

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

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Valley Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

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From the President & CEO



Wishing you a very Merry Christmas

By Rich Bauer

AS WE approach this holiday season, many people will reflect on what they were most thankful for throughout the year. Whether it be family, friends, your job, or even your neighbors, everyone has something or someone in their lives that they are thankful for. The same holds true for your cooperative. Valley REC is thankful for the family we have, the friends that we have made, the services that the co-op provides, and especially for you, our neighbors and owners. That is what sets us apart from other utilities: we are part of the community and owned by our community.

For Valley REC, 2019 has been one of the best years the co-op has ever had. There were a lot of different factors that helped make this happen, but one of the biggest contributing factors was our wholesale power costs and load management program. For 2019, the Susquehanna nuclear plant had its best operating year ever, and the Raystown hydro plant also had a banner year. This resulted in lower than expected power costs to the cooperative. Along with the lower power costs, our capacity costs were down thanks to two things — our members who have a DRU (demand response unit) attached to their water heaters and members using electricity wisely during off-peak times. With all these factors lined up, our costs were below anticipated expenses and your board of directors decided to return this margin back to you this year.

Right before Christmas, money is always tight. So, your board has decided to lower your November power costs by almost half. When you take a look at your statement, you will see that your bill is roughly half of what it normally would be. Along with the power cost adjustment, we have also applied your capital credits retirements to your bill which should lower it even more. We are returning to members nearly \$1 million in power cost adjustment credits along with an additional \$1.1 million in capital credits retirements. This is the advantage of being a member-owner of the cooperative.

Because the co-op's power costs came in well below what was expected, we wanted to pass those savings back to you as a one-time adjustment. We're happy to be able to do it. And, as usual, we continue to apply your capital credits retirements each year on your December bill.

I hope that you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving filled with family and friends, and I hope your Christmas season is just as special. I want to assure you that we at Valley REC are extremely thankful for the wonderful members that we have and the beautiful areas that we serve and call home. Hopefully this reduction on your bill will provide a little extra money in your pocket to pamper the ones you love. As always, if you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to give me a call, stop in or email me. Merry Christmas, and God Bless. 

Soil health impacts all of us

Conservation district program promotes best practices for farmers, gardeners

By Doug Roles

Vice President of Member Services

WHEN Greg Reineke, an education specialist with the Fulton County Conservation District, lifts up a shovelful of sod and asks his audience what he's holding, the wrong thing to say is "dirt."

"Dirt," Reineke recoils, tenderly touching the black mass topped with green vegetation. "This is nothing short of life itself. Soil is life."

Reineke, who often presents to schools and civic groups, led a program about soil health and complexities in October for the Fulton County Library and Fulton County Environmental Action Group. A dozen local farmers and backyard gardeners attended the evening event in McConnellsburg. The small group's conversation about soil mirrors a larger agriculture discussion taking place across the country.

A decades-long progression toward an intensive agribusiness model has some conservationists advocating for a renewed approach to soil management. Some are raising the alarm that soil is becoming sterile due to overreliance on tillage, pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilizers. Reineke is among them. He says soil quality is an issue that impacts everyone. Good soil, he says, is alive.

"It is absolutely chock-full of life," Reineke says, adding that the Natural Resources Conservation Service definition of soil is that it is a living ecosystem. Soil is comprised of minerals, organic matter, air and water.

Reineke told the group that by some estimates there are more life forms in a handful of good soil than there are humans on the planet. He also explained that living soil filters water and serves the function of a wastewater treatment



PHOTO BY DOUG ROLES

GOOD EARTH: Fulton County Conservation District Environmental Education Specialist Greg Reineke talks about soil health during a presentation in October at the Fulton County Library in McConnellsburg. A dozen farmers and gardeners attended the presentation. Reineke said soil health is a critical agriculture issue because poor soils produce nutrient-deficient foods and are more easily eroded.

facility for much of rural Fulton County and the world where there are no municipal treatment facilities.

Reineke also spoke about new no-till planting approaches. He said studies are finding that tillage promotes weed growth, increases the need for herbicides and destroys the composition of the soil over the long term. Fielding a question from the audience about the possibility of unwanted soil compaction with years of no tillage, Reineke says soil compaction in long-term no-till situations is typically from compaction by equipment, usually when machinery is operated over wet fields. Reineke says alternating crops, and especially utilizing cover crops, can apparently mitigate the compaction issue, though it probably won't prevent it.

Reineke says managing soil to promote earthworms and rotating crops to include root vegetables also mitigates the problem.

"And when you till, you basically trash the soil," Reineke says.

In farming circles, there used to be a saying that no-till meant low yield. But across the U.S. there is now a movement — some are calling it regenerative agriculture — of using no-till drills to plant seed mixes that have symbiotic relationships in the soil. This balance promotes the exchange of nutrients through root systems with the help of microscopic fungi. Some producers are coupling intensive rotational grazing with the no-till approach, keeping their soils covered year-round while crowding grazing stock onto small paddocks for short periods of time to control forage growth and put animal excrement back into the ground on an ongoing basis. In some models, grazing stock is on a small paddock for as little as one day before being moved to the next section of pasture.

