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OUTAGES & EMERGENCIES

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FROM THE MEMBERSHIP

A farmer's perspective on summer

Note: The following editorial was submitted by Valley REC member Tony Ricci, owner of Green Heron Farm near Three Springs, Huntingdon County. Tony is also a member of the Tuscarora Organic Growers Cooperative.



by Tony Ricci
Green Heron Farm

IT'S THE vegetable high season and farm stands have cropped up like weeds in the carrot patch. Corn squatters and cantaloupe hucksters have taken over every vacant space along the highways, and official farmers' markets are swarming with customers hungry for the fruits of the farmers' labor. This appearance of bounty after months of impatient waiting

for the first ripe tomato seems almost magical. From the outsider's perspective, it's just another one of those immutable expressions of the natural world that most people accept, like the rising of the sun. Is it even conceivable to have summer without a farm stand overflowing with tomatoes, corn, squash and peaches?

But farmers generally have a different perspective on the weekly event that keeps them swarming like wasps over a ripe melon patch. What really happens is more mundane and unexciting. It's mostly the culmination of a steady, weekly routine that starts sometime in March and winds down at the end of November. This time of year, we're basically on auto pilot.

Every farmer has a unique system to keep the regular flow of vegetables coming from the field to the market stand. For us, it means two days of picking, packing and scrounging from every available source for our wholesale and retail markets. I spend as much time on the phone as I do in the packing shed, making sure that the balance of supply and demand does not leave us with a pile of compost at the end of the week. By the time market day arrives, everything is staged for the ultimate performance that begins precisely at noon every Thursday at Portstown Park in Huntingdon.


The only thing I want to do on the morning of market is pack my van, pet my dog and kiss my wife goodbye. Sometimes

I have to try this sequence of events multiple times because of the pre-market anxiety. Once, in a distracted moment of seasonal dementia, I accidentally packed my dog, pet my wife and kissed an exceptionally gorgeous case of Chioggia beets. Needless to say, none of my victims were particularly happy about my lapse of sanity, especially my dog, who really should have been packed in a bushel box instead of a pea box. My wife just patted me back on the head, gave me a dog biscuit and told me to have a good day at market.

You would think the ride to market would calm my nerves, but mostly I continue obsessing over the details of the previous two days. It's usually about 15 miles down the road that I actually remember what I left behind — the cash box, the signs, the display bins, my socks — and then the weight of summer seems lifted from my shoulders. There's nothing I can do now except punt.

I'm usually the first to arrive at market where I meet up with my helper. A few early birds are out. It's tough trying to explain to these folks that market starts at noon and they'll have to wait while we set up our stand.

As the opening bell draws near, the pavilion at the park is filled. A fleet of baby strollers navigates through the crowd; toddlers poke their heads into every bin of produce, proudly rattling off the names of vegetables; the din of conversation is drowned out only by the passing freight train. It's the last ingredient that makes all our efforts meaningful — the community.

Our sleight-of-hand is complete and the pavilion is transformed into an open air market. Then James, our master of ceremonies, bellows that we're open for business and the feeding frenzy begins. I look around the stand, ready for the first customer, and ask anxiously, "Where are the bags?" My helper just gives me a rueful look. It's time to punt. 

Behind the scenes ...

SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

BY SUSAN R. PENNING

Director of Member Services

Editorial note: The following information was compiled after an interview with Terry Hutchison, Valley REC manager of engineering and technical services.

SUSAN: Terry, I understand you are responsible for identifying areas of our electric distribution system that need improvement or expansion. How do you determine what work to do, considering we maintain more than 2,900 miles of line?

TERRY: We focus our efforts on developing a four-year construction work plan that includes all necessary replacements, upgrades and installations of new equipment. To determine what those are, we first look at a lot of historical data to see what our typical needs have been in the past, and we budget

accordingly. Then, we ask our operations folks — the personnel out in the field — what issues we are having and where we need to make improvements. In addition, we use outside engineering consultants with powerful software and a computerized model of our system who look at our growth patterns, wire sizes, spans, equipment and so on, and arm us with information that allows us to fix things before they're even broken!

