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PREPARE YOUR HOME FOR WINTER:
Simple Steps to Improve Heating Efficiency

by Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager

As November settles into the Driftless Region and temperatures begin to drop, heating systems across Vernon Electric Cooperative's service territory will soon become some of the hardest-working equipment in our homes. From rural farmhouses to newer homes, keeping our families warm and comfortable is a priority during Wisconsin's long winter months.

While we cannot control the weather, there are steps we can take to prepare our homes for the cold ahead. A little maintenance and a few simple changes can help your heating system operate more efficiently, reduce unnecessary energy use and potentially prevent an inconvenient breakdown on a cold winter night.

Start with the basics

One of the easiest and most effective things you can do is check your furnace filter. A dirty or clogged filter restricts airflow, forcing your heating system to work harder to circulate warm air. Check your filter regularly and replace it according to the manufacturer's recommendations.

While checking your filter, look around your home to make sure furniture, curtains, rugs and other household items are not blocking supply or return air vents. Keeping vents clear allows warm air to circulate throughout your home and helps maintain a consistent temperature.

Give your heating equipment some attention

If your home uses a heat pump, inspect the outdoor unit. Fallen leaves, branches and other debris can restrict airflow, so keep the surrounding area clear. During winter, periodically check for snow and ice buildup, following the manufacturer's recommendations and avoiding any actions that could damage the equipment.

Even if you have a traditional central air conditioning system that remains idle during winter, keeping the outdoor unit clear of debris is good practice. Inside your home, scheduling a professional heating system inspection before the coldest weather arrives can help identify potential problems, verify safe operation and keep your equipment running efficiently.

Pay attention to the air moving through your home

Even a well-maintained furnace cannot do its job effectively if heated air escapes before reaching the rooms where it is needed. Leaky, disconnected or poorly insulated ductwork can waste energy and contribute to uneven temperatures. If some rooms never seem comfortable or your energy use has increased without an obvious explanation, consider asking an HVAC professional to inspect your ductwork.

You can also improve comfort by addressing drafts around windows, exterior doors, attic access points and other openings. Weatherstripping, caulking and appropriate insulation help keep warm air inside and cold air out. Reducing drafts and improving insulation can make a noticeable difference in comfort while reducing the energy needed to heat your home.

Use your thermostat to your advantage

Heating an empty house to the same temperature you prefer when everyone is home may not be necessary. Lowering your thermostat when you are asleep or away can help reduce energy use. A programmable or smart thermostat can make these adjustments automatically.

If your home uses electric heating, including a heat pump, understanding how your system operates is especially important. Some heat pumps use supplemental electric resistance heat when temperatures fall or when thermostat settings change significantly. Depending on the equipment and conditions, this supplemental heat can use considerably more electricity.

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PRESERVING THE HUNT

By Leah Call

Lee Marx has always had a passion for pheasant hunting and working with bird dogs. Last year, this Vernon Electric Cooperative member put that passion to work, opening a preserve that gives hunters from the region and beyond a place to enjoy the sport.

Now in its second year of operation, Coulee Region Game Birds & Shooting Sports (CRGB) carries on the tradition of the Badgerland Pheasant Farm, which served area hunters for many years.

"I used to hunt at Badgerland, so when they closed, there was a void," said Marx, who launched CRGB in 2025.

"Though there are hunting preserves in other parts of the state, we're unique in what we offer in this area," he added.

To get the preserve up and running, Marx and his family constructed pens and facilities and added hunting acreage. In addition to pheasant hunting, CRGB is a federally licensed firearm dealer that sells firearms and ammunition and offers 5-stand sporting clays for those looking to sharpen their shooting skills.

Raising the Birds

Though hunting sessions keep the preserve busy from fall through early spring, much of the work takes place in the off season.

"We get day-old chicks in April and raise them throughout the spring and summer to adult birds," noted Marx. "When people come to the preserve, they can purchase six, eight, 10 or 20 birds depending on the group size."

Last spring, CRGB raised approximately 2,000 pheasants. Marx purchases the chicks from Krug's Northwoods Gamebirds near Medford, Wisconsin. Raising pheasants requires specialized knowledge and facilities.

Marx received helpful guidance from former Badgerland owners Gerry and Corky Roethel. "We also purchased some brooder houses from them that we use to start the chicks in," he said.

As the chicks mature, they move from the brooder houses to covered areas and eventually into flight pens.

For now, pheasants are the preserve's primary offering, though Marx hopes to add chukar partridges and bobwhite quail in the future.

Open Season

Hunting sessions at CRGB generally run from mid-September through March.







Left to right: Pheasants are raised at Coulee Region Game Birds & Shooting Sports before being released for hunting sessions. A young hunter shows off a successful day in the field. The Marx children, Makinlee and Braxtyn, play active roles in the family business. Braxtyn represented Vernon Electric Cooperative at the 2026 Youth Leadership Council event in Nashville, Tennessee.





Left to right: The Marx family Candice, Makinlee, Lee, and Braxtyn. Hunters gather after a successful pheasant hunt on the preserve.

Hunters reserve a session for their group, purchase birds and head into one of four designated hunting areas, which range from eight to 20 acres in size.

"Typically, the cover is pretty heavy. You need dogs to hunt them," noted Marx. "Most hunters bring their own dogs, but guides and hunting dogs are available upon request."

CRGB offers a morning session and evening session in each of its four hunting areas.

Although fall season brings steady activity, January through March has proven to be the preserve's busiest season. "Since normal hunting seasons are closed that time of the year, people are looking to get out with their dogs and do some hunting," Marx said.

A Family Business with Room to Grow

While Marx currently divides his time between the preserve and his job installing floors and countertops, his goal is to focus 100% of his time on CRGB.

