

**Valley
Rural Electric
Cooperative, Inc.**

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric
cooperatives serving
Pennsylvania and
New Jersey

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FROM THE PRESIDENT & CEO

**Improving efficiency: Part of the
energy solution**



by **Wayne Miller**
President & CEO

ENERGY efficiency — the buzzword of the late 1970s and early 1980s — has become a hot topic once again. The federal stimulus bill includes tax credits for energy-efficient home improvement projects, and there are numerous national groups dedicated to promoting the concept of boosting the efficiency of homes and businesses.

But you might not know that the energy efficiency revolution started with the refrigerator.

In the mid 1970s, the first of a series of national refrigerator standards was created. Back then, the amount of energy each fridge used varied widely depending on the engineer who designed it and the amount of insulation built in. By setting and later boosting efficiency standards for manufacturers to follow, the U.S. Department of Energy reports that the amount of energy a standard fridge consumes today has been cut by 75 percent since 1975 — even though the size of the average fridge has grown from 18 to 22 cubic feet.


As a result, the amount of energy we're saving by using current efficient commercial and residential refrigerator models (versus those from the 1970s) equals more than all of the renewable energy produced in America today, excluding hydropower.

You see, energy efficiency isn't really

about adjusting a thermostat and sacrificing comfort or forgoing activities you love to save a buck on your electric bill; it's about being smart with the power you use. And the smarter we are about our power use right now, the less power we'll need in the future.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration stresses that, because of efficiency measures, energy productivity — the impact we get from every kilowatt-hour used — is rising by 0.9 percent a year. By turning to energy efficiency to pull more productivity out of the electricity we require, the United States can reduce the growth of demand from 2.1 percent each year to only 0.5 percent, according to a 2009 McKinsey Global Institute study.

Electric cooperatives like Valley are doing their part to help you get the most out of each kilowatt-hour you consume. Across the nation, 92 percent of electric cooperatives offer energy efficiency programs for members. It's part of our commitment to providing you with reliable and affordable power in an environmentally responsible fashion.

For more information on what you can do to improve the energy efficiency of your home or business, visit www.valleyrec.com and click the "Save Energy" tab. Be sure to check out the "Programs and Services" link as well. It highlights many of the other ways we can help you manage your electric bills. Or you can call us at 814/643-2650 or toll-free at 800/432-0680. 

Living off the land

Local couple digs into community-supported agriculture program

BY SUSAN R. PENNING
Director of Member Services



YOU COULD SAY that Valley Rural Electric consumers Micah and Bethany Spicher Schonberg are two peas in a pod.

Micah worked on a dairy farm throughout high school and on his uncle's vegetable farm while on break from Middlebury College in Vermont. He dreamed of one day making a living as a full-time farmer.

Bethany studied agriculture at Eastern Mennonite University in Virginia. There she developed a fascination with the idea of community-supported agriculture (CSA).

The two met, ironically, while living and working in urban Washington, D.C. Micah was a third-grade teacher and Bethany was employed at a non-profit organization.

"Micah caught my attention when I found out he was growing spinach in his tiny backyard in the city," Bethany chuckles. "On one of our first dates, he helped me build a compost pile for my kitchen scraps."

The two tied the knot (or maybe the farmer's loop) nearly four years ago and began to plot how they could start their own farm. They spent a year working as apprentices at Village Acres, an organic CSA farm in Juniata County. Then they worked for a year on a draft-horse-powered CSA farm in Massachusetts.

Last January, they moved to McAlevy's Fort, Huntingdon County, where they now rent and farm two acres owned by Bethany's parents, Tom and Sharon Spicher. The Spichers raise sheep on their 60 acres along Route 26.

Breaking ground

"We knew we wanted our business here to follow the CSA model," Bethany notes. "And we had a lot of things going for us. My parent's land was ready to farm and we were equipped with knowledge, a bit of experience and a lot of support and resources from the local farming community."

The ambitious couple named their operation Plowshare Produce and started planting over 50 kinds of vegetables. In early spring, with help from folks at Village Acres, they built a large greenhouse that is currently sheltering early tomatoes and will grow salad greens this winter.

The land at Plowshare Produce is in the process of organic certification.

"The only way to grow nutritious vegetables is to build healthy soil," Micah explains. "We use cover

UNCOMMON BUSINESS VENTURE: This year, Valley Rural Electric consumers Micah and Bethany Spicher Schonberg opened Plowshare Produce, an organic community-supported agriculture farm along Route 26 in McAlevy's Fort. The couple harvests boxes of vegetables for their shareholders and hosts a farm stand on Fridays in the summer.



crops, compost and natural amendments like rock phosphate and fish emulsion to achieve that goal.”

Back-to-basics approach

Over the last 20 years, CSA has become a popular way for folks to buy local, seasonal food directly from a farmer. It works like this: A farmer offers a certain number of “shares” to the public. Typically the share consists of a box of vegetables. Interested consumers purchase a share and in return receive a box of seasonal produce each week throughout the farming season.

This arrangement creates several rewards for both the farmer and the consumer. The farmers get to spend time marketing the food early in the year, before their 16-hour days in the field begin. They receive payment early in the season, which helps with the farm’s cash flow.

“It’s good to plant seeds knowing that they’re already sold,” says Micah. “It’s also a privilege for us to get to know the people who eat what we grow.”

The consumers benefit because they get ultra-fresh food, with all the flavor and vitamin benefits. And there is no anxiety about the growing or transport methods. They get exposed to new vegetables and new ways of cooking. They can visit the farm at least once a season. And they learn more about how food is grown.

