESE BALL

- 2 8-ounce packages cream cheese, softened
- ⅓ cup sour cream
- 8 ounces cheddar cheese, shredded
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- pepper, to taste
- bacon bits

Mix all ingredients, except bacon bits, together until smooth. Shape into a ball and chill for 1 hour, then roll in bacon bits. Wrap in plastic wrap and chill until ready to serve. *Serves 15-20*

Rebecca Hancox • Plano
Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative, Inc.

WANTED:

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THE REWARD:

\$25 FOR EVERY
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Deadline is Dec. 31

From egg bakes and casseroles to cinnamon rolls and power bowls – we want your best **breakfast and brunch recipes!**

Recipes will appear in our April issue. Please include your name, address, telephone number, co-op name, recipe category and number of servings on all submissions.

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Iowa Electric Cooperative Living magazine
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Des Moines, IA 50322



HOLIDAY LIGHTS: CANDLELIGHT TO CO-OP POWER

How Christmas lights and rural electrification brought warmth, color and connection to Iowa homes

BY SAFE ELECTRICITY AND ANN FOSTER THELEN

Long before electricity, people brightened the dark winter months with firelight, from the burning of the Yule log to candles placed around the home. The first recorded candlelit Christmas trees appeared in Germany in 1660 and eventually spread across Europe, reaching the U.S. later in the century.

While the glow of the candles was festive, it also posed a serious fire hazard, so the light could only be enjoyed for a short time.

A revolutionary spark

While Thomas Edison invented the incandescent light bulb in 1879, it was his colleague Edward H. Johnson who created the first electric Christmas tree lights in 1882. He hand-wired 80 colored bulbs around a revolving tree in his parlor, all powered by a generator.

Johnson's lights were ahead of their time, as electricity was not yet routinely available and electric lights were considered expensive. President Grover Cleveland and his wife First Lady Frances Cleveland helped boost acceptance in the 1890s when the White House Christmas tree was illuminated with colored bulbs to delight their young daughters.

The tradition of outdoor light displays, now associated with driving around to view beautifully lit homes and elaborate light shows, began in North America. This expansion was made possible by the development of safe outdoor Christmas light bulbs and light strings in the 1920s.

Lighting up Iowa's countryside

In Iowa, rural homes didn't see the glow of electric Christmas lights until the 1930s and 1940s, when

rural electric cooperatives began bringing power to farms and small towns. Before then, kerosene lamps and candles offered only a modest holiday shimmer. When electricity finally reached the countryside, families could string colorful bulbs for the first time, a symbol not just of celebration but of progress.



The arrival of electric lights brought a new kind of warmth to rural winters, brightening long nights and connecting communities across the state.

LEDs, smart displays and sustainability

Every holiday season, millions of light sets brighten homes across the country. From twinkling displays set to music to TV favorites like ABC's "The Great Christmas Light Fight," modern holiday lighting turns neighborhoods into dazzling shows filled with festive moments when we flip the switch and watch them glow.

Christmas lights have come a long way. Today's LED lights shine brighter than ever, creating beautiful displays while using less energy and lasting longer. LED light strings use about 80-90% less electricity than traditional incandescent bulbs and can last up to 25 times longer. They also stay cooler to the touch, reducing fire risks, and their shatter-resistant lenses make them safer and easier to handle.

Many communities now offer recycling programs for old light strings, and energy-efficient options make it easy to decorate responsibly. For electric cooperatives, encouraging LED lighting is part of an ongoing effort to help members save energy and money while keeping the season bright.



Behind the bulbs: The technology of light

From the first incandescent filaments to today's smart LEDs controlled by phone apps, holiday lighting has mirrored the evolution of electric power itself. The same current that once revolutionized rural life now drives innovation in energy efficiency and smart home technology.

Many electric cooperatives are helping members explore these new frontiers, from real-time usage tools and rebates for efficient lighting to systems that make homes brighter and more connected. Each advance continues the story of illumination that began more than a century

ago, when light first connected homes to the wider world.

