

JANUARY 2026

iowa

ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LIVING

**Iowa electric co-ops shine
in national commercial**

**Reliable electricity starts
with a clear path**

Vegetarian recipes

Apply for the 2026 Youth Tour ► See Page 12

CONTENTS



VOLUME 79 • ISSUE 1

3

STATEWIDE PERSPECTIVE
2026 legislative session preview

3

EDITOR'S CHOICE CONTEST
Win a Ninja Crispi air fryer

14

RELIABILITY MATTERS
Keeping outages at bay

15

OUT BACK
Wishing you an "awe"some year

EDITOR
Ann Foster Thelen

DESIGNERS
Megan Walters
Bree Glenn
Lorelai O'Hara

IAEC DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
Erin Campbell

IAEC EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT
Leslie Kauffman

IAEC BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Steve Inskeep, District 4
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Marion Denger, Prairie Energy Cooperative – NRECA Representative
Terry Sullivan, Corridor Energy Cooperative – Managers' Representative



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ON THE COVER

Special thanks to Michelle Benton, a Consumers Energy member-consumer, for supplying this month's cover image. Submit high-resolution photos for consideration to editor@ieclmagazine.com. You could receive \$100!

PROTECTING IOWA'S POWER: KEY ENERGY POLICIES TO WATCH THIS LEGISLATIVE SESSION

BY HALEY MOON



As the Iowa Legislature prepares to convene on Jan. 12, electric cooperatives across the state are focused on defending the policies and protections that keep power reliable and affordable for our communities. For more than eight decades, Iowa's electric cooperatives have prioritized the delivery of safe, reliable and affordable electricity while supporting local economies and strengthening the power grid. This work relies heavily on Iowa's defined electric service territories, an important law that helps ensure every corner of the state receives consistent, cost-effective electric service.

Protecting service territories and grid reliability

For rural communities in particular, defined electric service territories are vital. By assigning each utility the responsibility to serve a specific geographic area, every Iowan is guaranteed electric service that avoids redundant infrastructure, reduces costs and allows utilities the certainty to make long-term investments in grid resilience. These protections help cooperatives maintain affordable rates and plan strategically to meet future needs. As legislators return to Des Moines, Iowa's electric cooperatives remain vigilant against any attempts to weaken this foundational law or erode the consumer benefits it provides.

One challenge that could resurface is a third-party or "community solar" proposal. During the 2025 legislative session, lawmakers considered legislation that would have allowed non-utility solar developers to provide retail electric service inside

an established utility's service area, which is in direct conflict with Iowa's service territory statute. While these programs are often marketed as cost-saving options, the details can be far less rosy. Because third-party developers are not held to the same consumer protection standards or regulatory oversight as Iowa's public utilities, they can shift grid maintenance and infrastructure costs onto customers who do not subscribe.

Cooperatives are not opposed to solar – far from it. Iowa's electric co-ops have long supported the adoption of solar when and where it benefits their members and aligns with responsible grid planning. But allowing non-utilities to operate independently within the defined area of public utility, even on a limited basis, sets a precedent that threatens system stability statewide.

Strengthening safety protections for utility workers

Another priority heading into the upcoming legislative session

is protecting utility workers. Lineworkers are often the first on the scene after storms and work long hours in hazardous conditions to restore essential services. Despite the critical role they play in delivering power to our communities, something alarming is happening. Threats, harassment and assaults against utility workers while on the job are increasing nationwide. Strengthening penalties for violence against utility workers reaffirms our commitment to the safety of cooperative employees and our communities.

No matter what this session may bring, you can rest assured knowing that your cooperative will be advocating for policies to keep electricity safe and affordable for you and your community.

Haley Moon is the senior manager of policy and advocacy for the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives.

EDITOR'S CHOICE CONTEST

WIN A NINJA CRISPI AIR FRYER!

The Ninja Crispi® Portable Glass Cooking System is a compact powerhouse that packs the 1,500 watts power of a full-sized air fryer into a portable design. It includes a small 6-cup and larger 4-quart CleanCrisp™ container. Whether you're making quick, single-serve meals in just 7 minutes or sharing crispy snacks on the go, the Ninja Crispi® makes it effortless.



Visit our website and win!

Enter this month's contest by visiting www.ieclmagazine.com no later than Jan. 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.

ENTER ONLINE BY JAN. 31!

