

InTouch

WITH MEMBERS OF PRAIRIE ENERGY COOPERATIVE

October 2021 Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



Change is on the horizon at Prairie Energy

The existing office and warehouse buildings have been part of our history since Wright County REC moved from downtown Clarion in 1986. In 2001, Hancock County REC and Wright County REC merged to create Prairie Energy Cooperative (PECO).

For many years, employees worked out of multiple facilities until the fall of 2017 when the board of directors approved the sale of the former Hancock County REC facility in Garner. Since then, all administrative employees have worked in Clarion, and in 2018 a new service center was built in our Touchstone Energy Industrial Park in Garner where it houses the linemen and operations staff that keep the lights on for the members in our northern counties.

The Clarion facilities have withstood many changes over the years. Increased PECO load and membership growth have caused us to outgrow our current facilities. We find ourselves needing more space in order to house our employees and to continue providing the excellent service our members have grown accustomed to.

So, what is on the horizon? The

board of directors gave approval to relocate all Clarion personnel to the Clarion

Industrial Park. In 2005, PECO and Corn Belt Power Cooperative purchased land to promote economic development and built a speculative building to entice businesses into the area. Over the years, businesses have occupied all but two lots and the spec building remains available.

Prairie Energy will take full ownership of the remaining property and the spec building. Customization of the existing building with an addition of a new warehouse and pole yard will create the safe, efficient work environment that PECO has been striving for. New security measures will also be added in order to protect our employees, equipment, infrastructure, materials, and much more.

"The needs of the cooperative have changed. We have outgrown our facilities and our employees' health and safety are the most important to us," states Tim Marienau, CEO. "As an employer, Prairie Energy needs to provide facilities that



promote safe and healthy environments as well as physical workspaces that can have a significant impact on the well-being, mental health, and productivity of our employees."

Consolidating locations and improving the workplace will increase efficiency as we build modern facilities. Technology is also driving the creation of a more efficient, sustainable, and productive workplace for the cooperative. Downsizing from two facilities in Clarion to one will also decrease costs.

Watch for further details in the months to come as we work on building designs, costs, and timelines, and so on. We look forward to sharing updates with our members!

IUB inspections at Prairie Energy

Prairie Energy representatives Erin Baker, operations assistant, and Butch Norem, director of operations/engineering, met with Iowa Utilities Board inspectors to perform an annual review of your co-operative's Inspection and Maintenance (I & M) program.

The in-office review of records is followed up with spot field inspections by IUB inspectors. The co-op's I & M program identifies any code issues, followed up with necessary repairs. The goal is a continued safe environment for the general public as well as employees.



Shoo away vampires this Halloween

Little ghosts, goblins, and princesses are a welcome sight on Halloween night. But beware of the vampire lurking inside your home.

You could be paying for vampire energy—electricity that leaks from your appliances, computers, and entertainment systems—if you leave them plugged in even when they’re turned off.

Any cord that is plugged into an electrical outlet draws electricity. So if you leave your mobile phone charger plugged in after you’ve removed the phone or you leave your computer and scanner plugged in after you shut down for the evening, you could be wasting—and paying for—unused energy.

Most people leave electronics plugged in all the time because it’s convenient to be able to turn them on without having to plug them in again and again, day after day. The worst offenders are “remote-ready” appliances, like computers, cable boxes, stereos, TVs, microwave ovens, garage door openers, and video game consoles.

As long as they’re plugged in, they remain in a “ready” state so they don’t have to wake up or warm up when you turn them on.

That can cost you between \$165 and \$440 per year in wasted electricity, depending on how many devices you have.

A tip: Invest in a high-quality power strip—one that will sacrifice itself during a power surge rather than letting the surge ruin the appliance. Plug multiple items into the power strip and unplug the strip before bedtime. That’s easier than unplugging and replugging lots of appliances.

A caution: Don’t overload your home’s electrical circuits by plugging too many appliances into a single power strip. Especially if you live in an older home, consult an electrician about how much of an electrical load your single outlets can handle.



SmartHub: Your online bill pay option and more

SmartHub offers:

- Payment scheduling that notifies our billing department that you have scheduled your payment
- Automatic bill payment management—sign up or make changes
- New bill notification
- Daily or monthly usage and billing history information
- Contact Us option

Access SmartHub through the app for iOS or Android or through our website.

Sign up today and check out all that SmartHub has to offer! As always, call us if you have questions.

RECare: Members helping members

Your rural electric cooperative has always extended a helping hand to those needing it. In response to actions by the Iowa General Assembly, your REC has established RECare, a program of members helping members.

RECare will provide funds to be distributed by local community action agencies to help pay winter heating bills and to assist in weatherization of homes of low-income consumers.

You may make a one-time contribution or a monthly pledge that will be automatically added onto your monthly electric bill. Even a dollar a month pledge will help others. **You have the power to make a difference.**

RECare Consumer Authorization Form

- I will contribute \$_____ per month. I understand this amount will be automatically added to my monthly electric bill.
- I will make a one-time contribution of \$_____ to RECare. My check is enclosed.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Account Number _____



Return to your local Touchstone Energy® Cooperative



Protecting water pipes? Use heat tape with care

Below-zero temperatures can cause pipes to freeze and burst, resulting in a huge mess and expensive repairs. One way to help prevent pipes from bursting is to use heat tape, a product that uses electricity to generate heat.