A brighter tomorrow

As we look to the future, Christmas lights remain a shining reminder of how far we've come, from candlelight to clean, efficient energy. Each twinkle tells a story of innovation, cooperation and community spirit. Across Iowa and beyond, those bright strands remind us that even in the darkest winter nights, we have the power to bring warmth and wonder to the world around us.

Article by Safe Electricity with supplemental content provided by Ann Foster Thelen, editor of Iowa Electric Cooperative Living.



SEEKING CANDIDATES FOR TWO POSITIONS ON THE PECO BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Prairie Energy Cooperative (PECO) is a member-owned cooperative governed by a board of directors that you elect. As a member, one of your most important roles is to participate in the election of directors, and you can become more involved in your co-op by serving on that board.

Two positions on PECO's seven-member board of directors will be open for election in 2026. The three-year terms of Ryan Eekhoff, District 2, and Marion Denger, District 5, will expire.

District 2 townships: Buffalo, Bingham, Wesley, Orthel, Britt, Garfield, Prairie, Boone, Erin and Liberty townships

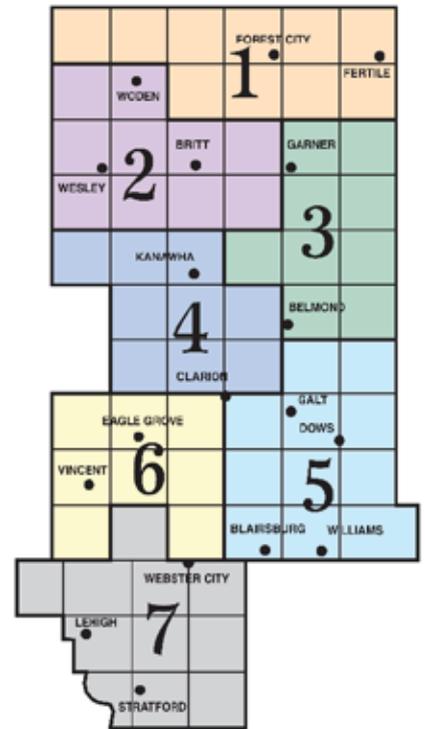
District 5 townships: Iowa, Scott, Lincoln, Blaine, Morgan, Wall Lake, Vernon, Oakland, Blairsburg, Williams and Alden townships

Board member qualifications

To qualify, candidates must be PECO members receiving electricity in the townships listed. In conjunction with these requirements, a board member is expected to attend the monthly board meetings, generally held on the last Tuesday of each month, and various information and training meetings throughout the year. Because the board of directors is responsible for establishing the policies and rates under which the cooperative operates, it is important that directors can devote adequate time to these activities.

To learn more about director requirements and expectations, visit our website at www.prairieenergy.coop.

If you are a member in either district and are interested in serving on the board of directors, call the co-op office at 515-532-2805.



BASIN ELECTRIC SCHOLARSHIP OPPORTUNITY

Each year, Basin Electric Power Cooperative – Prairie Energy Cooperative's wholesale power supplier – offers a \$1,000 scholarship to support local students pursuing higher education.

This scholarship represents an investment in the future of our rural communities. Recipients are chosen based on academic achievement, leadership, community involvement, work experience, and their educational and career goals.

Funds must be used toward college expenses, and recipients must be enrolled in a college program for the upcoming fall semester.

High school seniors and current college students are encouraged to apply. Applications are available on our website at www.prairieenergy.coop or by contacting our office at 515-532-2805.



The application deadline is Feb. 20, 2026.

