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● FEBRUARY 2026

Iowa

ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE LIVING

**Iowa Electric Cooperative
Excellence Award winners**

**Forces shaping the rural
economy in 2026**

Recipes: Cajun classics

Win an ecobee smart thermostat ▶ See Page 3

CONTENTS



6



8



10

VOLUME 79 • ISSUE 2

3

STATEWIDE PERSPECTIVE

Love is in the air and on these pages

3

EDITOR'S CHOICE CONTEST

Win an ecobee smart thermostat

14

EFFICIENCY MATTERS

Make the most of appliance upgrades

15

OUT BACK

Loving the land

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ON THE COVER

Special thanks to Ryan Van Dyke, a North West REC member-consumer, for supplying this month's cover image. Submit high-resolution photos for consideration to editor@ieclmagazine.com. You could receive \$100!

LOVE IS IN THE AIR AND ON THESE PAGES

BY ANN FOSTER THELEN



Love is in the air in February, and Valentine's Day gives us an opportunity to share heartfelt messages of adoration. It is also a fitting

time to reflect on something we care deeply about at *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living*. Each month, we have the privilege of creating a magazine for you, our electric cooperative member-consumers, and that connection is at the heart of everything we do.

This magazine has always been about more than turning pages. It is about strengthening ties to your local electric cooperative, sharing stories rooted in Iowa communities and offering practical information you can use every day. Whether it is a recipe clipped for later, an energy tip put into action, a safety tip that prevents an injury or a story that sparks conversation at the kitchen table, our goal is to serve you well.

Powered by our readers

One of the things we love most is the engagement we receive from readers across the state. You send in cover photo submissions that showcase Iowa's beauty in every season. You share favorite recipes that turn into family-tested meals for kitchens far beyond your own. You suggest story ideas, enter contests, respond to features and let us know what resonates with you.

That kind of participation does more than fill pages. It reminds us that this magazine is not a one-way conversation. It is a shared space where your voices, creativity and experiences help guide what we publish. When you take the time to reach out, you help make *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living* stronger and more relevant for everyone.

This magazine also reaches beyond individual readers. It is shared with community leaders, policymakers and others who help shape decisions affecting rural Iowa. By telling local stories and explaining how electric cooperatives work, these pages help build understanding of the cooperative model and the value it brings to the communities we serve.

Connecting locally, living cooperatively

Your readership reinforces something we believe deeply. This publication matters because it reflects what matters locally. Readers consistently show that they value content that helps them feel informed, connected and engaged with their electric cooperative. That includes learning how cooperatives work, understanding cooperative principles and seeing how local co-ops serve their communities every day.

We hope these pages also encourage you to take part in cooperative life beyond the magazine. Attend your cooperative's annual meeting. Vote for directors who help guide important decisions. Participate in youth programs, educational opportunities or advocacy efforts that give member-consumers a voice. These experiences strengthen the cooperative business model and keep it rooted in local leadership.

At its core, *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living* exists to support the same mission as your local electric cooperative. It is about service, transparency, education and community. As we move through February and beyond, thank you for reading, engaging and being part of this shared effort. We look forward to continuing to serve you and your community, one issue at a time.

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

EDITOR'S CHOICE CONTEST

WIN AN ECOBEE SMART THERMOSTAT!

The ecobee smart thermostat automatically adjusts to your set schedule to save energy when you're gone and optimize for comfort when you're home. Fine-tune your comfort on the thermostat's color touchscreen or from the ecobee app. Works with major smart home ecosystems like Apple HomeKit.

Visit our website and win!

Enter this month's contest by visiting www.ieclmagazine.com no later than Feb. 28. 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.

The winner of smart bird feeder from the December issue was **Julie Tjepkes**, a **Grundy County REC** member-consumer.



ENTER ONLINE BY FEB. 28!

GOV. REYNOLDS SIGNS ORDER ESTABLISHING IOWA NUCLEAR ENERGY TASK FORCE

In January, Gov. Kim Reynolds signed an executive order establishing the Iowa Nuclear Energy Task Force to advise her, the General Assembly and relevant state agencies on the development and advancement of nuclear energy technologies and infrastructure in the state.

The governor has appointed Iowa native Dr. Mark Nutt, director of nuclear energy programs at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, to serve as chair of the task force.

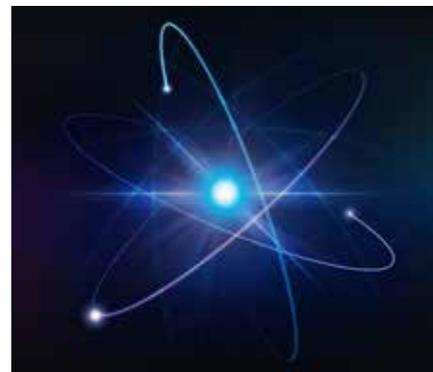
Other task force members include:

- **May Farlinger** – Alliant Energy, President of Alliant Energy Iowa
- **Mike Fehr** – MidAmerican Energy Company, Senior Vice President of Generation and Development
- **Lane Witten** – NextEra, Vice President of Development
- **Brandy Zumbach Meisheid** – Linn County Board of Supervisors, Chair
- **Dr. Jim McCalley** – Iowa State University, Anson Marston Distinguished Professor and Jack London Chair in Power Systems Engineering
- **Sarah Martz** – Iowa Utilities Commission, Chair

