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*Telling the story of
Rural Nebraska*

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As summer approaches, Nebraska Game and Parks is urging boaters to refresh their knowledge of safety rules in preparation for the busy boating season ahead. Follow these tips to reduce the risk of incidents and help ensure a safe and enjoyable day on the water.

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Nebraska photographer Michael Bazant captured a hummingbird clearingwing moth in flight.



Wayne Price

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The Ant and the Grasshopper: A Modern Lesson in Energy Efficiency

Have you ever heard the fable about the ant and the grasshopper? On a sunny summer day, a grasshopper flitted about and came across an ant toiling under the weight of a kernel of corn.

"Why all the hard work?" the grasshopper asked.

"I'm collecting this corn for winter. You should do the same," the ant replied.

"Why bother storing corn now? There's plenty to go around!" the grasshopper scoffed, hopping off into the sun.

We all know how that winter went for the grasshopper, who never did get around to storing any corn. That valuable lesson also applies to the electricity we use every day.

The Energy Crossroads

Nebraska's public power districts and electric cooperatives stand at a crossroads. Currently, we enjoy the luxury of powering our homes with the mere flip of a switch. Safe, reliable, and affordable electricity is readily available. The grasshoppers of the world are happy.

However, several factors are putting our energy future in limbo. Increasing demand for electricity, rising fuel and construction costs, and regulations limiting new power plants all contribute to this uncertainty. The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) predicts our need for electricity will climb by 30 percent between now and 2040. Unfortunately, the available power may not keep up with this growth as new generation capacity is put on hold while Congress reworks national energy policy.

The Power of Energy Efficiency

In the meantime, we have a powerful resource to tap: energy efficiency. With widespread energy efficiency measures, including those we've implemented on our distribution lines and those you can take at home, annual growth in electricity demand could drop to 2.2 percent, according to the Cooperative Research Network.

Saving electricity now will reduce your current utility bills and soften the blow against future power supply shortages. Being energy efficient doesn't mean being stingy with energy use. It means doing things in a smarter way. Listen to your mother. "What do you think—do we own the electric company?" Turn off everything that's not in use: lights, TVs, computers, and electronics.

Embrace the ant's foresight and start making small changes today. By doing so, we can ensure a stable and efficient energy future for all.



Bob Beatty

Bob Beatty is the General Manager of KBR Rural Public Power District, headquartered in Ainsworth, Neb.

Navigating Storms as a Rural Public Power District Manager

I remember the good old days when April was my favorite month of the year. School was about to be over, winter was about over, and spring was in the air. I started to look at my golf clubs hoping they worked better than they did in the fall. Just to let you know-they don't. Then I became a rural utility manager and all those warm and fuzzy feelings I had for April disappeared. Now I count down the days until it is over while constantly checking all the weather apps on my phone. This April, for a good part of the state, was a prime example why April can be the month of hell. While we got lucky at KBR and missed the storms, we watched with consternation the devastating damage that was being inflicted on our neighbors to the west.

Now I am going to be honest with you, one of the first things that enters your mind when a storm event happens is better them than us. I am not proud of that but that is a natural human emotion. The second thought is what we can do to help. Therein lies the beauty of mutual aid and the willingness for all of us to rush to help your neighbors. Phone calls and emails start to go out asking the affected systems what they need and how we can help. With the help of the statewide, emergency responses start to get organized in a fairly quick fashion and trucks start to roll.

It has always been amazing to me the willingness of line workers to not only travel out on mutual aid calls, but do so with a sense of anticipation. The idea of working 18 hours a day in uncertain conditions does not faze them in the least. I get the idea sometimes that they almost enjoy it. Maybe that is due to the appreciation and gratitude they get when they arrive to start work. Of course, the over time does not hurt. But I personally think it is the personal satisfaction they get by being able to see the immediate results of their work and knowing the impact that makes on the customer when their power comes back on. Any storm restoration event would not work without the sacrifice of the families of the line workers. I get nervous and worry about the safety of my employees when they are on a job. I cannot imagine what the spouses and children are going through. We all owe them a huge thank you.