The winner of Lodge cast iron skillet set from the October issue was **Sarah Silhanek, a T.I.P. REC member-consumer.**

STAYING RELIABLE STARTS WITH A CLEAR PATH

BY TROY AMOSS



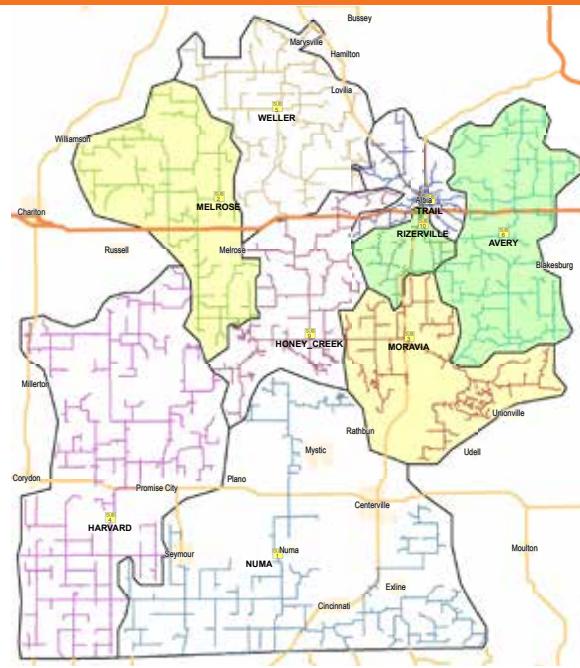
When members think about what it takes to keep the lights on, they often picture poles, wires and substations – but one of the most important factors in electric reliability actually grows around us every day: trees and vegetation.

At Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC), our mission is to provide you with safe, reliable and affordable power. One of the most effective ways we can do that is through proactive right-of-way (ROW) and vegetation management. Simply put, this means maintaining clear space around power lines, so trees, brush and overgrowth don't interfere with the flow of electricity.

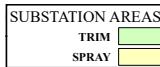
Preventing outages before they happen

It might seem simple, but the reality is that trees and vegetation are among the leading causes of power outages in our area – especially during storms, high winds, heavy ice and snow. By keeping our ROW clear year-round, we greatly reduce the

2026 TRIM AND SPRAY OVERVIEW



AVERY AND RIZERVILLE SUBSTATION AREAS - TRIM
MELROSE AND MORAVIA SUBSTATION AREAS - SPRAY



likelihood of branches contacting lines, prevent lengthy outages, and improve safety for both our line crews and our members.

Why routine maintenance matters

Routine trimming and clearing may seem like an ongoing effort – and it is – but it's also the most cost-effective approach. Allowing trees and brush to grow unchecked becomes far more expensive and time-consuming in the long run. When vegetation reaches the lines, the work becomes more complex, often requiring specialized equipment and additional labor. It's much like maintaining a yard: regular care is easier and more affordable than waiting until it's overgrown and out of control.

Our crews and contractors follow an established vegetation management cycle designed to cover our entire service area systematically. This proactive plan allows us to maintain clearance before issues

arise, keeping power reliable and reducing emergency repairs that can drive up costs for everyone.

What's ahead in 2026

As part of this ongoing effort, we've included a map above showing which areas are scheduled for trimming and which will be treated with herbicide in 2026. This plan allows our team to manage growth efficiently and safely, ensuring that every section of our system receives proper attention on a regular basis.

Maintaining our ROW isn't just good maintenance – it's good stewardship. Every mile of clear line helps protect the investment you and your fellow members have made in your cooperative. Together, we can continue to keep CVEC's system strong, reliable and ready to serve – no matter what Mother Nature sends our way.

Troy Amoss is the CEO/general manager of Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative.



Chariton Valley
Electric Cooperative, Inc.

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative



Office

2090 Highway 5 South • P.O. Box 486
Albia, IA 52531-0486

Office Hours

Monday through Friday, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m.
Closed Saturdays, Sundays and holidays

Telephone Numbers

Days, nights or holidays:
641-932-7126 (local)
or 800-475-1702



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CVEC CELEBRATES DEDICATED EMPLOYEES AND DIRECTORS

At Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC), our employees and board members are the heart of the cooperative. Each year, we take a moment to recognize their dedication, hard work and commitment to serving our members and communities.

This year, at our annual holiday gathering, we proudly honored the following individuals for their years of service and outstanding contributions.

EMPLOYEES



TROY AMOSS
CEO/General Manager
5 years



WYATT MCCARTY
Journeyman Lineman
5 years



KILE OVERMYER
Foreman
5 years



TIM SCOTT
Journeyman Lineman
5 years



JARED SHAW
Line Superintendent
5 years

DIRECTORS



RANDY GOTTSCHALK
Director
5 years



KENNY VANDENBERG
Board President
15 years

These milestones represent more than just numbers – they reflect years of dedication, teamwork and a shared commitment to keeping the lights on for every CVEC member.

We are grateful for the passion and professionalism each of these individuals brings to the cooperative. Their efforts not only strengthen CVEC but also ensure that our communities continue to thrive.

Congratulations to all honorees! Your hard work, loyalty and service are truly appreciated and celebrated by everyone at CVEC.

CVEC VOLUNTEERS LIGHT UP DOWNTOWN FOR THE VICTORIAN STROLL

In preparation for this year's Victorian Stroll, Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC) employees once again volunteered their time to hang Christmas lights on the 70 light posts throughout Albia's historic downtown.

This annual effort has become a holiday tradition for our team, helping bring festive cheer to the community and setting the scene for one of Albia's most beloved seasonal events.