- **Matt Resor** – IBEW Local 405, Business Manager
- **Andy Roberts** – Iowa State Building & Construction Trades, President; Plumbers & Steamfitters Local Union 33, Business Manager
- **Sen. Mike Boussetot** – Iowa Senate, Chair of Commerce
- **Rep. David Young** – Iowa House of Representatives, Chair of Commerce
- **Rep. Hans Wilz** – Iowa House of Representatives, Member of Commerce
- **Sen. Izaah Knox** – Iowa Senate, Ranking Member of Commerce
- **Rep. Sean Bagniewski** – Iowa House of Representatives, Minority Whip

The responsibilities of the task force include but are not limited to:

- Exploring opportunities to engage with the federal government to support nuclear energy development and ensure Iowa's policies and initiatives align with national regulations;
- Assessing emerging nuclear technologies for Iowa's energy sector;



- Engaging with industry leaders, academic institutions and others to ensure Iowa develops a highly skilled workforce for the growing nuclear energy sector;
- Engaging with manufacturers and other nuclear energy stakeholders to identify barriers to entry and the partnerships and investments needed to cultivate a nuclear supply chain in Iowa; and
- Evaluating opportunities to enhance economic growth by utilizing nuclear energy.

The executive order requires the task force to submit its final report detailing its findings and recommendations to the governor within 180 days of the order's issuance.

ENTER TO WIN

SEND US YOUR RURAL IOWA PHOTOS

We're always looking for stunning images for the cover of *Iowa Electric Cooperative Living* magazine. If we select your photo for a cover, we'll award you \$100. The photos must be clear, of an Iowa place served by an electric cooperative and in high resolution.

PLEASE NOTE:

To be considered, email photos to editor@ieclmagazine.com with "Cover Submission" in the subject line. Please include your address and the name of the electric cooperative that serves you.



RECEIVE \$100 FOR A PUBLISHED PHOTO

TOP 10 OUTDOOR WINTER ACTIVITIES

Get out and explore Iowa! Whether it's bird watching, tromping through the snow to look at world-class sculptures or zooming down a hill on a sled, there are tons of reasons to zip up a parka and pull on a fuzzy hat and gloves. Travel Iowa partnered with editors of *Midwest Living* to share 10 activities the whole family will enjoy.

1 Peaks and valleys. Even from the parking lot of Pikes Peak State Park there are sweeping views of the Mississippi River and limestone bluffs. Venture a couple of miles farther along a wooden boardwalk through a wooded valley to end up at Pikes Peak, a 500-foot-high riverside bluff in McGregor from which you can see the confluence of the Wisconsin River and the Mighty Mississippi.

2 Eagle watch. See our national symbol soaring wild and free along the Mississippi River. From mid-December through March, eagles make their winter home near locks and dams along the river from Dubuque south to Keokuk. The location offers a prime roosting spot; wooded bluffs flanking the river provide the perfect home, turbulence below dams keeps ice at bay and open water results in an all-you-can-eat fish buffet for eagles. Numerous cities hold events during this annual migration; bring binoculars or use spotting scopes to see hundreds of eagles in a day.

3 Art hop. Brave Iowa's wintry breeze with a relaxing stroll around the Pappajohn Sculpture Park in Des Moines. The 4.4-acre park features artwork by 25 of the world's most celebrated artists and offers a pedestrian-friendly entryway to the downtown. For a truly educational experience, download the John and Mary Pappajohn Sculpture Park Exploration Guide or call 515-657-8264 for a free audio tour.



Photos courtesy of Travel Iowa.

4 Trail trek. Swing your arms and legs just as you do when walking or running and you've got the hang of cross-country skiing. Don't own any skis? Rent gear from Polk County Conservation at Jester Park, where five miles of groomed trails traverse woods near central Iowa's Saylorville Lake. Reserve equipment in advance by calling 515-323-5300.

5 Hills and thrills. Take advantage of the heavy snowfall with a trip to Seven Oaks Recreation in Boone. With ski and snowboard rentals, anyone can test their skills on the 11 runs of varying difficulty. The whole family can also enjoy racing down the snow tubing chutes at this great winter wonderland.

6 Fast and fun. Admittedly, the winter beauty of the Loess Hills passes in a blur when you sled down the .18-mile Chute Trail at Hitchcock Nature Center. But the steep hike to the top gives you plenty of time to appreciate the scenery. Just steps from Loess Hills Lodge, the Chute Trail snakes and twists between steep ravines for a hang-on-tight ride in Honey Creek.

7 Sliding and gliding. Enjoy an afternoon or evening of skating in front of one of Iowa's best-known landmarks, the largest man-made Grotto in the world. The rink offers rentals for all

to enjoy skating in relaxing circles or joining a pick-up hockey game. Skaters can take a break and grab a snack inside the warming house.

8 Stay and play. With hundreds of miles of groomed trails for snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, snowshoe hiking and observing winter birds, Okoboji boasts an abundance of outdoor winter adventures. Or forget about the cold outside with a visit to the indoor waterpark.

