



# NEWEST SOLAR PROJECT A COOPERATIVE EFFORT



## BLUFF PRAIRIE PROJECT MAKES COMMUNITY SOLAR EASY, ACCESSIBLE, AND AFFORDABLE

by Craig Buros, CEO & General Manager



In 2014 Vernon Electric Cooperative (VEC) installed the first community solar array in the state of Wisconsin, a 305-kilowatt (KW) system which also happened to be the largest array in the state at that time. Since then, VEC has remained at the forefront of renewable

energy by adding two more solar arrays: a 520 KW array at our headquarters facility in Westby, and a 300 KW array near Liberty Pole. In partnership with Dairyland Power, two more 1-megawatt (MW) arrays were installed near Liberty Pole and Hillsboro, respectively. Altogether there is more than 2.5 MW of utility-scale solar arrays in VEC's service area. VEC has also enabled over 2.5 MW of residential solar, owned by members of our co-op. This gives us a grand total of over 5 MW of renewable energy locally. But soon there will be more...

Earlier this year we announced the Bluff Prairie Community Solar array, a 1.5 MW array located near Red Mound. We are pleased to announce the near completion of the project, which contains 3,276 panels and is expected to produce over 3 million kilowatt hours (kWh) per year. To maximize the amount of energy produced, OneEnergy Renewables installed bifacial

solar panels on single-axis trackers. The trackers follow the sun from east to west throughout the day.

You often hear us discuss our cooperative principles; Cooperation Among Cooperatives is one of those principles. Electric cooperatives throughout the country have a common goal of providing safe, affordable, and reliable electricity to the members we serve. Development of the Bluff Prairie Solar project was coordinated with nine other electric cooperatives to get a better price and return on investment for our members. In total, 22 MW of new solar generation is coming on-line at electric cooperatives across the state over the next few months.

"Partnering with Vernon Electric Cooperative and the landowner for the Bluff Prairie Solar Project has been a great experience. OneEnergy and our whole Midwest development and construction team appreciate the opportunity to serve the community by generating local, clean energy," said Eric Udelhofen, VP of development for One Energy.

Throughout the years, solar energy has become increasingly popular as more people install solar at their home or utilities invest in large-scale solar farms. Our members often tell us they would like to participate in solar, but the up-front cost is more than they would like to invest. As we continue to look at ways to diversify our energy portfolio, we

must also consider if it will be an added benefit to our members. If history has shown us anything, it's that our members are very interested in community solar. In 2014 our 1,001-panel community solar farm in Westby sold out in just two weeks.

Overall, 60 percent of the Bluff Prairie Solar array is dedicated to community solar. The other 40 percent is committed to a buy-all, sell-all agreement with our wholesale power provider, Dairyland Power Cooperative.

Output from approximately 2,000 panels will be available for members to subscribe as part of our community solar program. Members can purchase an annual subscription for \$50 per panel and will receive the output as a credit on their bill each month. During the summer months (June, July, August) subscribers will receive a rate of 7 cents per kWh for the output of their subscriptions. All other months, they will receive a rate of 5.2 cents per kWh.

Each panel subscription is projected to produce 960 kWh per year, with an estimated annual credit of \$56. The number of subscriptions a member can purchase will be determined by how many kilowatts they consumed the previous year. For example, if a member consumed 10,000 kWh last



year, they will be eligible to purchase 10 subscriptions.

We decided on the subscription model to allow more members the opportunity to participate in community solar. This model allows members who no longer wish to participate in the program to opt out and not be responsible for selling their subscription to someone else. Annually, participants will have the option to renew for the next year.

When designing our program, we analyzed several scenarios to maximize the number of members who could participate. The Wisconsin Office of Energy Innovation, housed within the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin, committed

\$250,000 in State Energy Program grant funds to Couleecap, Inc. to reduce the cost of electricity for households that qualify for energy assistance by offering free access to community solar benefits. This created a great opportunity for two local organizations to partner together to provide renewable energy opportunities for income-eligible members. A new program called Energize Wisconsin was developed.

In the Energize Wisconsin program, Couleecap will become a subscriber on behalf of eligible households. The grant will be divided over ten years, equating to \$25,000 per year and VEC will provide an additional \$2,500 per year. The grant, plus the funds contributed from VEC, will provide 550

subscriptions of the Bluff Prairie solar project and will produce an estimated 528,000 kWh per year. We anticipate annual bill credits will exceed \$30,000 for eligible members.

Hetti Brown, executive director for Couleecap Inc. 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. With

"Cost is a steep barrier for many households interested in solar participation. With the program Energize Wisconsin, we are removing that barrier."

– Hetti Brown, Couleecap Inc.

the program Energize Wisconsin, we are removing that barrier. Couleecap appreciates our partners at Vernon Electric Cooperative and the WI Office of Energy Innovation for funding and collaborating with us on this project."

A unique advantage of installing a large solar array is it provides us the opportunity to improve pollinator habitat. It is often assumed the ground beneath the solar panels will never be restored to what it once was; however, by planting prairie grasses and wildflowers, a healthy root system will develop to prevent soil erosion and improve habitat for insects that pollinate crops we use for food.

There has been an immense amount of work dedicated by our employees and partners to the Bluff Prairie Solar project. After nearly two years of planning, preparation, and construction, we are all excited to see this project come together. We look forward to hearing from you and your interest in participating in this community solar project.

**YES**, I am interested in participating in Bluff Prairie community solar.



Name \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

No. of panels \_\_\_\_\_

*Submit by December 1, 2023, or submit online at [vernonelectric.org](http://vernonelectric.org).*

**\$50 per panel subscription**

Return to Vernon Electric Cooperative,  
110 Saugstad Rd., Westby, WI 54667