WATER HEATER WOES

BY MIRANDA BOUTELLE

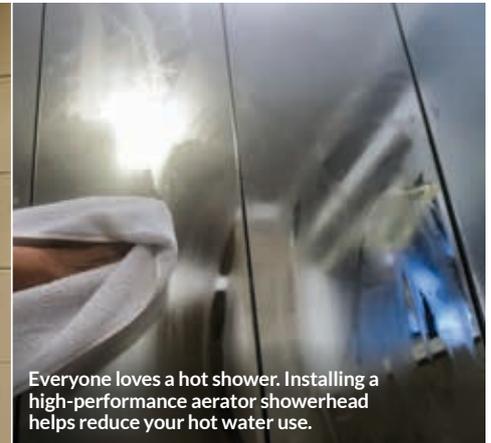
We've all gotten used to having reliable hot water in our homes. Nobody wants to get caught off guard with an unexpected cold shower or failed water heater. I tend to live in the "if it isn't broken, don't fix it" school of thought, but a failed water heater can cause damage to your home and property. Emergency replacement of a water heater can add unnecessary cost, not to mention inconvenience. Evening or weekend replacement or repair can lead to higher costs charged by a plumbing company.

Here are four signs that your storage water heater might be approaching the end of its life.

- 1 Age.** The typical lifespan of a storage water heater is 10 to 15 years, according to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). If your water heater is older than that, plan to replace it soon. Don't have records of when it was installed? No problem. Find the serial number on the water heater's sticker or metal plate. Look up the serial number online or call the manufacturer to find its age.
- 2 Leakage.** Sediment or water on the floor or at the bottom of the water heater could mean its days are numbered. Sediment can be a sign of corrosion, which leads to a leak or failure.
- 3 Discolored water.** Seeing rusty or discolored water when you turn on your faucets can be a sign the tank is rusting inside. If water is not getting as hot as it used to, it could be a sign of a failing electric element or a gas burner not functioning properly.
- 4 Noises.** Odd noises could indicate an issue with the components. If you're hearing unusual noises from your water heater, schedule a checkup with a plumber. Well-functioning water



If your water heater is 10 to 15 years old, it's time to start planning and budgeting for a replacement.



Everyone loves a hot shower. Installing a high-performance aerator showerhead helps reduce your hot water use.



Be aware of your water heater's age and performance to avoid emergency replacement and damage to your home.

heaters typically don't make much noise. A professional plumber may be able to replace failing components. If you are having issues with the tank itself, it's likely time for a new unit.

If you're in the market for a new water heater, a heat pump water heater might be a good fit for your home. These systems are two to three times more energy efficient than conventional electric-powered tank water heaters, according to the DOE. A federal tax credit is available until Dec. 31. You can claim 30% of the project cost, up to a maximum of \$2,000, for the installation of an ENERGY STAR® heat pump water heater. If your water heater is past its useful life or showing any signs of failure, consider investing in a new one before the end of the year. You might also be eligible for rebates or incentives from your electric cooperative.

Even if your water heater is in great shape, you can save at home by lowering your hot water use. Some easy ways to do this are washing laundry in cold water and installing high-performance aerators on faucets and showerheads to reduce the amount of hot water you use. If you have time-of-use rates, you can save by installing a timer on your water heater to prevent it from operating during peak energy use hours, typically in the mornings and evenings. It also helps lower the strain on your electric cooperative.

Knowing the signs of water heater failure can save you from home damage and offer opportunities to explore options for more efficient equipment to lower your electric use.

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

2026 MOMENTUM IS BUILDING CONFERENCE DETAILS

Iowa builders and contractors are invited to discover the latest advancements in energy efficiency technologies at the **2026 Momentum is Building Conference**, set for Feb. 19-20 at the Sheraton in West Des Moines.

The annual conference offers opportunities for contractors to earn continuing education units (CEUs) in Iowa's plumbing/mechanical, HVAC and electrical codes. Attendees will also have the chance to network with industry peers, learn from leading experts in energy efficiency and the building trades, and gain insights into current energy efficiency regulations and incentives.