9 Winter catches. Offering some of the best winter catches in the country, Iowa's lakes are a prime spot for some great ice fishing. Northern Iowa offers the longest ice fishing season due to colder winter temperatures, making Big Spirit Lake, West and East Okoboji Lakes and Clear Lake ideal places to catch a diverse variety of fish. For a sure catch, explore the dredged backwaters of the Mississippi River, the waters of Big Creek State Park or Storm Lake.

10 Photo opp. Take a tour of downtown Dubuque by following the extravagant murals that cover the community's historic buildings. Part of the Voices Mural Project, this unique collection includes over 20 murals from regionally and nationally recognized painters. Find your favorite and snap a picture to take it home with you.

Safety Tip

Heating equipment accounts for 13% of home fires. Place a space heater on a hard surface and make sure clothing, papers and other combustible items are at least 3 feet away from the heater.



Safe
Electricity.org®



Robert Wakehouse



Jerry Beck

TWO OUTSTANDING INDIVIDUALS HONORED WITH FIRST IOWA ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE EXCELLENCE AWARDS

BY ERIN CAMPBELL



Iowa’s electric cooperatives have a new way to recognize the contributions of outstanding individuals within the industry with the introduction of the Iowa Electric Cooperative Excellence Awards Program.

During the 2025 Annual Meeting of the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives (IAEC) in West Des Moines on Dec. 4, the Excellence Awards debuted as a way to honor Iowa electric co-op employees and board directors who go above and beyond. Earlier in the year, employees and board directors of IAEC-member cooperatives were invited to nominate colleagues; a panel of judges independently reviewed all entries to select finalists.

The Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives (IAEC) is a trade association established to support the interests of member-owned electric cooperatives, including 38 distribution co-ops and nine generation and transmission co-ops. Formed in 1942, IAEC aims to unify and empower Iowa’s electric cooperatives through legislative representation, regulatory oversight, training and education services, safety programs, communications support and advocacy. Since 1948, IAEC has been publishing this magazine to share timely and relevant energy information with co-op member-consumers across Iowa. Learn more at www.iowarec.org.

2025 EMPLOYEE EXCELLENCE AWARD



Robert Wakehouse
Director of Operations
Harrison County Rural
Electric Cooperative (REC)

Harrison County REC Board Treasurer Brenda Lundergard noted in her nomination how Robert exemplifies the cooperative spirit of collaboration and service. Robert has worked at the electric co-op for more than 26 years and was promoted to director of operations in 2025.

During Robert's first month in his new role, the co-op faced two destructive winter storms. Brenda wrote, "Under immense pressure, Robert responded with clarity, determination and strategic foresight with his quick coordination of mutual aid assistance from partner cooperatives and a

plan to restore power to our membership. His actions have fostered trust, demonstrated the strength of mutual aid and underscored the resilience of our rural electric systems. He leads by example, inspires loyalty among his team and represents the absolute best of what our statewide cooperative family has to offer."

In a letter of recommendation that accompanied Robert's nomination, Harrison County REC CEO Shadon Blum stated, "I have witnessed firsthand the exemplary level of professionalism, leadership and dedication that Robert brings to our cooperative and the communities we serve." He went on to explain, "Prior to his role as director of operations, Robert served as our subforeman and staking technician. During this time, our co-op faced the devastating loss of a valued member of our cooperative family. Robert did not hesitate and stepped up to lead his fellow



crew members to make sure that nothing was left incomplete and the cooperative wasn't falling short of its core mission, to provide our members with safe and reliable power."

2025 DIRECTOR EXCELLENCE AWARD



Jerry Beck
Board Director
Iowa Lakes Electric
Cooperative

Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative Board Chair Daniel Winterhof shared the following in Jerry's nomination: "Jerry's enthusiasm for the cooperative model goes beyond personal interest; it inspires those around him. Through conversations, mentoring and his consistent example, he fosters understanding of the cooperative principles in both his family and the wider community."

Ken Kuyper, retired executive vice president and general manager of Corn Belt Power Cooperative, shared in his letter of recommendation:

"Jerry has been a cornerstone of Iowa Lake's organization for decades, demonstrating both vision and dependability. His leadership style is rooted in listening, collaboration and action."

Rick Olesen, retired president and CEO of Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative, wrote the following in his letter of recommendation: "Jerry's gift, as I have related to many of my peers, is his ability to communicate, especially one on one with his director peers, and work through challenging issues to find common ground and build consensus resulting in positive outcomes in support of the member-consumer."

And Jerry's daughter, Elizabeth Beck, shared the following: "What sets him apart is not just his knowledge, but his unwavering commitment to improving the lives of others - through his work, community service and dedication to the cooperative movement. His leadership, vision and integrity consistently reflect the



principles he believes in and the values he has lived by for decades."

As a special surprise, Jerry's daughter attended the IAEC Annual Meeting from out of state to celebrate the award presentation in person.

Congratulations to Robert Wakehouse and Jerry Beck for being named the first recipients of the Iowa Electric Cooperative Excellence Awards.

Erin Campbell is the director of communications for the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives.