It is hard to put into words the feeling of pride I feel as a manager when I see the social media post when our crews roll in to start to help. I am proud of my employees every day, but it gets magnified when I see the comments in the posts and especially when I get a phone call letting me know how professional and hard working the KBR crews are. It also gives one a sense of security that when it is our time to be in the spin cycle, that help is a phone call away.

The Power of Smart Home Technologies

By Anne Prince

Smart home technologies are transforming how we live, making our homes more comfortable, convenient and energy efficient than ever before.

Smart home technologies are devices that communicate with each other to automate everyday tasks and functions around the home, like heating and cooling, lighting and security. In addition to convenience, smart technologies enable consumers to manage and monitor their energy consumption through device scheduling and control.

With just a tap on your phone or a voice command to your virtual assistant (like Alexa or Siri), you can conveniently control many aspects of your home environment. If you're new to the smart tech world, there are several cost-effective devices you can try as you explore ways to make your home smarter.

One of the best and most inexpensive places to start is with a smart bulb or plug. Smart LED bulbs allow you to control home lighting remotely through a smartphone

app or voice commands. You can set schedules to automatically turn lights off or on, which can help you save energy and boost home security.

Smart plugs are another inexpensive way to give electronics and small appliances the smart home treatment. Smart plugs allow you to set schedules and remotely control power to lamps, small appliances and electronics, minimizing standby energy consumption and maximizing convenience. For example, you can sync the timing of your bedside lamp, alarm, speakers and coffee maker to turn on at the same time each morning.

If Alexa or Siri is already part of your household, you can build on your existing "tech ecosystem" by adding a smart hub, like Amazon Echo or Apple HomePod. Voice assistants that are synced to smart devices like bulbs and plugs provide additional options for device management and allow family members to interact with the various devices through voice control rather than individual apps.



TIPS FOR INTEGRATING SMART HOME TECH

If you're new to smart home technologies, keep the following tips in mind as you explore home automation options.

- 1. Define goals.** Determine the areas in your home you want to make smart, like lighting, security and entertainment systems.
- 2. Choose compatible devices.** A smart hub can make integration easier with a central device to control multiple smart technologies.
- 3. Check Wi-Fi strength.** Smart home technologies require a stable internet connection to function properly, so consider factors like router placement and signal strength.
- 4. Prioritize security.** Set strong, unique passwords for your Wi-Fi network, set devices to update automatically and limit personal data collection.

Home heating and cooling account for a significant portion of energy use, so one of the best investments you can make in smart tech is a smart thermostat. While traditional programmable thermostats can be set to your schedule and preferences, a smart thermostat takes this one step further by learning and adjusting to your routine and building a schedule around it.

Smart security systems are popular options for homeowners looking for advanced security solutions that incorporate cameras, sensors and cloud-based video recordings. As with other smart technologies, smart security systems provide convenient, flexible ways to monitor homes (and businesses), giving you peace of



mind even when you're away.

If you're considering smart tech for your home, start by defining your goals. Is saving energy your top priority, or are you aiming to improve home security? Smart home technologies provide great convenience—but remember, they are internet-connected devices. That means you'll need a stable Wi-Fi connection to

ensure devices are working properly, and you'll need strong passwords for your router and individual devices.

Whether you're looking to automate every aspect of your home or simply want to try a device or two, smart technologies have the power to transform your living space into a home where comfort and convenience reign supreme.

Make Smart Choices To Maximize Your Solar Savings



With most residential solar systems being installed and electrically interconnected with your electric provider, your local public power district or electric cooperative should top your list of project contacts when considering such a purchase. Nebraska's public power districts and electric cooperatives are well-versed in both the pros and cons of solar installations. They can help you make an informed decision and navigate the interconnection process (to connect your system to the electric grid). Your electric utility likely has a specific process by which planned solar arrays are approved prior to installation and inspected afterward.

For many homeowners, solar installations are considered an investment. As with any investment, you need a clear understanding of your final investment costs, the annual energy production to be expected along with its corresponding value, and the ability to determine how long it will take before you achieve a return on your investment.

Many solar installers provide quotes using national averages for energy prices to calculate your annual savings. These calculations can be wildly inaccurate as energy prices range considerably across the country. The assumption for increases in energy prices over the lifespan of your solar array can't be ignored but is often calculated at a rate that is higher than that experienced over the last 15-30 years.