His 17-year-old son, Braxtyn, and 15-year-old daughter, Makinlee, play active roles in the family business. Both help with daily chores, caring for the birds and assisting hunters. Marx's wife Candice handles the marketing and developed CRGB's website. The whole Marx family pitched in to build pens and facilities.

"It's been a good learning venture for our whole family," said Marx.

As this family business takes flight, Marx looks forward to providing area sportsmen and women a place to get outside with their dogs for years to come.

Hunters interested in setting up a session can call the preserve or book it at couleeregiongamebirds.com. Sporting clays are also available with open shooting on Monday evenings at 5 p.m. through October, with winter dates possible.







Hunters and their dogs enjoy time in the field at Coulee Region Game Birds & Shooting Sports.

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Explore available energy-efficiency resources

Vernon Electric Cooperative encourages members to look for practical ways to manage their energy use throughout the year. Focus on Energy offers resources that may help homeowners identify energy-saving improvements and find incentives for qualifying equipment and home upgrades. Programs and eligibility requirements can change, so visit focusonenergy.com to explore current residential offerings.

Before investing in a new heating system, insulation or other major home improvement, compare your options and consider how an upgrade may affect your overall energy use. A qualified contractor can help evaluate your home's needs and recommend appropriately sized equipment.

VEC members can also contact our office with questions about their electric service, billing or available energy-management resources. Our Member Services team is here to help members better understand their electricity use and explore practical ways to manage it.

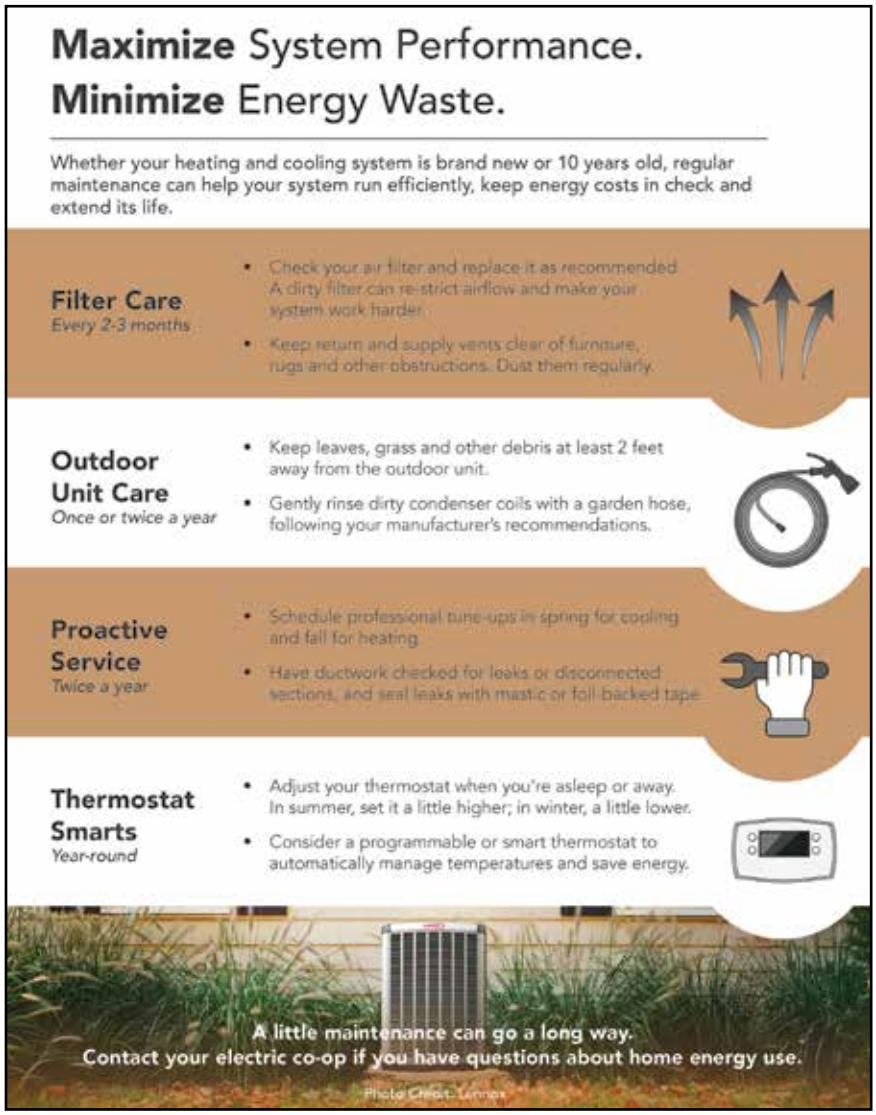
Prepare for more than just the cold

Winter in western Wisconsin can bring heavy snow, high winds and ice that challenge electric service. As you prepare your home, consider assembling an emergency kit with flashlights, batteries, drinking water, necessary medications and other essential supplies. If you rely on electrically powered medical equipment, develop a backup plan for an extended outage.

Members who use backup generators should ensure they are installed and operated safely, following manufacturer instructions and applicable electrical codes. Never connect a generator directly to your home's wiring without a properly installed transfer switch, and never operate a generator indoors or in an enclosed space.

At Vernon Electric Cooperative, safety, reliability and service to our members remain priorities throughout the year. Although we cannot prevent every winter storm or equipment issue, preparing ahead can help you stay comfortable and ready for the season.

Your heating system has an important job to do over the next several months. By maintaining your equipment, sealing drafts, managing your thermostat and exploring available efficiency resources, you can help your home operate more efficiently and potentially avoid unnecessary energy costs. A little preparation now can go a long way toward making winter more comfortable for you and your family.



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