

# Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative Association, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives  
serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

## Northwestern REC

P.O. Box 207

22534 State Highway 86  
Cambridge Springs, PA 16403  
www.northwesternrec.com

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## Main Access Number

1-800-352-0014

## Emergencies/Outages

1-800-352-0014

## FAX

814-398-8064

## Office Hours

Monday through Friday  
7 a.m. - 3:30 p.m.

**Amy Wellington, Editor**

## Guest Column



# Our goal is excellence in safety

By Ryan Meller, *Chief Operating Officer*

I AM BOTH honored and excited to have been given the opportunity to serve the members as your new chief operating officer (COO) for Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative (REC). This is a new position created by Bill Buchanan, president & CEO, in his efforts to streamline management and realign business functions at the co-op. The COO will be responsible for administering three primary functions: operations, engineering and information technology.

My main objective as COO is to maintain excellence in safety for our employees and the public. Our line crews often work in extremely dangerous conditions. It is of utmost concern to ensure our lineworkers go home safely to their families every night. We are fortunate to have very knowledgeable lineworkers who continue to provide our membership with professional service.

Recently, we have developed a mobile hotline (live wire) demonstration to educate emergency responders, police cadets, school students, and the general public about the dangers of electricity and power lines. Please reach out to our staff at any time to schedule one of these free demonstrations. I also encourage you to visit the outage page on our website, where you will find helpful tips to follow during an extended outage.

During my tenure at Northwestern REC (I began my career here in 2012 as an intern), my team has been instrumental in administering the

co-op's distribution system upgrades that allow for automated power monitoring and switching. This work has improved service quality, reliability and safety for you, our members.

Using strategic planning, we will continue to be at the forefront of system improvements through technology adaptation and will use these to develop our goals. In recent years, we have strengthened our substation ties with newer, larger wire that allows us to backfeed our members from alternate sources. This happens automatically, so other than a brief power interruption (a matter of seconds), you will not realize you're being backfed from another substation.

I look forward to continuing our commitment to improving operations, as well as working with our staff to provide our members with safe and reliable electric service. The cooperative has given me the most incredible opportunities, and I am honored to help lead the co-op team as we continue to serve, ensuring value to our members.

Cooperatively yours,  
Ryan Meller, Ph.D.  
Chief Operating Officer

*Ryan Meller is an electrical engineer, who earned his Ph.D. in systems engineering from Colorado State University and a master's degree in power transmission and distribution from Gonzaga University. Meller is also a member of Northwestern REC.*

## Ten tips to consider before installing solar

AS PRICES decline and technology improves, installing a residential solar system — also called a photovoltaic, or PV system — makes sense for some consumers. However, even with these recent improvements in PV systems, it's important to find out the facts before committing to a purchase. Consider these points as you explore whether solar is right for your situation:

### 1. MAKE YOUR HOME MORE ENERGY EFFICIENT BEFORE BUYING A SOLAR SYSTEM.

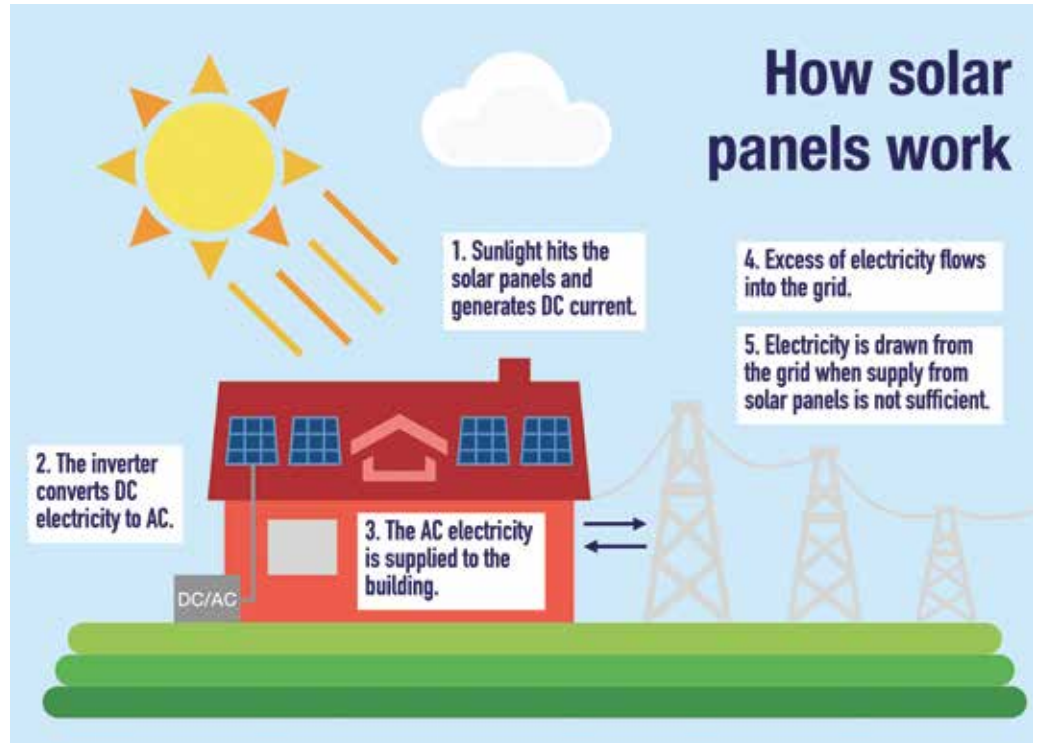
Adding insulation, sealing air leaks and completing other basic fix-it projects make sense for several reasons. You can cut your energy costs immediately, and you'll also be able to reduce the size of the PV system you purchase. Northwestern Rural Electric Cooperative (REC) does offer several levels of home energy audits to members.

