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WISCONSIN ENERGY *Cooperative* December 2023 NEWS

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COMMUNITY, COOPERATION CELEBRATED AT BLUFF PRAIRIE SOLAR RIBBON-CUTTING



by Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager

Many will recall October 25, 2023, as one of the most exciting and busiest days in the history of our cooperative. Throughout September and October, the dedicated team at Vernon Electric (VEC) devoted their efforts to not

only organize the October Member Appreciation Picnic, but also to orchestrate a ribbon-cutting ceremony commemorating the successful completion of the Bluff Prairie Community Solar Project. The planning and coordination for this event involved extensive communication, considering the many elements at play.

The Bluff Prairie Solar Array marks the fifth utility-scale array on VEC lines, standing out as a project of importance and complexity. Spanning approximately two years, its completion was a result of seizing opportunities and forming partnerships. We listened to our members when they told us they would like to have more community solar opportunities, and fortunately the state of Wisconsin offered grants which helped to expand those opportunities.

This particular project holds special significance as it enables us to offer community solar to all members, including those with low-to-moderate incomes, courtesy of a \$250,000 grant awarded to Couleecap, our local community action program. Collaboration between VEC, Couleecap, and Wisconsin’s Office of Energy Innovation played a pivotal role in devising a program that maximizes community solar benefits for as many members as possible.

Electric cooperatives abide by the seven cooperative principles to maintain their level of service. You may have heard about “cooperation among cooperatives,” particularly when Wisconsin is hit by a large storm and co-ops seek the help of other co-ops to restore power outages. In this case, we could say “cooperation among the community.” Two very important local businesses worked together to fill a need to benefit the community.

Hetti Brown, executive director for Couleecap, stated, “We are excited to bring solar access to utility customers who have the highest cost burden. Cost is a steep barrier for many households interested in solar participation.”

In anticipation of the ribbon-cutting ceremony, we recognized the importance of involving the media to help share the story of what we believe is a groundbreaking project. To our knowledge, the utilization of grant funds to facilitate the participation of low-to-moderate-income members in community solar has not been done before.

Invitations were extended to board members of VEC and Couleecap, Senator Brad Pfaff, Representative Loren Oldenburg, representatives from OneEnergy, and various other distinguished guests. A particularly exciting confirmation came a few days prior when Governor Tony Evers expressed his intention to attend.

As the morning of the event unfolded, initial concerns arose about the persistent misty weather, prompting considerations of moving the proceedings indoors. However, fortune smiled upon us as the mist subsided, allowing us to host the event

outdoors with our solar array in the background.

VEC initiated the press conference around 9 a.m., with Channel 8, 19, 13, 25, and Wisconsin Public Radio all in attendance. Hetti Brown of Couleecap, Joe Pater from the Office of Energy Innovation, Governor Evers, Beth Esser of OneEnergy, Senator Pfaff, and Representative Oldenburg all spoke at the event. All made wonderful comments, reiterating the concept of teamwork.

As the event concluded, attendees were invited to

explore the solar array up close and engage with Beth Esser, associate director of development for OneEnergy Renewables, who shared technical insights about the array’s development.

The overall success of the event was evident, and we extend our gratitude to all who attended. Simultaneously, back at our headquarters, the Member Appreciation Picnic was in full swing. Members were welcomed to our office for a picnic-style meal prepared by our dedicated team, featuring brats, hot dogs, chips, and, of course, cheese curds. Despite the less-than-ideal weather, over 300 people joined us, and we are appreciative of their presence and support of the cooperative.

Reflecting on this remarkable day, I am immensely proud of what we achieved. The VEC team’s dedication and hard work ensured the success of both events, and we are truly grateful for everyone’s wholehearted commitment.



VEC directors and CEO Craig Buros were joined by Governor Tony Evers (center), Senator Brad Pfaff (front, second from right), and Representative Loren Oldenburg (far right) for the Bluff Prairie Community Solar Project ribbon-cutting.