Sponsored by the Iowa Cooperatives for Energy Efficiency, the annual Momentum is Building Conference connects Iowa's construction industry with the services and resources provided by local electric cooperatives, which serve nearly 650,000 Iowans across all 99 counties.

"Electric cooperatives have long supported energy efficiency, and one of our key goals is to help member-consumers use energy wisely," said Angela Catton, vice president of communications and development at Northwest Iowa Power Cooperative. "We invest in this conference to build relationships between cooperatives and the contractors who serve our members."

Lineup of speakers, educators

The conference kicks off with Justin Wilson from Construction Instruction as the keynote.

"Wilson, who spoke in 2013, will discuss current policies, technologies, and consumer trends affecting home building and remodeling," shared Ryan Cornelius, vice president of corporate relations at Corn Belt Power Cooperative.



Annual energy efficiency conference for Iowa builders, contractors and HVAC professionals.

Feb. 19-20, 2026
Sheraton West Des Moines

www.MomentumIsBuilding.com



The conference also welcomes back Bill McAnnally, who can be heard monthly on Iowa Public Radio's "Talk of Iowa - Home Improvement Day." CEU providers, Dave Sullivan (electrical), Terry Moorman and Jeff Reichart (PMSB), who have been long-time partners and presenters at the conference, will return to offer their specialized training to attendees.

The conference will close with Kenyon Murray on Friday, Feb. 20. Kenyon is the CEO of Murray Legacy Management and the business manager to his sons, Kris and Keegan, who play in the NBA. He is a host of "The Leave Your Legacy Show" and became a Certified Professional Life Coach. In his session, attendees will be introduced to a simple and digestible way to embrace personal growth. The goal is to share tools for creating a

systematic personal routine that can impact their lives at multiple levels.

A long-standing resource

For almost 35 years, the Momentum is Building Conference has provided a platform for electric cooperatives and contractors to collaborate in delivering safe, efficient and cost-effective home comfort solutions to Iowans.

Don't miss this chance to stay ahead of the curve in energy efficiency and enhance your professional skills. For more information or to register for the 2026 Momentum is Building Conference, visit www.MomentumIsBuilding.com.

Discounted Early Bird registration runs until Monday, Jan. 19.

GIVING GIFTS FROM THE HEART

BY DARCY DOUGHERTY MAULSBY

When you were a kid, what was your favorite toy for Christmas? Farm toys top the list for Nolan Toomsen.

While Nolan lives on a farm near Geneva in Franklin County, his mom, Erin (Frank) Toomsen, is from Lake City, my hometown. When I visited with Nolan this fall during his Grandma Rita's birthday party, I asked if he wants to be a farmer when he grows up. "I'm a farmer right now," stated Nolan, who celebrated his 5th birthday in early January 2025 with a Pioneer Seed-themed party.

Then I asked Erin about Nolan's accident on Jan. 28, 2025. Erin was at work (she's a kindergarten prep teacher in Hampton), and the Toomsen's older kids were at school. Just a typical Tuesday.

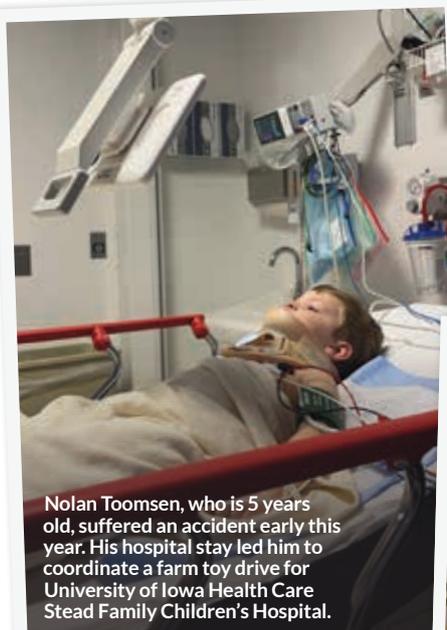
Nolan wasn't feeling well that morning, however, and needed to go home. His dad Tyler took Nolan and his little brother Brody, 2 (who was also home, since daycare wasn't open), along to do farm chores. Around this time, a fluke accident left Nolan unresponsive. He was rushed by ambulance to Franklin General Hospital in Hampton. Then Life Flight whisked him to the University of Iowa Health Care Stead Family Children's Hospital in Iowa City. The medical team ran a CT scan and an MRI on Nolan, who suffered strained neck muscles.