SUSAN: I bet all this labor and material gets expensive. How do you decide which work will need to be funded right away and which work will need to wait?

TERRY: It is very expensive. For example, our 2010-2013 work plan budget is \$25,698,888. Planning and funding a work plan is a balancing act. Our goal is always to optimize our improvements

while remaining cost-conscious. We submit a work plan budget request to our financial management personnel and the co-op board. They review it and crunch the numbers. They look at business equity, energy sales, etc. and determine how the cost of the work plan will impact our membership. Then they make their decision accordingly. Of course, there are non-negotiable projects that must be funded right away. But we don't always get everything we want. I believe this system of accountability helps all of us correctly prioritize the co-op's needs. When prioritizing, we look at projects that will have the largest impact on the system. We fund those first and work down the list from there.

SUSAN: When you budget for building or upgrading equipment in a particular area of our territory, how do you avoid





making mistakes regarding the type and size of equipment you install?

TERRY: This can be tricky, because you can't look into a crystal ball and see what a neighborhood will look like in 10 years. We never want to unnecessarily overbuild — that is, install beefy, expensive equipment — at a location that is never going to carry a large electrical load. That would be a waste of money. At the same time, we don't want to underbuild, then have to come back to upgrade equipment we recently installed. That would be a waste of money and time. We make decisions based on the best information we have available and we rely a lot on our engineering software to make educated choices regarding projected load growth.

SUSAN: How exactly are these work plan projects funded?

LEFT: Shade Gap district personnel install hardware on a pole being set along Route 641 near Shade Gap. Part of the co-op's current work plan, this project involves replacing aging lines and equipment in the area with larger poles and heavier wire that will handle more electrical load.

RIGHT: It often makes sense to hire contracted crews for work plan labor. Here, personnel from C.W. Wright begin a project that will increase the capacity of the Route 30 substation near Hustontown, Fulton County.

ABOVE: Co-op lineman Tink Bucher of the Shade Gap district prepares to attach wires to a new pole being set along Route 641 near Shade Gap, Huntingdon County.

RIGHT: Co-op personnel get ready to raise one of a series of new poles along Route 641.

TERRY: Well, as I mentioned before, it's a balancing act. We basically use two resources to finance our work plans: federal and cooperative lending institutions that offer super-low interest rates; and our members' patronage capital — the money they've invested in the co-op by paying their electric bills. The goal is to use the best blend of financing that results in the lowest cost to our members. We currently maintain about 42 percent member equity in the coopera-



tive. That percentage is well within the range recommended by our bankers to keep a healthy financial status. We have to be good stewards and be fair across the board with regard to using members' money to fund work plan projects. The bottom line: We do our due diligence so that we can continue to maintain service reliability and keep our members happy without overspending on projects. It's a responsibility we take very seriously. ☀



HomeEnergySuite™ gets makeover

BY JOHN H. BOOKWALTER, JR.
Special Projects Coordinator

REMODELING is a task familiar to many homeowners. They may change features, make additions and remove obsolete components. They may apply new paint or wall coverings to give spaces a fresh look. The goal behind these projects is often to make the home more comfortable and to improve its functionality and efficiency.