Working together, CVEC employees carefully decorated each light post to ensure downtown was beautifully illuminated for the occasion. The twinkling lights created a warm, welcoming atmosphere for residents and visitors to enjoy the holiday festivities.

At CVEC, we take pride in giving back to the communities we serve. The Victorian Stroll is a cherished event that brings people together, and we're proud to help make it even more special each year.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to our employees for volunteering their time and efforts. We hope the lights helped brighten your holiday season and added a little extra sparkle to this year's Victorian Stroll!





LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

ANNUAL MEETING RECAP

BY ERIN CAMPBELL

More than 375 directors and employees from Iowa's electric cooperatives gathered in West Des Moines for the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives' (IAEC) 2025 Annual Meeting on Dec. 4-5. With the theme Leading through Change, the event highlighted the industry's ongoing transformation and the importance of strong leadership.

IAEC Executive Vice President and General Manager Leslie Kaufman, who marked her first year with the association in July, noted the momentum of the year. Board President Jim Miller also reflected on his first year in the role, recalling how "a farm kid from Fonda" received a call from Gov. Kim Reynolds during his second week as president. The conversation focused on emerging energy policy issues, underscoring the responsibility and visibility of the position. Miller also praised Kaufman's early outreach to member co-ops, which helped shape IAEC's strategic direction.

In her executive report, Kaufman outlined departmental progress and emphasized the critical role of advocacy as policy challenges accelerate. She highlighted a new policy and advocacy framework designed to help statewide staff work more proactively in the years ahead.

Educational sessions once again played a central role in the meeting. Speakers included National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) Board President Mike Partin, who joined Kaufman for a fireside chat on leading through change; nuclear engineer and Miss America 2023 Grace Vanderhei; Youth Leadership Council delegate Ava Meinders; governance experts from Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange and NRECA; and National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners Executive Director Tony Clark, who addressed national issues, including resource adequacy,

cybersecurity and the growing electricity demands of AI and data centers. NFL Hall of Famer and former Congressman Steve Largent closed the event with leadership insights from his career in sports, business and politics.

IAEC also recognized longtime contributors and emerging leaders, including service award recipients, Cooperative Leadership in Iowa Program (CLIP) graduates, Rural Electric Safety Achievement Program (RESAP) certified cooperatives, nationally credentialed directors and the inaugural Iowa Electric Cooperative Excellence Award honorees: Director Excellence Award recipient Jerry Beck of Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative and Employee Excellence Award recipient Robert Wakhouse of Harrison County REC.

Watch for more information about key annual meeting topics in upcoming issues of this magazine.

COOPERATIVE LEADERSHIP IN IOWA PROGRAM

Congratulations to the 13 graduates of the 2025 CLIP for emerging leaders.

Participants committed to a year-long calendar of in-person, virtual and on-demand training sessions. Additionally, these individuals developed their leadership skills, gained insights on various professional roles within electric cooperatives and attended statewide events to better understand important issues facing Iowa's electric cooperatives.

Zach Finn
Central Iowa Power Cooperative
Justin Krueger
Consumers Energy
Ben Donnelly
East-Central Iowa Rural Electric Cooperative
Mindy Comstock
Farmers Electric Cooperative, Inc.
Emily Rush
Franklin Rural Electric Cooperative

Johnna Nunemaker
Linn County Rural Electric Cooperative
Abby Fischer
Maquoketa Valley Electric Cooperative
Kraig Johnson
MiEnergy Cooperative
Jason Stock
Northwest Iowa Power Cooperative

Steve Jackson
Prairie Energy Cooperative
Alicia Lohr
Raccoon Valley Electric Cooperative
Tanner Rinehart
Southwest Iowa Rural Electric Cooperative
Jason Jack
T.I.P. Rural Electric Cooperative



2025 CLIP graduates. Pictured from left: Jason Stock, Zach Finn, Johnna Nunemaker, Alicia Lohr, Abby Fischer, Emily Rush, Mindy Comstock, Jason Jack, Kraig Johnson, Steve Jackson, Tanner Rinehart, Ben Donnelly and Justin Krueger.



IOWA CO-OPS RECOGNIZED FOR SAFETY ACHIEVEMENTS

During the IAEC annual meeting in December, several Iowa electric cooperatives were congratulated for completing the RESAP in 2025. The cooperatives included:

- Clarke Electric Cooperative, Inc.
- Corn Belt Power Cooperative
- Eastern Iowa Light & Power Cooperative
- Grundy County Rural Electric Cooperative
- Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative Association
- Linn County Rural Electric Cooperative
- Maquoketa Valley Electric Cooperative
- Nishnabotna Valley Rural Electric Cooperative
- Osceola Electric Cooperative, Inc.
- Pella Cooperative Electric Association
- Southwest Iowa Rural Electric Cooperative
- Western Iowa Power Cooperative

DIRECTOR GOLD CREDENTIAL

The NRECA Director Gold Credential (DGC) recognizes directors who have earned their Credentialed Cooperative Director certificate and Board Leadership Certificate credentials and are committed to continuing their education throughout their service on the board. The following have achieved or maintained their DGC.