Although not adhesive, heat "tape" acts as a heating pad for exposed pipes. There are two installation methods. The first, and less common, method is when the tape is hardwired to a home's electrical system and has its own breaker(s). In this case, the tape should be installed by a licensed contractor.

The second installation method uses heat tape that plugs directly into a GFCI (ground fault circuit interrupter) outlet. This type of tape typically allows you to control the temperature.

If you are considering installing heat tape, extra care should be taken.

- Due to its potential to overheat and cause a fire, **do not use heat tape on pipes behind**

walls or ceilings. It should only be used for exposed pipes, such as those found in your crawl space or outside your home.

- **Select the right kind of tape for your pipes.** If you use tape designed for PVC on metal pipes, it will not be as effective; if you use heat tape designed for metal on PVC pipes, it can melt them.
- **Always purchase heat tape that is backed by a reputable testing lab**, such as UL (Underwriter Laboratories), and do not use damaged or worn tape, cords, or plugs.
- **Unplug the heat tape in the spring.**

Heat tape is not a must for everyone, but if you have had an issue with exposed pipes freezing in the past, it might be worth considering.

WHAT IS HEAT TAPE?

Safe Electricity.org



Heat tape involves plugging in something in an area that could become wet, so never step into a flooded or damp area that could have an electrical current running through it. In other words, always use caution with heat tape since it runs on electricity. While installing the specialized covering may help prevent freezing pipes, always follow the instructions provided for installation and use.

Help us stop copper theft

This summer, Northwest Power Cooperative, LeMars, and its member distribution cooperative, Western Iowa

Power Cooperative, Denison, were victims of copper theft. Vandals cut through locked gates and mesh fencing where they stripped copper grounding wire.

Copper thefts can cause power surges, outages, fires, explosions, and injuries. Common post-theft repairs cost tens of thousands of dollars.

If you see someone suspicious at a substation or around any electrical equipment, please call 9-1-1 or Crime Stoppers at 800-452-1111. Your information and identity will remain anonymous, and you could earn a reward.

**CRIME
STOPPERS**
800-452-1111
STOP COPPER THEFT!

CO-OPS ARE GUIDED BY 7 PRINCIPLES

| | | | | | | |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---|---|-------------------------------|
| 1 Voluntary & Open Membership | 2 Democratic Member Control | 3 Members' Economic Participation | 4 Autonomy & Independence | 5 Education, Training, & Information | 6 Cooperation Among Cooperatives | 7 Concern for Community |
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**Community born.
Community led.
Focused on YOU.**

October is
National Co-op Month!

Our continued commitment to economic development

Prairie Energy (PECO) recently provided a \$360,000 USDA Rural Economic Development Grant to Hancock County Health System (HCHS). The sizeable renovation to the first and third floors had primary focus on surgical services and the emergency department. Lab services and Senior Life Solutions were a part of the renovation as well. Goals of this project included providing a footprint that can grow and provide space for the current and targeted volumes and types of procedures, enhancing technology, and building efficiencies to save time and resources.

HCHS is a progressive health system whose focus is to deliver the right care, at the right place, at the right time.



(L to R) Jim Vermeer and Brittany Dickey, Corn Belt Power Cooperative; Julie Damm and Mary Kopacek, HCHS; Todd Foss, PECO; Bill Paulus, HCHS; and Steven Benne, Iowa Area Development Group

Become familiar with cyber basics

October is Cybersecurity Awareness Month

At a time when we are more connected than ever, being "cyber smart" is of the utmost importance.

This year has already seen more than a fair share of cyber attacks and breaches, including high-profile attacks on the Colonial Pipeline and other critical infrastructure. Furthermore, as has been underlined by these recent breaches, cyber attacks are becoming more sophisticated.

Luckily, there are several steps that we can take to mitigate risks and stay one step ahead of malefactors:

- **Enable multi-factor authentication.** Multi-factor authentication adds that necessary second check to verify your identity when logging in to one of your accounts. By requiring multiple methods of authentication, your account is further protected from being compromised, making it more difficult for password cracking tools to enable attackers to break into accounts.
- **Use strong passphrases/password manager.** This may seem obvious, but all too often securing strong pass-

phrases/password managers is overlooked. People spending more time online during the pandemic has certainly contributed to more bad actors prowling for accounts to attack. Using long, complex, and unique passwords is a good way to stop your account from being hacked. An easy way of keeping track of your passwords is by using a password manager.

- **Perform software updates.** When a device prompts that it's time to update the software, it may be tempting to simply click postpone and ignore the message. However, having the latest security software, web browser, and operating system on devices is one of the best defenses against online threats.
- **Do your research.** Common sense is a crucial part of maintaining good online hygiene. An intuitive step to stay safe online is to do some research before downloading anything new to your device, such



as apps. Make sure that it's legitimate by checking who created the app, what the user reviews say, and if there are any articles published online about the app's privacy and security features.

- **Check your settings.** Double check your privacy and security settings. Be aware who can access your documents. This extends from Google docs, to Zoom calls, and beyond. For meetings on Zoom, for example, create passwords so only those invited to the session can attend, and restrict who can share their screen or files with the rest of the attendees.

Being cyber smart and maintaining stellar online hygiene is the best way to protect yourself and others from cyber attacks. No single tip is foolproof but taken together they can make a real difference for taking control of your online presence.

