

Valley
Rural Electric
Cooperative, Inc.

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One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

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GUEST COLUMN

2015 is the start of a busy new year



by Doug Roles
Director of Member
Services

THE NEW YEAR got off to a busy start. Staff at Valley REC worked to offer members a new electronic billing system in the coming weeks. They prepared for district nominating meetings and fielded calls from members asking for tips on staying warm while balancing the budget. The 2015 vegetation management program also kicked off.

The rest of the year looks just as busy. Spring brings the annual meeting, and planned system maintenance projects will take place throughout the coming months.

SmartHub launch

The co-op is launching the SmartHub electronic account management system, the successor to the E-Bill platform. SmartHub is more compatible with mobile devices and will allow members to receive alerts. Current E-Bill users can continue using their existing log-in credentials. More information on SmartHub is available on page 12b.

Cold snap

January brought winter's first spell of bitterly cold weather. Single digits were common, with wind chills in the negative numbers, so staying warm without breaking the bank was a challenge.

Members often ask our staff energy specialist for the one big thing they can do to save energy in cold weather. Typically, the solution is a mix of several smaller steps, such as caulking around windows, putting weather stripping around doors and keeping your HVAC system properly maintained. The "Save Energy" tab on Valley's website (www.valleyrec.com) is a great resource on cutting costs and staying warm.

Tree trimming

A member recently asked about Val-


ley REC's monthly charges compared to those of private power companies (PPCs) in the region. The question came about the same time we were mailing notifications of tree-trimming work to members along affected rights-of-way. What do the two things have in common?

For a contracted tree-trimming crew, a couple miles of line is all in a day's work, whether it's a co-op line or a PPC line. But along that mile of line, the co-op has, on average, seven members, compared to 34 customers for the private companies. By their nature, rural co-ops have fewer consumers to shoulder the costs of operating and maintaining the distribution system. Couple this sparse consumer base with the costs to reach remote lines and the economics of ensuring a reliable energy supply become more challenging. But it doesn't change the goal from doing so safely and at the lowest possible price.

Nominating meetings

February is the month for district nominating meetings. The co-op has nine director districts. Each year, three of those districts have meetings to nominate members to stand for election to the co-op board during the annual meeting. Meeting invitations were mailed in January to members of Districts 2, 4 and 6.

Unsure what director district you live in? A map and breakdown by municipality is available on the website. Just click on the "Member Info" tab and select "Directors and Districts" from the dropdown menu.

When your district has a nominating meeting, it's important that you return your invitation and attend the meeting. The cooperative is "your" business. Your attendance at the nominating meeting and the annual meeting means you are exercising the cooperative principle of democratic member control. Please mark your calendar for the annual meeting on Friday, April 10, at Huntingdon Area High School. 

Valley REC launches new electronic bi

BY DOUG ROLES
Director of Member Services

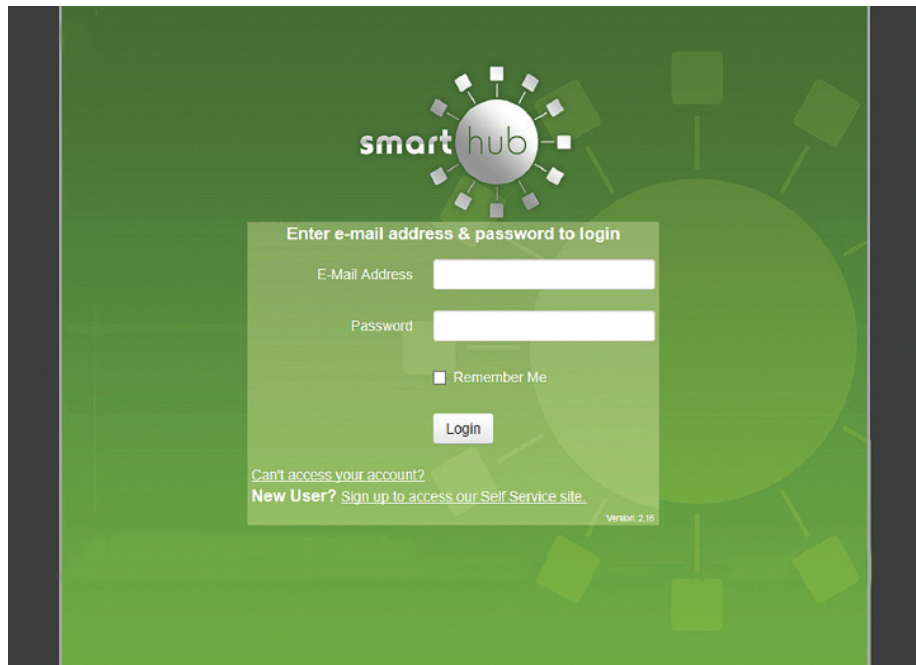
CO-OP MEMBERS who like to pay their bills online will be able to “get smart” about it this month as Valley Rural Electric Cooperative launches a new electronic account management system.

The co-op will make available the National Information Solutions Cooperative’s (NISC) “SmartHub” platform in mid-February. SmartHub replaces NISC’s current E-Bill platform.