David Hollingsworth
Michael Holtkamp
Access Energy Cooperative
Jerry Keleher
Allamakee-Clayton Electric Cooperative
Allyn Harms
Butler County Rural Electric Cooperative
Steve Boedecker
James Miller
Calhoun County Electric Cooperative Association
Kenneth VandenBerg
Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative, Inc.
Cody Miller
William White
Clarke Electric Cooperative, Inc.
Dennis Beckman
William Hobson
Consumers Energy
Joel Carstensen
Gary Kester
Kurt Olson
Kathrine Wunderlich
Eastern Iowa Light & Power Cooperative

Mark Earhart
Kristopher Petter
Farmers Electric Cooperative, Inc.
Gordon Greimann
Donald Greimann
John Snyder
Franklin Rural Electric Cooperative
Kevin Pruisner
Grundy County Rural Electric Cooperative
Brenda Lundergard
Harrison County Rural Electric Cooperative
Tricia Jaeger
Mark Kingland
Vince Morische
Heartland Power Cooperative
Bruce Amundson
Craig Deim
Crystal Pluth
Mark Tuttle
Trent Will
Roger Williamson
Daniel Winterhof
Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative
Gary Schlotterbeck
Kenneth Squires
Linn County Rural Electric Cooperative

Judy Gotto
Thomas Stewart
Maquoketa Valley Electric Cooperative
Gene Kenkel
Donna Olson
Nishnabotna Valley Rural Electric Cooperative
Dale Ullrich
North West Rural Electric Cooperative
Bryce Arkema
Darrell Boot
Carroll Hoksbergen
Steve Inskeep
Jon Van Woerkom
Pella Cooperative Electric Association
David Onken
Raccoon Valley Electric Cooperative
Ronald Hoffman
T.I.P. Rural Electric Cooperative
Phillip Jensen
Scott Linville
United Electric Cooperative

RESAP is a service of the NRECA and strives to promote the highest standards of safety among electric cooperatives.

IAEC fully supports the RESAP program and works with electric cooperative members in their safety achievements. The rigorous program requires annual reporting to NRECA of Occupational Safety and Health Administration Data and updates to the cooperative's safety improvement plan. Every three years, additional data must be submitted to NRECA, as well as participation in an onsite safety observation by NRECA at the cooperative.



CRAISINS, APPLE, WALNUT AND QUINOA SALAD

- ½ cup quinoa, uncooked**
- ½ cup toasted walnuts, chopped**
- 1 cup craisins**
- 1 large apple, chopped**
- 1 large celery stalk, chopped**
- 2 tablespoons green onion, chopped**
- 1 tablespoon honey (or white corn syrup)**
- 2 tablespoons white balsamic raspberry blush vinegar**
- kosher salt, to taste**
- pepper, to taste**

Prepare quinoa according to package directions. Refrigerate for 30 minutes, until cooled completely. In a large bowl, toss cooled quinoa, walnuts, craisins, apple, celery and onion together. In a separate bowl, mix honey or corn syrup and vinegar. Season with salt and pepper. Pour dressing over salad and mix well. Serve immediately or chill in refrigerator until ready to serve. Serves 8

Nancy Anderson • Ankeny Prairie Energy Cooperative

CUKE, TOMATO AND ONION SALAD

- 1 medium cucumber, sliced**
- 1 medium onion, sliced**
- 2 medium tomatoes, cubed**
- 2 teaspoons dill weed**
- 1 tablespoon salad oil**
- 1 tablespoon vinegar**
- 2 teaspoons sugar**
- 2 teaspoons salt**
- dash of pepper, optional**

Mix all ingredients and refrigerate 2 hours before serving. Serves 10

Patricia Glandorf • Williamsburg T.I.P. Rural Electric Cooperative

OAT BURGERS

- 1 cup creamy cottage cheese**
- 1 cup corn flakes cereal, crushed**
- 1 cup quick oatmeal**
- 2 eggs**
- salt, to taste**
- pepper, to taste**
- oil**
- 1 can cream of mushroom soup**
- 1½ cans milk or water**

Mix cottage cheese, cereal, oatmeal, eggs, salt and pepper. Form into patties and brown in oil. Mix soup and milk or water, then cover patties with the soup mixture. Bake covered at 350 degrees F for 45-60 minutes. Cream of mushroom soup can be substituted with cream of celery soup. Serves 2-4

Natalie Herrington • Nevada Consumers Energy

CARIBBEAN RICE AND BEANS

- 1 tablespoon oil**
- ¼ teaspoon garlic powder**
- ½ cup green onion, diced**
- ½ cup green pepper, diced**
- ½ teaspoon rosemary leaves**
- ½ teaspoon thyme leaves**
- ½ teaspoon black pepper**
- 1 can black beans, drained and rinsed**
- 1 cup raw rice, cooked**
- ¼ cup picante sauce**
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce**
- ½ cup cheddar cheese, grated**