CHICKEN AND SAUSAGE JAMBALAYA

- 2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- 1 pound kielbasa, any style
- 2 medium red, green or yellow bell peppers
- 2 medium yellow squash
- 2-3 tablespoons Creole or Cajun seasoning
- salt, to taste
- 2 14.5-ounce cans petite diced tomatoes
- 2 small onions, diced
- 1 pound shrimp, cooked, deveined and peeled
- cooked rice
- fresh parsley, chopped, optional

Cut chicken into bite-size pieces and slice kielbasa into half-inch pieces. Seed, core and cut bell peppers into two-inch strips. Cut squash into bite-size pieces. Grease slow cooker and place chicken and sausage in first. Sprinkle with Cajun seasoning and salt. Pour in diced tomatoes. Top with bell peppers, squash and onions. Cover and cook 7-8 hours on low, or 3-4 hours on high, until chicken is done. Add cooked shrimp and stir to mix. Cook 5-10 minutes longer on low. Spoon jambalaya into bowls of hot cooked rice. Sprinkle with parsley. *Serves 8, recipe can be cut in half to serve 4*

Jacque Bird • Sutherland
North West Rural Electric Cooperative

SHRIMP DIP

- 1 8-ounce package cream cheese
- ½ cup sour cream
- ¼ cup mayonnaise
- 1 cup cocktail sauce
- 2 4-ounce cans tiny shrimp, drained
- crackers

Mix the first three ingredients and spread on a platter. Spread cocktail sauce over top and sprinkle with shrimp. Serve with crackers. *Serves 10-15*

Laura DeSmet • Larchwood
Lyon Rural Electric Cooperative

CAJUN BUTTER CHICKEN BREAST

- 2 teaspoons brown sugar
- 1½ teaspoons mild paprika
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon chili powder, add more if you like heat
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ¼ teaspoon cracked pepper, to taste
- 2 large chicken breasts
- 1½ tablespoons canola oil, divided
- 4 tablespoons butter, divided
- 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ½ cup low-sodium chicken stock broth
- rice

Combine the first nine ingredients to make a Cajun seasoning. Slice chicken horizontally in half to make four steaks. Toss chicken in seasoning mixture. Drizzle with ½ tablespoon oil and rub seasoning all over chicken to coat evenly. Heat remaining oil and 1 tablespoon butter in skillet or pan over medium-high heat until combined and hot. Sear chicken in batches for 5-7 minutes each side, until golden or internal temperature is 165 degrees F using a meat thermometer. Remove from pan and set aside to rest for 5 minutes. Meanwhile, reduce heat to medium and melt remaining butter in pan. Sauté garlic about 30 seconds, until fragrant, while scraping any browned bits from the pan. Pour in broth and let reduce for 2-3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and drizzle sauce over chicken. Serve warm with a side of rice. *Serves 4*

Bryce and Kelly Godbersen • Odebolt
Raccoon Valley Electric Cooperative

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



CAJUN SHRIMP PASTA

- ½ cup butter
- 5-6 scallions, chopped
- ½ cup fresh parsley, chopped
- ½ head fresh garlic, smashed
- 1 quart heavy whipping cream
- ¼ cup spicy seasoning mix
- 2 pounds raw shrimp
- ¼ cup Parmesan cheese
- 1 pound package angel hair or linguini pasta, cooked

Melt butter on medium-high heat. Add scallions, parsley and garlic. Cook until melted, then turn heat to high and add heavy cream. Add your choice of spicy seasonings to taste (or add a mixture of Chef Paul Prudhomme Magic Seafood Seasonings or Blackened Redfish and Louisiana Cajun Blackened Seasoning). Then add shrimp and cook. Stir the entire time until shrimp are fully cooked. Cover and turn to low or turn heat off. It will thicken as it cools. Add Parmesan cheese and serve over cooked pasta. *Serves 10*

Russell Hornsby • Bouton
Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative Association

BANANAS FOSTER BREAD PUDDING

- 5-6 cups bread cubes
- 2 eggs
- 2 cups half and half
- ½ cup sugar
- ½ teaspoon vanilla
- ¾ teaspoon cinnamon, divided
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- salt
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 4 tablespoons brown sugar
- 4 tablespoons pecans
- 2 tablespoons rum, optional
- 2-3 bananas, sliced

Place bread cubes in greased baking dish. Mix eggs, half and half, sugar, vanilla, ½ teaspoon cinnamon, nutmeg and a sprinkle of salt. Pour over bread. Bake at 350 degrees F for 35 minutes. In a saucepan, melt butter, brown sugar, pecans, ¼ teaspoon cinnamon, a sprinkle of salt and rum, if desired. Heat over medium-high heat until bubbly. Add bananas and cook for 2-3 minutes. Serve bread pudding warm or at room temperature with warm bananas foster sauce. *Serves 6*

Chris Daniels • Casey
Guthrie County Rural Electric Cooperative Association

SPICY CAJUN PRETZELS

- 1 cup corn oil
- 1 1-ounce package ranch dressing
- 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried dill weed
- 1 16-ounce package mini pretzels

Combine oil and seasonings. Break pretzels into pieces and place pieces in roaster pan. Pour seasoned oil over top of pretzels and stir. Bake at 200 degrees F for 2 hours, stirring every 30 minutes. Remove from oven, drain on paper towel. Store until ready to serve. Makes a great party snack!