Ben Gorman, manager of business administration, explains that the E-Bill platform had reached the end of its life cycle and will offer no new features for users. Nor will it any longer be supported by NISC, the vendor which supplies Valley REC and many other electric cooperatives with accounting and billing services.

“This is the replacement,” Ben says of SmartHub. “It enhances communications, administration and interaction. It gives our members more options to interact with their cooperative.”

The E-Bill log-in screens will be replaced with those for SmartHub. Cur-



NEW SERVICE: SmartHub is Valley REC’s new electronic account management platform. It succeeds the E-Bill service previously offered by the co-op and provides more compatibility with mobile devices. Below: Executive Secretary Kim Kane, a co-op member, uses her cellphone to check her electric bill.



rent E-Bill users will not have to change their existing log-in credentials. SmartHub offers the services of E-Bill and more. Download of the SmartHub app is free on the App Store® and Google Play®.

“SmartHub not only replaces our current outdated E-Bill web platform, but also adds tablet and smartphone app support for a better experience for our members,” says Max Hetrick, Valley REC’s IT manager.

Valley REC began offering electronic bill payment to its members in the fall of 2010 through the E-Bill service. The service modernized (for that time period) members’ experiences by giving them a way to view their billing history and to use credit/debit cards and electronic checks to pay their bills. It also enabled members to set up recurring payments.

SmartHub goes further by giving members the ability to manage notifications from the co-op. The service can notify members when their bill is due or when a payment has been posted. Members can still view their billing history

with just a couple of clicks or taps.

SmartHub is very user friendly when analyzing electricity use trends over time. Valley members who use SmartHub can report power outages without having to call the co-op’s offices by using the built-in service features. Users can also send email messages to the cooperative through the service app.

“A nice addition to the new platform is the ability to control the type of alerts and notifications you want to receive regarding your account,” Max says. “This was not available in the past and is a great feature for those who want alerts for things such as credit card expiration, personal information changes and billing changes.”

In addition to receiving account notifications and other information — via email, text message or through the app — members can also store payment methods safely, and add or delete those methods at any time. As user friendly as it is for members, SmartHub will also make co-op staff more efficient.

“SmartHub will further enhance

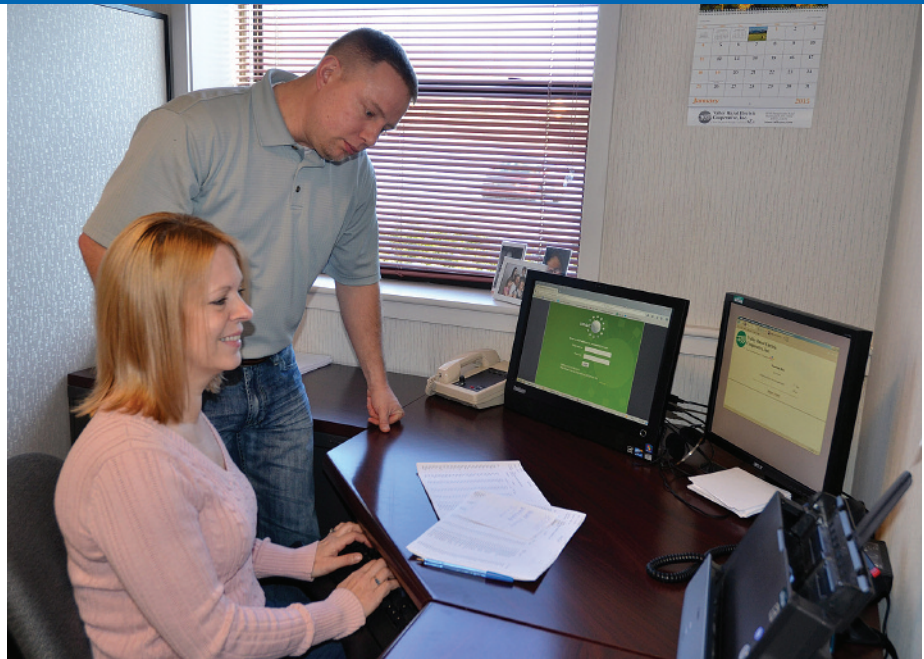
Bill pay service

automation of our billing and outage systems, which in turn frees up Valley employees to be more productive,” Max says, pointing out that billing staff will no longer have to manually generate lists of expiring credit cards in order to send out notifications.

The SmartHub landing page can be found at the Valley REC website (www.valleyrec.com) in the “View & Pay Bill” tab at the top of the page.

The co-op is making available instructional “Smart Clip” videos. The tutorials can be seen on Valley REC’s Vimeo page. Go to www.vimeo.com and search for Valley Rural Electric Cooperative. 🌞

PHOTO BY DOUG ROLES



2015 CHANGE: Ben Gorman, manager of business administration, left, and Nancy Bucher, billing clerk, navigate the SmartHub interface.

Co-op seeks students for 2015 Youth Tour

HIGH SCHOOL juniors and seniors connected to the co-op either through a parent’s membership or employment have a great opportunity to make new friends and learn more about their government this summer.