In a skillet, sauté oil, garlic powder, green onion, green pepper, rosemary, thyme and pepper. Add beans to sautéed ingredients. Then, add rice, picante and soy sauce. Stir fry until hot, then top with cheese. Serves 4

Sandra Busard • Donnellson Access Energy Cooperative

BLACK BEAN AND VEGGIE BURGERS

- 2 15-ounce cans black beans, rinsed and drained
- 1/4 teaspoons garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons cilantro
- 1/4 cup green pepper, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup breadcrumbs
- 1 large carrot, grated
- 1/4 cup red onion, chopped
- 1 egg
- 6 buns, optional
- lettuce, optional

In a large mixing bowl, mash black beans. Add garlic powder, chili powder, cumin, paprika, salt and cilantro. Mix until combined. Add peppers, breadcrumbs, carrot, onion and egg to the combined bean mixture. Form into patties and fry over medium heat in a greased pan. Flip after 5 minutes and fry the other side for the same amount of time. Serve on a bun or on a bed of lettuce. Serves 6

Crystal Hammes • Libertyville
Access Energy Cooperative

HOMEMADE SLOW COOKER TOMATO BASIL SOUP

- 5-7 tomatoes on the vine (or 2 cups baby tomatoes)
- 1 yellow onion, diced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 head garlic, peeled
- splash of vegetable broth
- 1 tablespoon Italian seasoning
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- fresh basil, to taste
- heavy cream, optional

Place all ingredients in a slow cooker, except basil. Cook on low until tomatoes and onions are soft. Blend soup until smooth with an immersion or regular blender. Adding heavy cream will make for creamier soup. Adjust seasonings to taste and garnish with fresh basil before serving. Serves 6, approximately

Tristen Jungers • Archer
North West Rural Electric Cooperative

SPAGHETTI SALAD

- 4 medium fresh tomatoes
- 1 large red onion
- 2 cucumbers
- 2 bell peppers
- 2 pounds spaghetti
- 1 16-ounce bottle Wishbone Italian salad dressing
- Shilling Salad Supreme Spice, to taste

Chop together tomatoes, onion, cucumbers and peppers. Break spaghetti into thirds and boil until cooked. Cool slightly but add salad dressing before spaghetti is cold. Mix spaghetti with tomato mixture and add salad spice to taste. Serves 16, or cut recipe in half to serve 8

Denise Anderson • Ocheyedan
Osceola Electric Cooperative, Inc.

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



EASY PEASY PAELLA

- 2 tablespoons oil
- 1 cup white rice
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 carrots, diced
- 2 stalks celery, diced
- 8 ounces mushrooms, quartered
- 1 bell pepper (any color), diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 pinches saffron, optional
- 1 teaspoon Old Bay seasoning
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- sprinkle cayenne
- 1 cup white wine or vegetable broth
- 8 ounces grape tomatoes
- 1/2 cup green olives
- 1 cup frozen peas
- salt, to taste
- pepper, to taste

Swirl oil to coat an 11-inch cast iron or other oven-safe pan. Layer (in order) rice, onion, carrots, celery, mushrooms, bell pepper, garlic, seasonings and wine or broth. Bake at 375 degrees F for 40 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, olives and peas. Bake 15 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serves 6

Chris Daniels • Casey
Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative Association

WANTED:

BEEF BURGER RECIPES

THE REWARD:

\$25 FOR EVERY
ONE WE PUBLISH!

Deadline is Jan. 31

Fire up the grill, load up the toppings and gather around the picnic table – we want your best **beef burger recipes!** Selected submissions will appear in our May issue in celebration of Beef Month. Please include your name, address, telephone number, co-op name, recipe category and number of servings on all submissions.



EMAIL: recipes@ieclmagazine.com

MAIL: Recipes

Iowa Electric Cooperative Living magazine
8525 Douglas Ave., Suite 48
Des Moines, IA 50322

Craig Codner, CEO of Butler County REC, participants in shooting the national commercial.



IOWA CO-OPS SHINE BRIGHT IN NEW TOUCHSTONE ENERGY COMMERCIAL

Hollywood came to Butler County in northeast Iowa this past summer in the form of Harvest Creative Services (Harvest) from Lansing, Michigan.

Butler County REC was chosen as the host cooperative for the Touchstone Energy® Cooperative's annual ad shoot, which took place in June. Before the shoot, however, there were numerous phone calls, emails – 825 in total – meetings, text messages and a week in May scouting locations for the five scenes.

Behind the scenes of a major production

Anne Gardiner, public relations specialist with Butler County REC, and Marena Fritzler, marketing

director with Corn Belt Power Cooperative, spent the week with Harvest. It was a full week that included new opportunities, making grilled cheese sandwiches for one scene, shooting scenes numerous times (the first scene alone took 31 takes), making last-minute adjustments, long days and short nights, and a lot of camaraderie.