WECA ANNUAL MEETING BRINGS HONORS TO VEC

In November, electric cooperatives from across the state gathered in Eau Claire for the 87th annual meeting of the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association (WECA). The event delved into crucial topics such as national security implications of U.S. energy transition, Wisconsin's political action committee, initiatives to bring electricity to the Navajo Nation, and rural broadband.

The annual meeting also served as a platform for recognizing outstanding contributions over the past year. Notably, Vernon Electric Cooperative, honored with the N.F. Leifer Memorial Journalism award the previous year for its exemplary center pages in the *Wisconsin Energy Cooperative News* magazine, secured runner-up recognition this year.

Craig Buross, CEO & general manager, holds the position of Manager Director for District 1 on the WECA Board of Directors and was elected

to the board's executive team at a reorganizational meeting following the business meeting.

Preceding the WECA meeting, the Federated Youth Foundation (FYF) conducted its annual meeting. Established in 1971, FYF is a nonprofit organization that administers a trust benefiting various Wisconsin co-ops, including electric co-ops. These cooperatives entrust unclaimed capital credits to FYF and then utilize these funds for charitable purposes such as scholarships, education, support for nonprofit organizations, and contributions to food pantries.

FYF operates under the governance of a seven-member board of directors elected by the membership. Trevor Clark, manager of communications and member relations at Vernon Electric, was elected to this board. Clark expressed enthusiasm for his new role, saying, "I look forward to serving on this board for



Trevor Clark (right), VEC's manager of communications and member relations, and Monica Obrycki, CEO of Eau Claire Energy Cooperative, were elected to the Federated Youth Foundation Board of Directors.

the next few years. Supporting our youth and community will always be a passion of mine, and this opportunity will only enhance my ability and knowledge to better serve the members."

LOWERING ENERGY DEMAND CRUCIAL FOR GRID RELIABILITY

In the August issue of the *Wisconsin Energy Cooperative News*, we delved into the significance of "demand" and its potential impact on our rate evaluations. Traditionally, Wisconsin grapples with heightened energy demand in the summer months of June, July, and August, primarily due to air conditioning. Our winter months, although recently mild, have experienced the polar vortex, bringing about substantial shifts in the energy needed for heating.

Unfortunately, as more baseload generation plants close and energy is replaced with intermittent sources, our energy consumption threatens to surpass production. This scenario increases the possibility of rolling blackouts.

Demand for electricity on the grid can be mitigated by spreading out the usage of electric appliances. This collective effort to stagger appliance use contributes to maintaining lower wholesale power costs for everyone.

Over the last few summers, Wisconsin has received warnings about potential rolling blackouts from the regional grid operator, Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO). Recently, the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) stated that while the majority of the North American electric grid can navigate through typical peak winter conditions, extreme weather poses heightened risks.

Mark Spurr, legislative director at the International District

Energy Association and president of the engineering and consulting firm FVB Energy, believes it's only a matter of time before a widespread grid disruption occurs.

According to NRECA CEO Jim Matheson, NERC's reliability assessment "reveals that our nation is confronting imminent grid reliability challenges as the demand for electricity continues to surge."

Demand for electricity on the grid can be mitigated by spreading out the usage of electric appliances.

Members of Vernon Electric have the option to participate in the load management program, which helps reduce demand on the system during peak hours through the use of a load control device. These devices, often linked to air conditioners, electric heaters, water heaters,

and electric vehicle charging receive signals from Dairyland Power to lower energy demand when necessary. The receiver temporarily cuts power to the connected appliance and restores it when system demand decreases. This program is voluntary, has minimal impact on the consume member, and operates with virtually no user involvement.

The consideration of implementing a demand rate on the bill remains on the table. This model encourages members to trim their energy usage during peak periods, thereby relieving stress on the grid. Vernon Electric is committed to exploring innovative solutions that benefit both members and the cooperative. By dispersing energy usage throughout the day, you can actively contribute to lowering demand.

