

**WEEKLY DIGEST**

PUBLISHED BY THE NATIONAL RURAL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE ASSOCIATION

**Bullets Damage Co-op Transformers**

One bullet can seriously damage an electric transformer, resulting in tens of thousands of dollars in damage and tying up skilled personnel and specialized equipment for days.

Those are among the lessons learned by co-ops that have had substations vital to their distribution systems hit by gunfire. Two cases that occurred last year have remained open for months, and investigators have yet to make any arrests. A recent article on gunfire vandalism that appeared in ECT.coop triggered renewed interest in the cases.

A substation belonging to Sundance, Wyo.-based Powder River Energy Corp. was struck by at least one bullet last year. The cartridge weighed less than an ounce and probably cost about 70 cents, but did an estimated \$70,000 damage to a transformer valued at \$250,000.

"We immediately offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the apprehension of the suspects responsible, but within weeks, the board increased the amount to \$15,000," said Peter Rossi, the co-op's manager of business support services. "We haven't had anyone come forward, but we're still working with the sheriff's department and this remains an open case."

[▶ Complete Article](#)**Toads Stall Co-op Wildfire Cleanup in Texas**

Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, county and state agencies and private contractors were ordered in mid-January to suspend wildfire projects and other work so experts could determine whether endangered Houston toads were in the mood to reproduce.

"A federal regional environmental officer told us to stop working while they did an environmental impact assessment," said Will Holford, manager of public affairs for the Bastrop, Texas-based co-op. Central Texas has suffered two major droughts since 2007, and dry conditions contributed to a massive wildfire last September that destroyed 1,600 homes and scorched 34,000 acres.

On the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's endangered species list since 1970, the estimated 3,000 Houston toads living in Bastrop County retreated underground, and hibernated through early winter. But a little rainfall, coupled with warmer daytime temperatures, have roused them from their burrows.

"The ones that survived have emerged to the surface," said Michael Forstner, a professor of biology from Texas State University in San Marcos. "The males then begin their unique call. Then the girls show up and they head to the ponds."

Experts say the 2- to 3.5-inch-long amphibians only require calm shallow water, lasting at least 30 days and located no more than three-quarters of a mile from their hibernation sites, for successful reproduction. That means nearly every shallow pool, flooded field, temporary wetland or roadside ditch in the county was covered by the stop work order. [▶ Complete Article](#)

**Mild Winter Good News for Billpayers**

The unusually mild start to winter has prompted the Energy Department to slash its expectations of what consumers will pay to stay warm this year.

*Continued on next page***USDA Closes Rural Offices**

The U.S. Agriculture Department will shutter 259 offices across the country, including more than three dozen rural development offices, in a cost-cutting measure.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced the closings, the biggest wave of shutdowns in the agency's history, as part of a plan to save \$150 million annually.

"The USDA, like families and businesses across the country, cannot continue to operate like we did 50 years ago," Vilsack said in a Jan. 10 statement. "We must build on the record accomplishments of farm communities in 2011 with a stronger, more effective USDA in 2012 and beyond."

The cuts do not directly affect the Rural Utilities Service and the electric loan program that is critical to co-ops across the country.

But they could change the availability of rural development offices, which work with local leaders on loans for housing, community facilities, water and waste disposal, and other projects.

Forty-three rural development offices in 17 states will be eliminated. The department said most of the offices recommended for closure have no more than two employees.

Other closings include 131 Farm Service Agency branches in 32 states, and 12 Agricultural Research Service programs at 10 locations. [▶ Complete Article](#)

**POPULAR STORIES ON ECT.COOP...****Co-op Voices: To help boost the U.S. economy, shop co-op****Co-ops bring dental care to needy children in North Dakota****Arizona co-op aids community solar program****Alabama co-op raises more than \$5,000 for breast cancer research****Co-op's PowerSaver Program lets consumer-members earn big rewards**

## Mild Winter *Continued*

In an update issued Jan. 10, the department's Energy Information Administration said it expects the average household that relies on electricity to spend 2 percent less than it did last winter.