Cooperation among cooperatives on full display

The ad was also a nod to cooperation among cooperatives, one of our seven cooperative principles. The first scene was shot at Grundy County REC with lineman Derek Snakenberg driving the REC truck. Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative

sent three volunteers – Ryan Craig, CEO and Touchstone Energy board member; Katie Harris, communications specialist; and Jen Sievert, vice president of customer and corporate relations.

"It was an epic, one-of-a-kind experience, learning from the production crew on set, photographing the journey, and helping behind the scenes," said Fritzler. "The magic of this creation came to life the way it did with the collective strength of many. It was neat to see local employees and board members from Butler County REC, Grundy County REC and Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative step up and into this production."

Creativity, improvisation and a memorable experience

Interestingly, appliance finishes ultimately determined the filming location for the kitchen scene. A couple of Butler County REC employees offered their own kitchens for filming, but during location scouting, the production team determined the finishes and reflections in co-op employees' refrigerator doors when opened were not the right fit for the envisioned transition into the hand-drawn bucket truck. Production crews found the winning refrigerator in a local rental property in Shell Rock, where the kitchen scene was filmed.

Improvising is also a hallmark of ad shoots. When the Harvest team was searching for a table for the kitchen scene, Gardiner offered her kitchen table. Fritzler and Gardiner disassembled the table to get it through doors, loaded it onto an REC truck, covered it due to impending rain and headed to the scene, where the crew unloaded it. After the scene was shot, the table was loaded back onto the truck and covered with a tarp. Rain was definitely on its way.

Fritzler and Gardiner then went back and forth on whether the table should be housed at Butler County REC's CEO Craig Codner's home or driven back to Gardiner's home. They decided to drive the table to Gardiner's and unload it. The decision proved to be the correct one – it sprinkled, but the table remained unscathed.

The ad, released during the Touchstone Energy annual meeting on Nov. 19, is the centerpiece of Touchstone's 2026 national campaign, "The Cooperative Advantage." With more than 100 co-op members, employees and actors, this was Touchstone Energy's largest production to date. It also has the distinction of being the only ad in eight years in which shooting days had to change to accommodate weather.

"Touchstone Energy and Harvest Creative Services were great to work with," Gardiner said. "Butler County REC was proud to be the host for the 2026 ad campaign. It was an amazing opportunity that we are so grateful to have been a part of. I learned so much and had the best time. I also don't look at commercials or movies the same way I used to!"



Scan the QR code to watch the 30-second spot.



Touchstone Energy[®]
Cooperatives

ABOUT TOUCHSTONE ENERGY

Touchstone Energy is a national network of electric cooperatives across 46 states that provides research, communications resources and employee training to help co-ops strengthen relationships with their members. These shared tools and programs support superior member satisfaction, reinforce the cooperative difference and strengthen both local communities and the broader electric cooperative network. Touchstone Energy cooperatives stand out as trusted, reliable sources of power and information for 30 million member-consumers.

WHY DOES TOUCHSTONE ENERGY ADVERTISE?

Advertising is important for Touchstone Energy because it strengthens the unified national brand shared by hundreds of local electric cooperatives, helping members recognize the value, reliability and community focus of their co-op. It communicates the "cooperative difference," reinforces trust, and educates the public on key energy issues, while also helping attract new talent by highlighting the meaningful, community-driven careers available within the cooperative network. By keeping co-ops visible, consistent and connected, advertising supports member engagement, strengthens workforce recruitment and ensures that Touchstone Energy cooperatives continue to be seen as trusted, people-first energy providers.

STEP INTO LEADERSHIP: APPLY FOR THE 2026 YOUTH TOUR



At Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative (CVEC), we believe in the potential of today's youth – the future leaders of our communities. That's why we are proud to sponsor the Iowa rural electric cooperative Youth Tour, a weeklong summer trip to Washington, D.C.

This incredible opportunity gives students a firsthand look at our nation's history and government while meeting peers from across the country and building memories that will last a lifetime. Sponsoring this program is one of the many ways CVEC invests in the next generation of rural Iowa leaders.

Q: Who can attend?

Q: Any full-time sophomore, junior or senior attending high school in CVEC's service territory is eligible to apply! This includes schools in Appanoose, Davis, Lucas, Marion, Monroe, Wapello and Wayne counties.

One to two students will be selected to represent CVEC during this unforgettable experience.

Q: Is it fun?

Q: Absolutely! The 2026 Youth Tour (June 14-20) is packed with exciting adventures, including:

- Touring historic landmarks
- Meeting congressional leaders
- Spending a day on Capitol Hill
- Exploring the Smithsonian museums
- Cruising the Potomac River
- Making friends from Iowa and across the nation

Q: How do you apply?

Q: Applications are being accepted until 4:30 p.m. on Feb. 27. The selection process includes completing an application form and participating in an in-person interview.