Tahni Lang • Russel
Chariton Valley Electric Cooperative, Inc.

CAJUN POTATO AND ANDOUILLE SAUSAGE

- 1 pound andouille sausage, sliced (or any sausage)
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 green bell pepper, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 4 medium potatoes, diced
- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- salt, to taste
- pepper, to taste
- 1 cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup fresh green onions, chopped (for garnish)

In a large Dutch oven, add andouille sausage and cook until brown. Remove, drain on paper towel and set aside. Add onion and bell peppers to Dutch oven. Sauté until tender, then add garlic. Add potatoes to vegetables and pour in chicken broth. Stir to combine ingredients evenly. Add seasonings and stir well. Cook until potatoes are tender, then add sausage. Stir in heavy cream. Taste and adjust seasonings if necessary. An additional sprinkle of smoked paprika can be added for extra flavor. Garnish with green onions and serve hot. *Serves 6*

Tonya Crowl • Ashton
Osceola Electric Cooperative, Inc.

WANTED:

BACKYARD BBQ FAVORITES

THE REWARD:

\$25 BILL CREDIT FOR EVERY ONE WE PUBLISH!

Deadline is Feb. 28

We're looking for delicious summer **backyard BBQ recipes** – think potato salads, sweet corn dishes, saucy BBQ ribs and beyond! Selected submission will appear in our June issue. 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
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COBANK: FORCES THAT WILL SHAPE THE U.S. RURAL ECONOMY

At the end of 2025, CoBank – one of the largest providers of credit to the U.S. rural economy – released its “2026 Year Ahead Report: Forces that will Shape the U.S. Rural Economy.”

The financial services firm said economic uncertainty surrounding U.S. trade policy is much lower than it was a year ago, steadying the broader outlook for 2026. The reduced market anxiety can be seen in historically low volatility metrics for equity, bond and currency markets, as well as in historically tight corporate credit spreads.

With tariffs fading from the forefront of economic concern somewhat, artificial intelligence (AI) has become the focal point of financial market prognostication. Direct investments in AI and related infrastructure, combined with the wealth effects

from the surging stock market, have conservatively added 1% to U.S. GDP this year. Over the next three to five years, the report indicates AI will likely play out similarly to the oil and gas shale boom between 2010 and 2015 – overproduction of a commoditized product, lower than expected earnings and disappointing industry profit margins.



U.S. economy: Markets adjust to a new normal

Several indicators suggest the economy will continue to remain steady in 2026. With the year-on-year tariff inflationary effect fading by end of the first quarter, core inflation is likely to resume its downward trend in the second half of the year. Moreover, the Congressional Budget Office estimates the accelerated depreciation provisions in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act will boost GDP

growth by almost a full percentage point next year. The labor market has cooled from the post-COVID cycle and is now more in line with historic norms. Near 4% wage growth and sub 5% unemployment are well within the margin of safety for a growing economy in 2026.



U.S. government affairs: Tariffs, farm policy and the shifting Washington landscape

The environment in Washington is beginning to change, if ever so slightly. Farm Bill programs have been extended through September, but pressure is growing for Congress to take further action before the next election. Questions surrounding the president's authority on tariffs, a key issue impacting several market sectors and businesses, will also dominate policy discussions in the coming year.

Grains, farm supply and biofuels: Ample grain supplies will burden markets in 2026

Global grain and oilseed markets remain oversupplied, but increased biofuels production and improving export conditions are boosting optimism that prices have passed their cyclical bottoms. Demand for U.S. grains and oilseeds will continue strengthening as low prices stimulate usage. But grain farmers will face hard choices for planting this spring. Prevailing prices of nearly all crops are below the cost of production. Current price ratios indicate soybeans stand to pull acres from all major crops in 2026. High input costs may discourage farmers from planting corn and switch to cheaper alternatives. Farmer affordability remains under pressure and while corn prices have slid, fertilizer prices have not.

Animal protein: Investment in efficiency is paying dividends as consumers clamor for protein

Despite rising price points for meat and poultry, animal protein demand should remain strong in 2026. The combination of higher revenues and falling feed prices is boosting producer optimism for the year ahead, but not to the degree that expansion is expected to proliferate. Livestock supply conditions have grown notably tighter in the last two years and are likely to remain so over the next 12 to 18 months.

As a result, feeding efficiencies and heavier carcasses will remain a focal point in 2026. While optimism in the sector is strong, several headwinds including new and recurring livestock diseases and trade disruptions could constrain growth in the coming year.

Dairy: Protein will drive milk checks for the foreseeable future

Milk protein is poised for an extended bull-market run as demand for protein-based dairy products continues to climb. While demand for full-fat dairy products also remains strong, butterfat has moved to an oversupply situation. Shifting consumer dietary trends suggest protein markets will remain strong for many years to come. And according to data from Circana and Dairy Management Inc., four of the top 10 protein products for absolute unit sales growth in the past 52 weeks were dairy products, including cheese, cottage cheese and yogurt.

Power and energy: Patchwork or partnership?

U.S. electricity consumption is increasing at its fastest pace since World War II. The Department of Energy is using its emergency authority to direct the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to quickly standardize large load interconnections. If adopted, some of the proposed reforms would mark

a major shift in how large, energy-intensive customers like data centers connect to the grid. While the reforms could expedite grid access for major customers, they may compromise local utility investment and state regulatory authority. That means unified planning and coordination at the federal, state and local levels will be even more critical going forward.