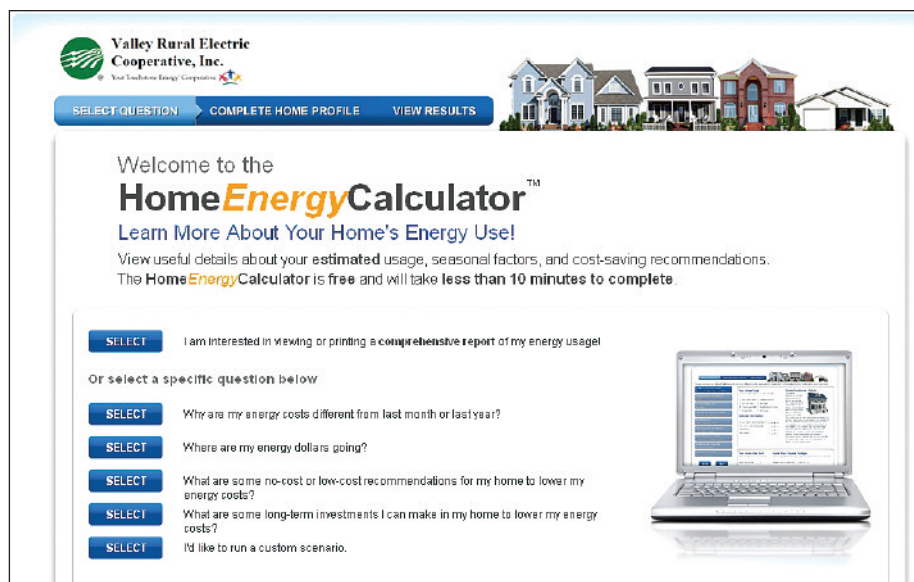
Companies update software for similar reasons. For example, Apogee Interactive has remodeled its HomeEnergySuite™, the home energy auditing software and reference materials that Valley Rural Electric makes available for free on its website. This new version differs from the one highlighted in the February 2011 edition of *Penn Lines*. The software incorporates a new design scheme along with changes and suggestions from users like you.

When you access the updated HomeEnergySuite, the first screen that displays is the home page. Serving as the landing page, this screen now has a new look and function. All components of the software are presented here as icon buttons. You may navigate the energy suite by clicking on these buttons instead of the tabs that were across the top of the screen in the old version. Each component's page opens as a separate browser window or tab. A new background and color scheme adorns all of the pages.

HomeEnergyCalculator™

The HomeEnergyCalculator™, which models your home's energy use, has been completely redesigned to be more user-friendly. It tries to minimize the need for you to leave the computer to locate or determine requested information. The goal of the new format is to encourage completion, which should take less than 10 minutes. Most people take two to five minutes to finish.

The initial screen of the home calculator now offers several options to evaluate your residence. You can select a comprehensive report or focused information about a specific question. Also available is a custom scenario where you describe your existing home and compare it to a



modified version that you specify.

Each of these selections takes you to the home profile section where you supply data about your home. No longer confined to one page, the questions in the home calculator now span multiple pages, one for each topic listed on the left of the screen. Each topic's screen asks questions about your residence.

As you choose an answer, a picture and short description appear nearby to explain the choice. Be certain to specify how many people in your household are away during the day and how many are home.

Once you have viewed and answered each of the nine topics, click the Calculate button. If you skipped any topics, a message asks you to complete those sections or continue with the default values. The software analyzes your responses and generates a detailed report that explains why your current energy costs might differ from last month or last year; shows where your energy dollars are going; and offers some no-cost, low-cost and larger ticket improvements that you can make to lower your energy bills. The View Detailed Report button allows you to review, print or email your report. At the bottom of the results screen, you may send feedback about the HomeEnergyCalculator to Valley REC.

Lighting Calculator

The Lighting Calculator also has a new

design. This calculator compares incandescent and compact fluorescent light-bulbs. Slider bars replace the previous drop-down selection menus. Use them to select the number of bulbs, hours of use per day, wattage and price. Calculations are made automatically without the need to click on a button. Total savings and total costs of ownership, projected over 10 years and broken down by electricity costs and lamp or bulb costs, appear instead of the monthly and annual savings.

Energy libraries

The two energy reference libraries, Home Energy Library and Fundamentals of Electricity, have received some improvements, too. Both now feature a search box and a list of contents. Selecting a content topic presents a second list with related articles. If you type a word or phrase in the search box and click Go, a list of any articles containing your search terms appears. Peruse the articles to learn about energy use in your residence and the basics of electricity.

All of these modifications should make the HomeEnergySuite easier and more beneficial to use. To take advantage of the updates, visit Valley REC's website at www.valleyrec.com and click the Save Energy link. You will find ways to "make over" your home to use energy more efficiently and reduce energy costs. ☀