Download the application at www.cvrec.com/youth-tour, stop by our office for a printed copy or check with your school's guidance counselor.

For more information, contact Anna See, executive assistant/communications coordinator, at asee@cvrec.com or 641-932-7126. Don't miss this chance to represent your community, learn about leadership and experience the trip of a lifetime!



CVEC'S RECENT YOUTH TOUR REPRESENTATIVES

2025

Cassidy Thompson

Albia High School

Logun Ostermeyer

Albia High School

2024

Brenna Whitney

Moravia High School

Ethan Stalzer

Albia High School

2023

Jordyn Hafer

Albia High School

Olivia Hathcock

Moravia High School

2022

Gabriel Helmon

Albia High School

Jayce Reed

Albia High School

2021

Youth Tour cancelled due to COVID-19: **Allison Major** and **Nick Heffron**, both Albia High School students, each received a \$1,000 scholarship

2020

Youth Tour cancelled due to COVID-19: **Savannah Stalzer** and **Sherryl Rowe**, both Albia High School students, each received a \$1,000 scholarship

2019

Sarah Herz

Albia High School

Collette Teno

Albia High School

2018

Kaitlyn Faber

Albia High School

Jenah McCarty

Albia High School

THE HIGHWAY RESTAURANT SERVES UP COMFORT AND COMMUNITY IN ALBIA

BY ANN FOSTER THELEN

For two decades, The Highway Restaurant has been a familiar gathering place for families, farmers and travelers along Highway 34 East in Albia. The family-owned restaurant opened in 2006 and has become a community favorite known for warm hospitality and generous home-cooked meals.

Owner Nick Maksuti brought deep experience in the industry when he arrived in Albia. Originally from a village in North Macedonia and Albanian by heritage, Maksuti came to the U.S. as a young man and began working in restaurants almost immediately.

"I have been in restaurants all my life since I came to the United States," he said. "My brothers and sisters are in the restaurant business too. It is what our family does."

Before opening The Highway Restaurant, Maksuti spent 10 years running a restaurant in Illinois. He first visited Albia when traveling through the community to see his brother, who also worked in the industry in Centerville. During that visit, he discovered that a restaurant property along Highway 34 was for sale.

"I stopped in and thought I would give it a try," Maksuti said. "Albia is a friendly town, and it is a great place to raise kids."

Homemade meals and a homey atmosphere

That welcoming spirit is felt as soon as customers walk through the door. The dining room is cozy with brick accents, warm wood and simple comfortable décor. Regulars often greet one another across tables, and the staff treats customers like old friends. Morning coffee conversations are common, especially among longtime patrons who make the restaurant part of their daily routine.



The Highway Restaurant in Albia features a cozy dining room with brick accents, warm wood and simple comfortable décor. Daily specials rotate and are often favorite selections for customers.

The Highway Restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and dinner seven days a week from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., with a menu that offers something for everyone. While the restaurant is known for large portions and a wide selection of entrees, breakfast remains the top draw. "Breakfast is our most popular meal," Maksuti said. "People order it all day, and it is my favorite meal too."

The breakfast menu includes omelets, skillets, pancakes, homemade cinnamon French toast and hearty combinations that fill the table. Daily specials rotate, including items like country fried steak, roast pork, chicken stir fry and fresh homemade soups.

Freshness is central to every dish. Maksuti still cooks regularly and often starts his day preparing the soups, mashed potatoes and gravies. "Everything is made fresh each day," he said. "Whatever is left over at the end of the day is discarded, and we start fresh again the next morning."

Carrying on through challenges with gratitude

Like many restaurants, The Highway Restaurant has faced rising food costs and supply issues in recent years. Maksuti continues to adjust through careful planning and rotating specials. "It is a tough time for restaurants because food prices are so high," he said. "I am grateful for my employees and my team. We work hard every day to keep going."

The restaurant remains a busy and reliable stop on holidays as well. For example, on Thanksgiving the dining room filled quickly with families who wanted a delicious dinner and friendly service. The restaurant was open until early afternoon, so the staff could return home to enjoy their own celebrations.

After 20 years, The Highway Restaurant remains exactly what Albia welcomed in 2006: a comfortable place to enjoy a homemade meal, catch up with neighbors and feel at home.

Ann Foster Thelen is the editor of Iowa Electric Cooperative Living magazine.

DISTRIBUTION AUTOMATION KEEPS POWER FLOWING, OUTAGES AT BAY

BY CATHY CASH

Staying online uninterrupted by a power glitch seems more important than ever. And today, it's even more possible than ever before, thanks to advanced energy technologies that can instantly rearrange electricity flows to areas hit by storms or other disturbances.

Distribution automation, also known as DA, refers to a powerful set of tools that includes automated sensors, communications systems and data analytics-enabling electric utilities to monitor power lines, field equipment and generation facilities in real time.

Equipped with these DA tools, Iowa's electric cooperatives can detect an outage and isolate it in real-time from their control rooms before sending out field crew to repair the damaged powerlines.