Natural gas and propane expenditures are now projected to fall by 7 percent and 1 percent, respectively, EIA said.

"The forecast of average household heating expenditures for all heating fuels has been lowered from the first forecast for the current winter," EIA said, "primarily as a result of the warm first half of this heating season."

The numbers represent a U-turn from the agency's October forecast, when it predicted spending on electric heat would drop by less than 1 percent this winter, while natural gas expenditures would jump by 3 percent, and propane by 7 percent.

The average household that relies on electricity will pay about \$934 this winter, compared with the \$957 it paid in 2010-11. That masks wide regional variances in the cost of electric heat—EIA puts expenditures for Midwestern households at \$1,073 and Southern households at \$891. But they all are down from last winter, the agency said. [▶ Complete Article](#)

## Refrigerator Battle Plays Out at Co-op

Just how much is that old refrigerator costing you? A Minnesota electric cooperative is figuring that out.

In February, Wright-Hennepin Cooperative Electric Association, Rockford, will conclude an experiment tracking the energy use of a 1970s-model refrigerator and a new Energy Star model.

Since the test began Sept. 27, the retro-fridge has used more than three times as much energy as the new appliance: 230 kilowatt-hours, or \$23.46 in energy costs, compared to 77 kwh, or \$7.85, as of Jan. 10.

"We preach conservation and energy efficiency all the time, and we tell our members that old appliances are inefficient," said Lindsay Scherer, communications specialist at the co-op. "This is a real-life, tangible example they can use to see how much their older appliances could be costing them."

The co-op tested refrigerators because "people have a tendency to save their old fridges and put them in their garages," Scherer said. "But they don't realize how much energy they're drawing." The experiment is the co-op's latest effort to involve members in monitoring energy costs.

Recently, it competed with another co-op in a "Littlest User" contest, in which six families vied for four months to see who could achieve the biggest energy savings. [▶ Complete Article](#)

## Co-op Community Service Project on the Run

After renovating homes in New Orleans and making energy efficiency improvements to a school and a camp for sick children, this year's Touchstone Energy® Community Service Project is taking a different turn.

The March 3 walk/run event in San Diego is a partnership with a group that has a very special meaning in that Southern California community. It is the Chelsea's Light Foundation Sunflower Scholarship Fund.

Chelsea King was 17 when she vanished Feb. 25, 2010, while jogging in northern San Diego County. Her body was found five days later in a shallow grave, and a convicted sex offender later pleaded guilty to rape and murder.

"Chelsea's story is all about how the tragic end of a young woman's life has blossomed into hope for the future of young people like her," said Jim Bausell, Touchstone Energy COO.

Last year's event drew 5,400 participants, raising \$110,000 to provide 10 scholarships for college-bound teens who embrace King's dedication to community. The 2012 event, which takes place during NRECA's annual meeting, will be in Balboa Park. The electric cooperative community is being asked to take part by signing onto the Touchstone Energy team. [▶ Complete Article](#)

## Father, Son Copper Thieves Jailed

A father-son copper theft team is off to federal prison for a scam that victimized a manufacturer of wire and cable for electric utilities.

The U.S. Attorney in Atlanta called Jacinto Diaz and his son, Henry, the brains behind an operation that stole \$457,000 worth of copper from Southwire Co. in Carrollton, Ga.

The pair instructed three other men to pose as truck drivers for a legitimate shipping company. The trio picked up 129,000 pounds of copper wire from Southwire. But rather than bring it to Indiana, as the company expected, the men took it south to Florida and sold it.

The Diazes and their accomplices pleaded guilty to charges of transporting stolen copper across state lines. Jacinto Diaz, 46, was sentenced Jan. 12 to four years, three months in prison, while Henry Diaz, 27, received three years, 10 months. Each has to pay \$826,499 in restitution.

Meanwhile, a new bill to combat copper theft in Alabama has been pre-filed, ahead of the state legislature reconvening Feb. 7.

The sponsor, Sen. Ben Brooks, R-Mobile, said his bill would make all metal thefts felonies, regardless of the value of the stolen metal. [▶ Complete Article](#)



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