FAITH, FELLOWSHIP, AND FUN

By Leah Call

The learning and adventure at Living Waters Bible Camp (LWBC) doesn't stop when summer ends. For 53 years, this 100-acre site powered by Vernon Electric Cooperative has provided service-learning through adventures in nature for youth and families from the Midwest and beyond.

Officially established in 1970, LWBC began as Erwin Lotz's dream. Lotz envisioned transforming 75 acres of his property about three miles northeast of Westby into a Bible camp where children and families could learn about God while immersed in His creation. Volunteers from near and far put countless hours into building the camp facilities and planting some 30,000 pine trees.

Naturalist John Muir once said, "Between every two pines is a doorway to a new world." Fifty-three years later, about 800 summer campers and 2,000 other LWBC event participants annually walk through the now mature pines into a world of faith, fellowship, and fun. The camp is run by 11 full-time staff and over 500 volunteers annually. Though the focus is on youth, Living Waters offers year-round activities and programming for all age groups.

"The mission behind Living Waters is to reach people with the message of the Lord and the gospel, to train people in the ways of God's work, and to equip them to do this elsewhere around the world," noted Dennis Siler, who first began working at Living Waters 34 years ago.

"When I came here, the goal was to make the camp



Dennis Siler on a Mexican mission trip.

available for all denominations," added Siler, who served as LWBC executive director from 1989 to 2019. "We want to train people to become servant leaders. Jesus was the greatest servant leader, so we want to model him."

Helping Others

LWBC campers and staff are involved in numerous service projects in the surrounding communities. Through the years, LWBC has developed partnerships

with area organizations, including the Wild Turkey Federation, Trout Unlimited, and area public and Christian schools.

Each year, LWBC raises and releases approximately 2,500 Brook Trout as part of a partnership with the DNR, Trout Unlimited, and West Fork Kickapoo Project. Campers have also helped to maintain land around nearby Jersey Valley, removing poison ivy and wild parsnip.

"We look at our neighbors as both help to us and to how we can help them," said Siler.

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Pick Your Adventure

Though summer is the peak time for campers at LWBC, there are activities through the winter months. December and January activities include a weekend marriage retreat for families; Winterama, with three days of skating, skiing, tubing and hot chocolate; a Father/Son Retreat; and a Snow Day afternoon of winter fun.

Summer camps include:

- Kids' Camps, grades 3-6, with nature-based programs, swimming, horseback riding, campfires, crafts and games.
- Boys' Camps and Girls' Camps, grades 7-9, with challenging outdoor activities and games as well as Bible lessons.
- Senior High Camp where high school students enjoy nature programs, team adventure challenges, rock climbing, canoeing and more.
- Family Camp lets families take a break from the rigors of life and spend four days of fun and relaxation.

Off-site excursions include trips to Wisconsin Dells, an annual mission trip to Mexico, and an upcoming expedition to Copper Country in Upper Michigan. Details on excursions and camps are found on LWBC's website.

Spiritual Adventure

Siler's own life adventure brought him to LWBC 34 years ago. "I was an engineer for 10 years. Half way through, my



wife and I committed our lives to the Lord. Two years later, we started bringing kids to camp, and then three years later, I left my job to become the executive director of Living Waters."

In 2019, Ivan Munguia took over that leadership role, though Siler continues to work as partnership director. Siler's outreach efforts include assisting nonprofits to reorganize and refocus their mission, and conducting trauma training with schools, social workers, and foster parents. "That is my new role—helping people outside the camp," added Siler, though he will always be committed to the adventure-based service learning at LWBC.

SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE FROM VEC

Scholarships are available to students who are dependents of Vernon Electric Cooperative members. High school seniors selected will each receive a \$750 scholarship for the college or university they decide to attend. Funding for the scholarships comes from unclaimed capital credit checks, which are entrusted to the Federated Youth Foundation. **A Non-Traditional and Line Worker scholarship will also be offered.**

Scholarship applications are available on www.vernonelectric.org/scholarships-applications, by calling our office, or through school counselors.



APPLY BY JANUARY 22, 2024

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