"Distribution automation helps electric co-ops deliver reliable, high-quality service to members when today's world demands it most," said Ravindra Singh, senior principal of DA for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

Some call DA a "self-healing electric grid" because its application, such as fault location, isolation and service restoration (FLISR), allows the network of power lines and substations to automatically reconfigure in response to disruptions.

How it works

When power lines are damaged or shortened by storms, critters or some disaster, DA systems can reroute electricity from the power source to unaffected infrastructure. This allows electric service to continue uninterrupted to a community that would otherwise suffer an outage.



With distributed automation technology and its analysis of network data, co-ops can see their system's assets, how they are operating and what energy resources are on their power lines to support better quality service and reliability.



Distribution automation devices installed on a power pole bolster reliability and help members stay powered even during storms.



Distributed automation can save electric co-ops and their members money by reducing inspection time for field apparatus such as transformers, substations and power lines.

DA not only has a hand in preventing outages, but this suite of technologies can save electric co-ops and their members money by reducing inspection time for field apparatuses such as transformers, substations and power lines.

With real-time field measurements from DA technologies, a co-op gains situational awareness of its electricity network and can minimize unnecessary maintenance activities, truck rolls and crew dispatches to examine lines, locate damage and make repairs.

"Power distribution grids are evolving from being a passive network to a more active network," said Singh. "With DA technology and its analysis of network data, co-ops can see their system's assets, how they are operating and what energy resources are on their power lines to support better quality service and reliability."

Knowledge is power

Without DA, a co-op may not know where electric vehicles, rooftop solar, residential batteries, generators and other distribution resources are being added or operated on its system by its members. This can be a challenge when it comes to managing peak demand and having to curtail energy to sustain reliability.

Electricity demand is only going to grow because of new types of loads such as data centers, crypto mining and EVs, according to any industry forecast. So, it makes sense for utilities to optimize the use of their existing infrastructure or equipment to keep costs in check.

With DA, electric co-ops can better manage and grow their systems and respond to crises safely and efficiently while their members enjoy reliable electricity without hiccups.

Cathy Cash writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

WISHING YOU AN “AWE”SOME YEAR

BY DARCY DOUGHERTY MAULSBY

Remember when Iowa's night sky offered breathtaking views on Veterans Day 2025? If you stepped outside on Nov. 11, you could see the northern lights shimmering across the horizon.

Like many other Iowans, I couldn't resist taking pictures of this incredible phenomenon. Professional photographers and amateurs with smartphone cameras shared images online of the spectacle, with ribbons of red, green, pink and violet dancing above farms, small towns and city skylines.

The northern lights aren't common in Iowa since we're located too far south to regularly see the region where the lights are most visible. Seeing them in Iowa requires a strong geomagnetic storm to push the aurora far enough south and create an exceptionally vibrant display – a rare event.

In other words, it's awesome.

“I couldn't believe how vivid the northern lights were,” commented my friend Donetta Stewart of rural Auburn, who captured amazing views of the sky above her barn during the celestial show. “I've never seen anything like it. Every now and then, it's soul satisfying to witness something that captures your sense of wonder once again.”

Make room for more awe and wonder

That word “wonder” resonated with me. It describes the magic inspired by a sense of awe.

What exactly is awe?

We've all experienced it, even if we didn't know what to call it. Whether we're enjoying a stunning sunset or watching a new leaf grow on a plant, the feeling we get in that moment – amazed, inspired, transported – is what researchers call awe.



“I've been thinking a lot lately about how it's important to make room and opportunity for awe and wonder in your life, especially as we get older,” Donetta told me. “I constantly remind myself of how it is a privilege to see the passing years. Many I know didn't get to do that.”

She's exactly right. Awe is a rich blessing. It's a gentle nudge to appreciate the everyday wonders flourishing all around us. It's something we all need more of in our lives.

Like many positive emotions, awe makes us feel good. It helps us connect with others. Awe decreases stress levels, and it increases generosity and kindness. Awe also makes us happier and more satisfied with life.

Everything is a miracle

Research shows that awe shifts us from a competitive, dog-eat-dog mindset to a sense that we're a part of a community, a culture, an ecosystem. Thanks to awe, “our individual self gives way to the boundary-dissolving sense of being part of something much larger,” noted Dacher Keltner, author of the book *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life.*“

Finding ways to cultivate awe in everyday life leads us to appreciate what is most humane in our human nature.

- Slow down and focus on your senses. Tune into the sights, textures, smells, tastes and sounds around you, from the flavors of a delicious meal to the delight of listening to a favorite song.
- Spend time in nature. Notice the vastness of the sky, the beauty of trees and flowers, and the way the sunlight sparkles on a river or lake. Even observing nature from a window can help.
- Document the beauty around you. Write down things you notice that bring you joy, or take some photographs, just like many of us did with the northern lights.

This year, make time to nurture a sense of awe, and take inspiration in this quote attributed to Albert Einstein: “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

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



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