“It’s a positive educational experience for everyone involved,” Bethany adds.

ABOVE: The vegetables are planted on two acres, which Micah and Bethany rent from Bethany’s parents, Tom and Sharon Spicher.

RIGHT: With help from a CSA farm in Juniata County, the couple built a greenhouse that now holds mostly early tomatoes.

Distributing the bounty

Since Plowshare Produce “got off the ground” last winter, the Spicher Schonbergs have seen their dreams come to fruition.

For instance, they’ve sold all 40 shares for 2009 and currently have a waiting list for consumers who want to be a part of the farm next year. The couple offers full shares, half shares and some work shares.

They also host a roadside farm stand in McAlevy’s Fort on Fridays from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m. through the first week of November where anyone can stop and buy their vegetables.

Folks who invest in Plowshare Produce get a weekly box of vegetables in the spring that consists of salad mix, spinach, lettuce, radishes, tender white turnips, peas, kale and other leafy greens, early beets and carrots, the first zucchini and herbs. A summer box holds tomatoes,

SPRING BOX: Plowshare Produce shareholders get to enjoy weekly boxes of vegetables from May through November. Here, a spring mix is displayed. The Spicher Schonbergs also publish a weekly newsletter that includes recipes for the current week’s produce.



green beans, potatoes, carrots, beets, zucchini, cucumbers, sweet bell peppers, hot peppers, garlic, watermelon, cantaloupe, onions, swiss chard, celery, sweet corn, lettuce, herbs and flowers. The fall brings pumpkins, winter squash, sweet potatoes, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, beets, onions, turnips, rutabagas, potatoes, kale, leafy greens, lettuce, spinach and herbs.

In addition to yummy food from May through November, shareholders enjoy a weekly newsletter with recipes on how to prepare the produce. And they get to participate in seasonal events at the farm.

For more information on Plowshare Produce, visit www.plowshareproduce.com or call 814/667-2272. ☀



PHOTO COURTESY OF PLOWSHARE PRODUCE

Hot tips on air conditioning

If you rely on air conditioning to cool your home, you know it can add considerably to your utility bill. However, there are a few things you can do to keep cooling costs low while maximizing your comfort.

For example:

- ▶ Plant trees and shrubs to shade your home.
- ▶ Use thermal window curtains or shades and install ceiling fans.
- ▶ Purchase a high-efficiency unit.

More tips:

- ▶ When evening temperatures cool down, use a window fan instead of air conditioning. Place the fan in a living room window to blow the hot indoor air outside. Then close other windows except for the bedroom window.
- ▶ The best location for a window air conditioner is a double-hung window near a wall outlet with sufficient capacity to handle the appliance. The weight of the unit is carried on the sill and held in position with brackets at a slight downward slope for proper drainage of condensation. Fill in the gap

between the half-open window and the window frame with foam insulation.

- ▶ For maximum cooling efficiency, clean window unit filters weekly. If you have central air conditioning, replace air filters monthly.

- ▶ Plant trees and shrubs to shade your air-conditioning unit from the sun and it will run up to 10 percent more efficiently.



YOU



can help cool future power costs.

Our future electric rates are partially based on how much power you use on hot, humid weekdays between 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. this summer. When you hear an announcement from your local electric cooperative about doing the "Electric Shift," try these simple steps:

- Set air conditioners at 78 degrees or use fans instead.
- Close curtains and blinds to keep things cooler in your home.
- Operate washers, dryers, dishwashers, stoves and other major appliances in early morning or evening.
- Minimize the number of times you open your refrigerator and freezer.
- Cook with an outdoor grill or a microwave oven.
- Turn off any non-essential lights.
- Run pool pumps at night.



A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative



Meet your employees

A welcome addition to the Valley Rural Electric team last April, Mike Lansberry serves as a staking engineer for the co-op's Huntingdon District.

Mike's primary duties include consulting with consumers about line construction design and system improvements.

"I map out and mark where new electric lines will go," Mike says. "And I handle the paperwork for repair or replacement of equipment that has been tagged as needing attention."

The Altoona native came to Valley with a long history of electrical experience.

He spent 21 years in sales and design with Wesco, a distributor of electrical construction products.

Prior to that, he spent two years with Blair Electric, working as an electrician and estimator. He took on some freelance electrical work at the time as well.

Mike says there were many reasons



Mike Lansberry

why he made the switch to staking engineer for a rural, not-for-profit organization.

"I came to Valley because I was looking for a change," he explains. "I was tired of the endless pressure of sales; I wanted something fresh. I liked the idea of working outdoors. Plus the four-day work week and benefits were huge selling points."

Mike's love for electrical work developed early in his life. He completed the electrical trades program at Altoona's Career and Technology Center before graduating from Altoona Area High

School in 1985. Later, he became a state-certified electrician.

Mike and his wife of 17 years, Denise, have two children, Caleb, 12, and Alexis, 6. They live on Altoona's west side.

"When I'm not working, I'm with my family," Mike points out. "I love watching Caleb play baseball; Alexis is into dancing and basketball. Spending time with my kids is really important to me."

In addition to cheering his children on in their various activities, Mike volunteers at his son's baseball concession stand.

When and if he gets a little time to himself, he says he's content to just kick back and watch a NASCAR race on TV.

As far as his job at Valley, he's quite content with that as well.

"I never realized how beautiful the countryside is around here," he observes. "And the members are appreciative of what you do. I've been offered homemade lemonade and even a burger. You don't see that kind of hospitality much in the city."

The folks at Valley REC are appreciative of Mike, too. He's one of the people you can count on. ☀