Turning compassion into action

After a short stay, Nolan returned home wearing a cervical collar. "I really liked it when I finally got to take it off," Nolan told me. "I burned it."

Despite his quick recovery, Nolan couldn't quit thinking about something that troubled him about the Children's Hospital. They only had two toy tractors, several wagons and an odd assortment of farm animals, including a dolphin. (Don't get Nolan started about how silly this is.)

"Nolan told me he wanted to donate some of his farm toys to the Children's



Nolan Toomsen, who is 5 years old, suffered an accident early this year. His hospital stay led him to coordinate a farm toy drive for University of Iowa Health Care Stead Family Children's Hospital.

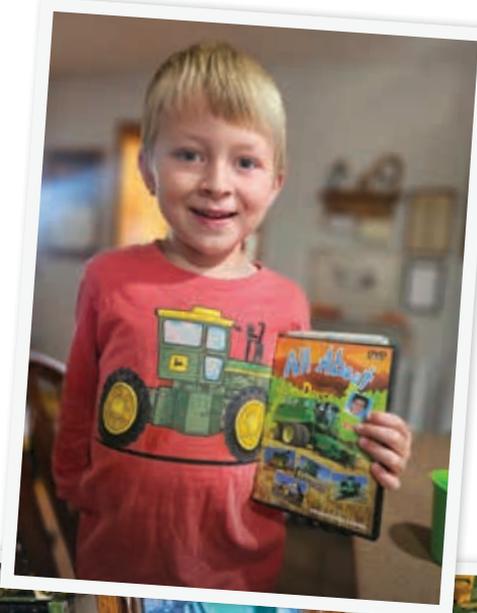
Hospital for other kids who have to go there," Erin said. He also wanted her to write a letter for him, which she posted on her Facebook page in mid-May.

The letter read: "Do you want to give me some money to buy more tractors for the Iowa City Hospital because the ones they had weren't very good. From Nolan."

Checks and electronic money transfers via Venmo started pouring in from friends, family and strangers. Nolan received more than \$3,000 from more than 200 different donors. Combined with significant discounts from the businesses he purchased from, Nolan was able to donate about \$5,000 worth of farm toys.

The joy of giving

On delivery day (Aug. 15), the Toomsen family filled the back of their Ford Expedition with toys from John Deere, Case IH, Little Buster Toys and Big Country Toys. When I asked Nolan if it was hard for him to part with any of them, he admitted he really liked a CASE IH harvest equipment set. "But I'd paint it green if it were mine," he emphasized.



Nolan is pictured with some of the farm toys he donated to the hospital.

"We know that these carefully selected toys will help brighten the day of many farm-loving kids who are facing battles in the hospital," said Erin, who added Nolan has always had a kind heart. "We can't thank everyone enough for helping Nolan give back."

The toys have been well received by pediatric patients of all ages, reports Sheri Austin, supervisor, concierge services & Rossi Lodging Program, for University of Iowa Health Care.

"Thank you, Nolan, and your family and community, for generously donating high-quality farm toys to the Stead Family Children's Hospital. Your thoughtful gift has brought joy to children from across Iowa," she said

As we celebrate the priceless gift of a child during this Christmas season, never forget that the greatest gifts are never wrapped in paper, but in love.

Darcy Dougherty Maulsby lives near her family's Century Farm northwest of Lake City. Visit her at www.darcymaulsby.com.



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