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative will sponsor students from throughout the cooperative’s eight-county service territory on an all-expenses-paid trip to the nation’s capital June 14-19. The Rural Electric Youth Tour has brought high school students to Washington, D.C., every June for more than 50 years.

More than 40,000 students from rural areas and small towns across America have participated in this unique program. The featured speakers during National Youth Day provide insight regarding the important roles electric cooperatives play in their communities and in the nation. Students gain a personal

understanding of American history and their responsibility as citizens by meeting their representatives and senators, and exploring the sights around the nation’s capital.

the Youth Tour delegation must meet several criteria. Any high school junior or senior whose parent or guardian is a member or employee of Valley REC is eligible to apply.

Students will be required to submit a transcript along with additional information to the co-op Selection Committee. Transcript submission may be done electronically.

Selections will be based on academic achievement, as well as participation in extracurricular activities and/or community service programs. Students interested in attending Youth Tour this year should visit their



IN WASHINGTON, D.C.: U.S. Rep. Bill Shuster (R-9th) visits with Youth Tour representatives at the U.S. Capitol.

It’s not unusual to see a former Youth Tour participant working as a congressional aide on Capitol Hill. In fact, several former Youth Tour students have gone on to serve in the highest ranks of government, including the U.S. Senate.

Juniors and seniors interested in joining

high school guidance counselor’s office now to apply. Final selections will be made in early March. For more details, visit www.valleyrec.com and follow the Programs and Services link to Youth Tour. Or call the co-op’s member services department at 800-432-0680, extension 1663. 🌞

Meet your employees

BY DOUG ROLES
Director of Member Services

HIGHLIGHTED in this column is a recent addition to the Valley REC team, Trevor Eichelberger. Trevor joined the co-op staff in May 2014 as a fourth-year lineman working in the co-op's Martinsburg District.

A native of Hopewell Township, Bedford County, Trevor is a 2005 graduate of Northern Bedford County High School. He attended Penn State's Altoona and main campuses, taking a variety of courses. He then attended the Southeast Lineman Training Center in Trenton, Ga., completing the 15-week lineworker course.

"They take a guy who doesn't even know how to lace up his boots and 15 weeks later, you have your CDL and you can climb anything," Trevor says.

Following lineman's school, Trevor went to work as an apprentice lineman for Adams Electric Cooperative in Gettysburg, where he worked prior to coming to Valley REC. Trevor believes the two co-ops are more alike than different. He says Adams Electric is especially similar to Valley REC in that it too has three districts. He says Valley's Martinsburg District is similar to Adams' Shippensburg District, while the Gettysburg District (where he worked) compares to the Huntingdon District. He says Adams' York District is very rural, as is Valley's Shade Gap District. The goal of providing members with the best possible service is the same, too.

Trevor has a lifetime of experience with rural electric co-ops. His father, Rick, is the general manager/CEO of New Enterprise Rural Electric, where he has worked for 30 years. Trevor remembers that old phone books used to list the Eichelbergers' home number right under the New Enterprise office number.

"I was taught at a young age to take names and account numbers," he recalls of answering the phone during storms. "This is kind of a fit for me."

As a lineman, Trevor's day-to-day work can range from routine service calls to long days restoring power after a storm. The job can be physically demanding and requires ongoing safety training.

Co-op begins next round of right-of-way trimming

Valley Rural Electric Cooperative started the new year with a new round of vegetation management to help maintain service reliability. As in the past, letters will be mailed to members as Valley's contracted tree crews work their way through areas where maintenance is scheduled for 2015. Door hangers will also be used when workers need to contact property owners who are not at home. The door hanger will have the contact information for the crew and list details about the work to be done.

The co-op follows a five-year maintenance schedule, meaning each primary right-of-way is maintained at least once every five years.

The goal of Valley's vegetation management program is to increase reliability and lessen damage from storms by decreasing the likelihood that trees or tree limbs will come into contact with power lines during periods of high winds or heavy snows. Vegetation management also enables line crews to more quickly and safely access trouble spots when an outage occurs or when doing routine maintenance.



NEW LINEMAN: Trevor Eichelberger is a lineman in the Martinsburg District.

Trevor's wife, Lindsey, works in the administrative offices of the Hollidaysburg School District. The couple has a 15-month-old son, Camden, and recently purchased a home in New Enterprise.

"It's nice being back home and in an area I'm familiar with," Trevor says.

When not on the job, he enjoys time with family and being outdoors. He also participates in one of his father's passions.

"He's talked me into running a couple of marathons, including the Philadelphia Marathon," Trevor says.

Trevor's co-workers are happy to welcome him to the Valley team and know he'll go the distance for the co-op. He's one of the people you can count on. ☀

"Our consistent, aggressive approach to vegetation management is a huge asset to the cooperative," says Kevin Detwiler, Valley's staff forester. "We have seen a significant decrease in the number of tree-related outages on our system over the past several years, and our vegetation management program plays a large role in helping us to accomplish that."

Maintaining rights-of-way is one of the co-op's largest maintenance expenses, costing more than \$1 million per year. This year, crews will conduct work along 370 miles of co-op rights-of-way. ☀