### 2. RESEARCH, RESEARCH, RESEARCH, BEFORE INVESTING IN A SOLAR SYSTEM.

Your electric cooperative should be one of your first contacts. Our experts at the co-op can answer basic questions, provide resource materials and direct you to reputable websites.

### 3. UNDERSTAND HOW A SOLAR SYSTEM MESHES WITH YOUR COOPERATIVE'S SYSTEM.

Most solar systems are designed to provide you with a portion of the electricity needed, but won't provide 100% of your needs. At night and on cloudy days, and possibly at other high-energy-use times, you'll need more power than your PV system can produce. That means you'll still be connected to your cooperative's power lines. Because these systems are grid-connected, energy can flow both ways. Your cooperative has appropriate



policies for connecting PV systems to its lines (the grid) and for purchasing any excess energy your system might provide. Due to Act 129, a state law, Pennsylvania co-ops are limited to a maximum generation of 110%.

### 4. REVIEW YOUR CURRENT ENERGY USE SO YOU CAN DETERMINE WHAT SIZE PV SYSTEM TO INSTALL.

Northwestern REC requires a full year of past electric use to calculate an appropriate PV size for your home. Co-op staff can help you review your past energy use and determine how the projects you've undertaken to improve energy efficiency may help lower your future energy use. One pertinent bit of information that will be useful is looking at how your energy use fluctuates throughout the day. Having that information will help you determine — with expert assistance — the size and type of system best suited to your situation.

### 5. TALLY UPFRONT COSTS.

Northwestern REC does not sell,

install, or maintain PV systems, so you will either purchase or lease a system from a contractor who is not a part of the cooperative.

If you purchase a solar system, you will be the owner, and you'll be responsible for the purchase price as well as ongoing maintenance and repair costs. If leasing is the option you prefer, you will pay less initially, but you'll likely have higher ongoing costs. In either case, it pays to spend time figuring out all the expenses you'll be responsible for during the life of the system. These may include installation (in addition to the price of the system), interconnection costs, insurance, taxes and possibly others, too.

If you are leasing, ask contractors about the length of the term, if the contract is transferable to a new homeowner if you sell your home, the potential for price increases as well as the same questions you'd ask if you were to purchase a PV system. In the "credit" column of your price comparisons, look at any incentives, rebates, and tax credits offered for either a purchase or a lease.



#### 6. SEARCH FOR INCENTIVES, REBATES AND TAX CREDITS.

Any financial incentives available will help reduce your investment costs. Opportunities vary by state and locale, and many have expiration dates. One database offering details is [dsireusa.org](http://dsireusa.org). This site includes a clickable, interactive map, showing federal and state incentives, credits, exemptions, grants, loans, and rebates for residential and commercial/industrial projects. In addition, your electric cooperative staff and your contractor should have up-to-date details about available incentives.

#### 7. ACCEPT SHORT- AND LONG-TERM RESPONSIBILITIES.

If you purchase a PV system, you'll need to meet the requirements of the interconnection agreement with Allegheny Electric Cooperative, Inc., Northwestern REC's generation and transmission cooperative. That includes paying any costs of connecting to the cooperative grid. Local and/or state officials are responsible for conducting safety inspections, but it's your responsibility to notify them in advance about your installation. After the interconnection requirements are met, and the safety and integrity of your system are

approved, your cooperative will take care of the connection to the grid. And, as the owner of the system, you'll be responsible for maintenance and system repairs. If you lease a system, your responsibilities will depend on the agreement you sign. Be sure you know what those responsibilities are.