"There are a lot of people out there

experimenting with no herbicide and pesticide application,” Reineke adds. “And there’s literature out there that suggests you can no-till this way. Put as much life in your soil as you can.”

Reineke also talked about the important role that earthworms play in soil health. He notes that in some areas earthworm populations have been decimated by the application of anhydrous ammonia fertilizers.

Reineke says gardeners can benefit from some of the soil health approaches taking place in large-scale agriculture. He advocates keeping soils covered and says gardeners should mulch leaves and

put them on gardens instead of burning them in the fall. He also says gardeners should concentrate more on nurturing soil health as opposed to fertilizing plants. Reineke says poor soil results in nutrient-poor foods.

John Fix, a Valley Rural Electric member from Harrisonville, attended the presentation because he would like better yields in his vegetable garden. The Fix family has been Valley members since the start of the co-op, and John has been involved in backyard gardening as well as planting row crops on a large scale.

“It was informative; it’s a lot of food

for thought,” Fix says of the two-hour session.

Dan Adams, co-founder of the Fulton County Environmental Action Group, introduced Reineke to the audience. Adams points out to the group that absorption into the earth’s surface is one way carbon dioxide amounts are reduced, along with the use of renewable energy sources and cutting energy waste at home.

“But in order to do that, the soil must be healthy,” Adams says. “Soil is a really big deal.”

Soil health is so important that civilizations rise and fall on it, Reineke says.

He reports that uncovered soil can erode at a rate of 41 tons per acre annually. He says the U.S. is losing soil at 10 times the rate of natural formation. He says in some areas of the world that rate is 40 times as fast as the formation rate. Reineke repeats President Theodore Roosevelt’s warning that “The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself.” ☀

WELCOME ADDITION: Carolyn Kligerman, right, of Mercersburg, shows Dan Adams, McConnellsburg, a container of earthworms during a Fulton County Conservation District presentation in October. The presence of earthworms is one of many factors in good soil health. Earthworm populations can be harmed by overapplication of synthetic fertilizers.



PHOTO BY DOUG ROLES



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Electronic gift ideas simplify holiday shopping

IF YOUR holiday shopping list includes folks into electronics, you're not alone. Consumer electronics are big business, especially this time of year.

In fact, the website statista.com ranks electronics as a top gift category for all age groups. But finding the right gift can be challenging when choices range from smart-home devices — like video-enabled doorbells and voice-activated video displays — to drones and fitness gadgets.

Abby Berry, who covers consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, has provided some help by categorizing gift ideas.

Gifts for those on the go: Berry writes that we all have that one friend who never stays in one place. She recommends gifts that keep them charged and entertained while on the go. For example, a portable charger (or power bank) can keep smartphones and tablets charged without draining your wallet.

"You can purchase portable chargers online or at local retailers for as low as \$20," Berry says. "Typically, these compact devices can fully charge an iPhone three times before running out of steam."

Berry also lists Bluetooth speakers in this category. Whether users are listening to their favorite tunes or watching

the latest flick, Bluetooth speakers can clarify and amplify volume to satisfy any media enthusiast. Prices range depending on features, but you can purchase a quality Bluetooth speaker online or at local retailers for as low as \$30.

Gifts for the chef: Berry says temperature matters when mastering the perfect cut of meat. Did you know there are Bluetooth-connected thermometers?

"Just download the associated app and keep an eye on the grill right from your smartphone or tablet," Berry advises.

Prices vary from \$30 to \$200, but you can purchase these handy gadgets online or at any big box store, like Walmart or Target. Digital kitchen scales are another gift idea. They feature an easy-to-read digital screen. Prices vary depending on the weight the scale can handle, but you can find a 13-pound max weight scale for about \$20 on Amazon.com.

Gifts for the pet owner: Pet tracking products continue to advance. Most trackers simply attach to your pet's collar. Prices vary depending on the tracker's capabilities, but some features include water resistance, health monitoring and exceptional battery life. Pet trackers can be purchased online or at your local pet store. Surveillance cameras for real-time monitoring are



PETCHATZ

CAT'S MEOW: Pet cameras, like the PetChatz model shown here, allow pet owners to monitor their furry friends in real time. Check in on your pet from your smartphone, tablet or laptop.

another option.

"Some cameras even allow you to toss treats to your furry friend while you're away," Berry says.

Additional features include a microphone (so you can talk to your pets), a built-in laser toy (for our feline friends) and the ability to snap a photo or take video from your smartphone. Prices vary depending on the bells and whistles, but you can purchase a pet camera for as low as \$40 on Amazon.com. 🐾

Valley REC employees gather for semiannual meeting



Valley REC employees gathered at the Shade Gap District office in late October for their fall meeting. President & CEO Rich Bauer provided an update on maintenance projects and the co-op's load management program. The sports-themed event included several contests for employees. At left, Todd Ross, left, and Ben Gorman complete a timed challenge for constructing a crossarm. An all-employee meeting is also held in the spring. The meeting rotates between the Shade Gap, Huntingdon and Martinsburg district offices.