Digital infrastructure: Navigating AI's expansion into rural America

The rise of AI is fueling a historic surge in data-center spending and hyperscalers will increasingly depend on rural America to achieve their ambitious buildout plans. Rural areas offer what hyperscalers like Microsoft and Amazon desperately need: land for sprawling campuses and the ability to colocate data centers with major power infrastructure. Given the business and geopolitical stakes, data center operators are moving fast and writing big checks to reduce friction in rural communities. While these communities face tradeoffs, rejecting data center projects could mean missing out on generational economic benefits.



Scan the QR code to read the full report.



SUPPLY CHAIN KINKS STILL CHALLENGE MISSION FOR AFFORDABLE, RELIABLE SERVICE

BY CATHY CASH

Kinks in the supply chain caused by the COVID pandemic may be in the rearview for regular consumers, but new bottlenecks in the flow of goods and services are challenging electric cooperatives to deliver affordable and reliable service. And the circumstances squeezing the supply chains for electric co-ops are unlikely to ease in the foreseeable future.

Basically, we're talking about a higher demand for electricity, but the supply of equipment needed to maintain or build more power plants has not kept up. Then there's a skilled labor shortage to get the job done and tariffs on imported materials. All these things add up to delayed energy projects at increased costs.

Rising demand collides with limited supply

With all things digital from phones to thermostats, electricity use is up. To sustain the growing digital economy, large data centers with appetites for electricity akin to that of a small city are sprouting up across rural America and electric co-ops' service territories. These centers soak up extreme amounts of power to serve the internet's relentless demand for high-speed networking, data storage and artificial intelligence.

But even in this post-pandemic world, there remains a scarcity of materials, equipment and workers to get new power generation sources built to meet this growing demand.

After the pandemic forced manufacturing to shutter for months in 2020, a lot of experienced employees retired or never even went back to their jobs making transformers and other equipment essential to distributing electricity to consumers. The supply of



The shrunken labor force is challenging the supply for new power plant construction, maintenance or outage recovery. Photo Source: ERMCO



Electric co-ops are seeing lag times of up to four years between orders and delivery of transformers at double the prices compared to pre-pandemic times. Photo Source: ERMCO

some transformers has never been fully replenished, and the lack of a skilled workforce today makes it a constant game of catch-up.

Delays and rising costs ripple through projects

U.S.-based engineering, procurement and construction firms are scrambling to meet work orders for new power projects as there is more demand today than they can keep up with, said Stephanie Crawford, regulatory affairs director at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

As a result, equipment crucial for electricity projects – from new substations to power plant maintenance and outage repairs after storms hit – are on delay and coming in at much higher prices.

Co-ops are seeing lag times of up to four years between an order for a transformer and its ultimate delivery. Prices are up 70% to 100% compared to 2020. Lead times for new gas turbines for a power plant can range from three to six years and cost 25% more than just three years ago.

According to one industry insider, an electric co-op that spent \$10 million on materials and equipment for electricity projects and maintenance in 2020 had to spend more than \$15.5 million in 2025 to keep up.

Collaboration offers a path forward

So, what is your electric co-op doing to maintain reliable and affordable service?

Collaboration, which is baked into every co-op's DNA, is key. Co-ops are working with equipment suppliers and contractors closer than ever before. Many are planning their orders at least a year in advance of construction to work out the snags of the current supply chain.

Knowing their exact inventory and the physical storage space also helps co-ops keep necessary equipment on hand, materials flowing and projects as near to schedule as possible.

The biggest challenge right now is "navigating uncertainty," said Tim Mills, president and CEO of ERMCO, a subsidiary of Little Rock-based Arkansas Electric Cooperatives, which makes distribution transformers with American-made steel at its facilities in Tennessee and Georgia.

By working as a team, electric co-ops, manufacturers and their industry partners will be able to improve forecasting equipment needs, stay ahead of potential demand changes and experience a smoother supply chain.

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

CONNECTED HOMES: THE POWER OF WHAT'S PLUGGED IN

BY JENNAH DENNEY

Our homes are changing, and so is the electric grid. Across the country, more households are becoming “smart” and connected. From thermostats that adjust automatically to electric vehicles (EV) that charge overnight, the devices we plug in are becoming intelligent, flexible and increasingly central to how we use and even produce electricity.

For your electric cooperative, this growing network of connected devices creates new ways for co-ops and their members to work together to keep power reliable and affordable.

What is a connected home?

A connected home is one where everyday appliances and devices can communicate with each other, you or even with your electric co-op. These could include thermostats that adjust to your patterns and preferences, water heaters that operate when electricity is cheaper, home batteries that store solar-generated power for later use or air-source heat pumps that efficiently heat and cool your home.

Each of these tools can help you use energy more efficiently. And when managed effectively, or when many homes coordinate and balance their energy use together, they can also help your co-op keep power flowing reliably and affordably for the entire community.

The power you don't see

You might have heard the phrase “behind the meter.” This simply refers to energy equipment that operates on your side of the electric meter that you own or control. This could include solar panels, battery storage systems or connected devices like EV chargers or smart thermostats.