#### 8. FOLLOW ALL SAFETY PRECAUTIONS.

Most solar systems are grid-connected. Because of the two-way flow of electricity, excess energy your PV system collects during the daytime flows into your cooperative's lines. This shoulders you with the responsibility for the safety of your cooperative's line staff, others who may come in contact with a downed power line and your cooperative's equipment. Improper connection and maintenance of your system may endanger people and the reliability of the grid.

#### 9. CHOOSE A REPUTABLE CONTRACTOR/INSTALLER.

Start with a list of options garnered from website research, local or state Better Business Bureaus, renewable energy associations, your state energy office, your state attorney general's office, extension service staff, and any other local experts you can call

on for assistance and advice. Contact at least a few of those contractors appearing on your list, especially if recommended by multiple state and local experts. Winnow your list after asking many questions, checking out other installations the contractor has completed, comparing bids (get at least three), checking references and thoroughly examining contracts. If possible, ask a contract specialist or lawyer to review the contract before signing.

#### 10. MAINTAIN GOOD RECORDS.

Keep files on your pre-purchase research and pre-installation data provided by your cooperative, as well as bids, contracts, inspection reports, maintenance records, and all other details you may need to refer to in the future. In addition, you'll want to know about system performance, so set up a system to track and compare your actual system performance with predictions provided by the contractor/installer.

If you have any questions, please email us at [info@northwesternrec.com](mailto:info@northwesternrec.com), chat with us online at [NorthwesternREC.com](http://NorthwesternREC.com), or call us at 800-352-0014. ☎

A graphic with a purple background. At the top, it says "CO-OP RATES CONTINUE TO BE STABLE" in white, bold, sans-serif font. Below this is a photograph of a person in a yellow jacket holding a smartphone that displays a green bar chart with an upward trend. At the bottom of the graphic, it says "NO RATE INCREASE IN 2022" in white, bold, sans-serif font.

## Are portable space heaters efficient for my home?

SMALL space heaters are meant to do exactly as their name says: Heat a small space. Unfortunately, many people use portable space heaters to heat their entire home, which can take a toll on their energy bills. The truth is, whether you should use space heaters really depends on your home's efficiency and energy needs.

If you're using a space heater to compensate for problems in your home, like inadequate insulation, drafty windows and exterior doors, or an inefficient heating system, space heaters are not a practical solution. Your best bet is to improve the overall efficiency of your home.

If you're on a tight budget, caulking and weather stripping around windows and exterior doors is a low-cost, easy way to save energy. Depending on the size of your home, adding insulation can be a great next step. Loose fill insulation typically costs \$1 to \$1.50 per square foot.

Taking these proactive energy-saving measures rather than relying on space

heaters for supplemental warmth can reduce your heating and cooling bills for years to come.

Perhaps your home is energy efficient, but you're cold-natured and want a specific room to be cozier than the rest. In this case, a space heater may work for your needs. A good comparison is ceiling fans. We use ceiling fans in the summer to cool people, not rooms. A space heater can be used in a similar way during winter months. Only use a space heater in small spaces that you're occupying and, if possible, try to shut off other rooms to contain the warmth provided by the space heater. If you decide to use a space heater to heat a small area in your home, make sure the heater is properly sized for the space; most heaters include a general sizing table.

A word about safety: The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates more than 25,000 residential fires are associated with the use of space heaters every year, resulting in more than 300 deaths. If you must use

a space heater, purchase a newer model that includes the most current safety features and make sure it carries the Underwriter's Laboratory (UL) label. Choose a heater that's controlled by a thermostat to avoid energy waste and overheating and place it on a level surface away from foot traffic. Always keep children and pets away from space heaters. Consider alternative ways to stay warm too, like extra layers of clothing or UL-approved electric blankets. If you have hardwood or tile floors, lay down area rugs to provide additional insulation (and appeal!) and maintain warmth.

We know it's cold out there, but remember in addition to safety concerns, space heaters can greatly increase your energy bills if used improperly.

If you're looking for alternative ways to save energy and increase comfort in your home, contact Rian Doubet, energy solutions representative, at 800-352-0014. We're here to help you manage your energy use. ❄️



## TIPS TO DITCH THE SPACE HEATER

Space heaters are energy hogs, and older models can be extremely dangerous. This winter, ditch the space heater and try these alternative solutions to stay cozy.

- Use an electric blanket to keep warm during the night.
- Caulk and weatherstrip around all windows and doors to prevent heat loss.
- Consider adding insulation to your attic and around duct work.