Individually, they may seem small, but together they can make a big difference. If hundreds of water



Behind the meter refers to equipment that operates on your side of the electric meter that you own or control. Photo Credit: LG

heaters slightly delay heating during a peak time of day (when electricity use is high), the co-op can avoid purchasing power at a higher cost, which essentially keeps rates lower for members. If home batteries store solar-generated energy during the day and release it back to the grid at night, it helps balance the overall supply and demand of electricity.

How connected devices help the grid

Each day, our electric grid must maintain a perfect balance to match the amount of electricity generated with the amount of electricity we are using – all in real time. Because electricity can't easily be stored at scale, this balancing act is constant and complex.

Connected devices give electric co-ops powerful new tools to help manage this complexity. Traditionally, electricity use was simple: flip a switch and power flows instantly. But today, many devices can shift when and how they use energy, also known as load



Connected devices, such as smart thermostats, can help you use energy more efficiently. Photo Credit: LG

flexibility. Load flexibility allows you and your co-op to better align energy use during times when electricity is more affordable, without sacrificing comfort or convenience.

The cooperative advantage

Electric co-ops are led by the members they serve. That means co-ops can design connected home programs that work for your community, not Wall Street. Members who participate can often earn bill credits or incentives, and every member benefits from lower peak costs and improved reliability.

Together, we can build a grid that's smarter, more flexible and ready for the future that's powered by what's plugged in. Contact your local electric co-op or visit their website to learn more about programs for connected devices and additional ways you can save energy (and money!).

Jennah Denney writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

SHOULD I UPGRADE MY APPLIANCE?

BY MIRANDA BOUTELLE

Buying a new appliance can feel daunting. Before you hand over your hard-earned money, choose an appliance that will help you save money over time.

When shopping, keep in mind that not all new appliances are high efficiency and not all old appliances are inefficient. The less efficient your current appliance is, the more you will save with an upgrade. The yellow EnergyGuide label on new appliances shows the yearly energy cost, kilowatt-hour electricity use and ENERGY STAR® logo, if certified.

Refrigerators: When an upgrade pays off

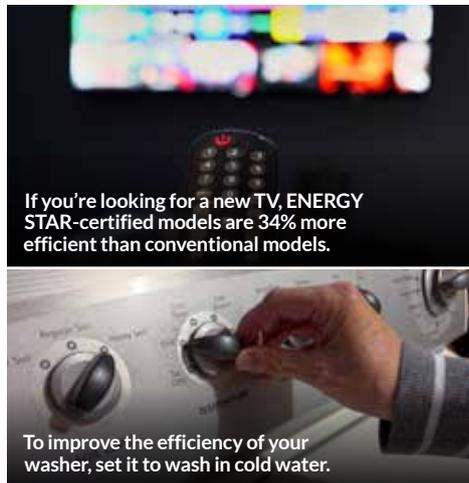
Refrigerators have seen major efficiency improvements over the years. New refrigerators use up to 73% less energy than 1970s models and about one-third less than 20-year-old models.

On a visit to my mom's house, she proudly showed off her 1980s refrigerator she bought when her 1970s harvest gold model died. If her 80s fridge uses 2,000 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per year, at 14 cents per kWh, it costs \$280 per year to operate. New ENERGY STAR-certified refrigerator prices start at \$500 with yearly energy costs ranging from \$38 to \$122. If mom buys a new ENERGY STAR-certified refrigerator for \$1,000 with \$100 yearly energy cost – saving her \$180 per year – it will pay for itself in about 5½ years.

If you intend to keep your existing appliance, be sure to weigh the additional energy costs. Maximize efficiency and keep your food safe by setting your refrigerator to 37 degrees F and your freezer at 0 degrees F.

Laundry appliances: Efficiency gains aren't always equal

New ENERGY STAR-certified clothes washers and dryers are also more efficient than older models. Use the ENERGY STAR Product



If you're looking for a new TV, ENERGY STAR-certified models are 34% more efficient than conventional models.

To improve the efficiency of your washer, set it to wash in cold water.



A secondary fridge or freezer allows you to save money through groceries by stocking up on sales, preserving your own food and saving gas with fewer trips to the store. It's all a balance.

Finder at www.energystar.gov to compare products. Integrated Modified Energy Factor measures the washer's energy efficiency. A higher number is better. Integrated Water Factor measures water efficiency. A lower number is better.

I recently bought a new washing machine when my old front-load machine died. I was considering a top-load machine. When I compared ENERGY STAR-certified top loaders to front loaders, I changed my mind. ENERGY STAR-certified front loaders use about 50% less energy and water than top-load agitator washers and about 25% less energy and water than top-load impeller washers that don't have an agitator.

My new washer cost \$698. According to the appliance's EnergyGuide, based on six loads of laundry a week and an electricity cost of 14 cents per kWh, the yearly energy cost is \$15. Similar non-ENERGY STAR-certified models were \$48 per year. Mine didn't cost much more than non-ENERGY STAR models and will help me save over time.

Then I had to make the decision about buying the matching dryer. My dryer was functional but had features I didn't like. At 14 cents per kWh and running roughly six loads a week for an hour each, my old dryer used \$131.04 per year.

The new matching ENERGY STAR-certified dryer cost \$698 and estimates annual energy use at 607 kWh, which is \$84.98 per year at 14 cents per kWh. With an estimated savings of \$46 per year, the dryer would take 15 years for the savings to cover the price. That's a long time and not worth the cost.

To improve your washer and dryer efficiency, wash in cold water, don't over dry clothes and clean your lint trap between every load.

Televisions: Settings may make a difference

Just like the light bulbs in your home, LED televisions offer increased efficiency. ENERGY STAR-certified televisions are 34% more efficient than conventional models. If you have a working LED television, swapping to an ENERGY STAR model is more efficient but may not make up for the cost of a new TV. Instead, check the efficiency settings on your TV or buy a smart power strip that turns off other connected devices when not in use.

Whatever appliance you are upgrading or replacing, make an informed decision by comparing the cost of operation and shopping ENERGY STAR models to help lower your electric bill.

Miranda Boutelle writes on energy efficiency topics for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

LOVING THE LAND

BY DARCY DOUGHERTY MAULSBY

February is the month of love, with Valentine's Day and all the flowers, candy and cards that come with it. I wasn't thinking about valentines, though, last December during the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives' (IAEC) Annual Meeting in West Des Moines.

Instead, I started thinking about a love of the land in this unlikely setting, thanks to Red Steagall. Late that Thursday afternoon, Steagall, 87, and The Boys in the Bunkhouse sang songs of the West, celebrating the American spirit. You could tell that Steagall's connections to rural America have remained as strong as his boyhood memories of Texas Panhandle cowboys.

An award-winning songwriter, recording artist, radio host, TV personality and official cowboy poet of Texas, Steagall also has ties to northwest Iowa. As he shared stories that inspired his poems like "The Fence That Me and Shorty Built," Steagall recalled the five summers he spent working on his uncle's farm near Havelock in Pocahontas County. From Texas to Iowa, Steagall's sentiments reflect a love of the land:

"You don't own the land;
the land owns you."

"We must care for the land
while we're here and pass it
on to future generations."

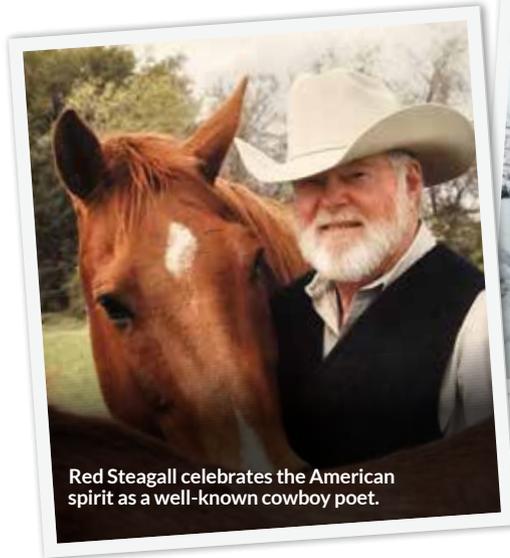
"I sincerely believe in the ownership
of land in the progress of a
free, independent society."

Who talks like this anymore?

It's rare to hear unabashed,
heartfelt sentiments about land
ownership and the essence of
American liberty. I was hooked.

America's story: a history of the land

This brought back memories of
growing up on my family's farm
northwest of Lake City, where my dad



Red Steagall celebrates the American spirit as a well-known cowboy poet.

told me that all original wealth comes from the land. I also recall reading "Gone with the Wind" and thinking about my Irish ancestors who came to Calhoun County in 1889 to farm.

"To anyone with a drop of Irish blood in them – why, the land they live on is like their mother," Gerald O'Hara emphasized to his daughter Scarlett during one poignant scene. "It will come to you, this love of the land. There's no gettin' away from it if you're Irish."

Previous generations intimately understood the inherent value of land. Native Americans' views of land centered on deep spiritual connections, stewardship and communal use – all essential to their identity, culture and survival.

Pioneer settlers often risked everything to acquire land. Western settlement exploded after Congress passed the Homestead Act in 1862. This offered up to 160 acres of public land for a nominal fee to anyone who was willing to claim, settle and farm the land for at least five years.

More than 50% of homesteaders successfully "proved up" and achieved their dream of land ownership. The Homestead Act gave away 10% of U.S. land (270 million acres).



By 2007, there were an estimated 93 million homesteader descendants alive, according to the National Park Service.

"We are born to this land"

Despite this heritage, it seems like land isn't top of mind for most people anymore, probably because we've become such an urbanized society. Even in a farm state like Iowa, 63.2% of us live in urban areas. (A community must have a population of at least 5,000 to qualify as an urban area, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.)

Still, there's something about land that touches something deep inside us. Throughout American history, there have been various "back to the land" movements. Then there's the current homesteading movement and the freedom to pursue a simpler, more sustainable life.

"My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty." Or, in the words of the iconic Steagall: "We are born to this land. We call her America. We love her. We are the luckiest people on this earth."

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



Watch Red Steagall's performance from the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives' Annual Meeting.

Visit our website at www.ieclmagazine.com



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WILL EMPOWER OUR MEMBERS TO

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