If you're considering solar for your home, use the questions and considerations to the right to help guide your decision before entering a contract with a solar vendor.

Selecting a professional installer, the right system, and best payment method are equally crucial considerations. Solar installations may be purchased with cash, loans or leases. An upfront purchase will help you save the most money over the lifespan of the solar panels, but you need the cash upfront. A lease means someone else owns the solar panels and sells you power at a reduced cost each month, but you won't save as much over time. With a loan, the system is yours, but you make monthly payments plus interest.

Installing solar is a major decision. You need a reputable energy partner to help you decide. Remember to contact your electric cooperative first. They're ready to answer your questions and help you make an informed decision.

Thinking About Solar?

Installing a rooftop solar system is a major decision. If you're considering solar, use the following questions as a guide before entering a contract to install the system.

Initial Questions

- Do you plan to stay in the home long-term?
- How much shade does your roof receive? (The orientation of your roof can impact how much electricity the system provides.)
- How old is your roof? (If it's old/in poor condition, consider replacing it before installing solar.)
- What are your goals? (If you're looking to save on energy bills, consider an energy audit first.)
- Will you lease or purchase the solar system? (Compare quotes from multiple contractors/installers.)

Utility Questions

- How will you need to work with your electric co-op to connect the solar system (to the electric grid)? (For example, an interconnection agreement must be signed.)
- How long will the process take?
- Does your co-op offer special rates for members with solar systems?

Contractor Questions

- Can the contractor provide appropriate documentation of licensing, permitting, bonding and insurance requirements?
- Can the contractor show documentation of safety practices and how those will be followed?
- Can the contractor provide current credentials?

Contract Questions

- Do the ownership terms make sense/seem fair?
- Do the system performance calculations seem realistic?
- Do the terms change if you sell the property?
- Do the project start and end dates seem reasonable?
- How long is the system warranty?
- Who is responsible for system maintenance?
- Who will receive the renewable energy credits (RECs)?

Nebraska Rural Electric Association Welcomes Southern Public Power District as its Newest Member-System

The Nebraska Rural Electric Association (NREA) has announced the addition of Southern Public Power District in Grand Island, Neb., as its newest member.

Southern Public Power District serves approximately 27,717 retail electric customers in Hall, Merrick, Hamilton, Phelps, Kearney, Adams and Franklin Counties in Nebraska. Southern Public Power District operates about 7,098 miles of electric lines and has 95 employees. General Manager Chad Waldow said Southern Public Power District looks forward to working with the Nebraska statewide organization and its members.

“After careful consideration by the Board of Directors, management and staff, Southern Public Power District is very excited to become part of the statewide organization,” Waldow said. “The benefits Southern will gain through the safety program, continuing education for our employees, and the networking opportunities will be invaluable.”

Waldow stated it has never been more important to have a central location that professionals involved in electric generation, transmission, and distribution can go to and discuss issues, share ideas and develop solutions.

“This industry is faced with many challenges, and we look forward to working through these challenges with the unified members of the NREA,” he said.

Headquartered in Lincoln, Nebraska, NREA's mission has evolved to include a broad range of activities to assist our member-systems as they face the many challenges of providing low-cost, reliable electric service to the rural regions of Nebraska. According to NREA General Manager Rick Nelson, “We are excited to have Southern Public Power District join the Nebraska Rural Electric Association. We are stronger together and are able to provide various services to Nebraska's rural electric consumers.”

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By Scott Flood

Unless you've just awakened from an especially long nap, you've probably been hearing plenty about artificial intelligence (AI). It's likely that much of what you've heard is either exciting or terrifying. Movies and TV offer up paradises in which technology frees us from daily drudgery—and frightening scenarios in which machines become our overlords.

Venkat Banunarayanan smiles when asked if popular media's takes on AI are accurate. "We're at the stage of discovery with AI," he says. "There's a lot more buzz than reality at this point, and we have a long way to go."

As the Vice President for Integrated Grid Business & Technology Strategies for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, Venkat spends some of his time exploring possible use cases with AI, augmented/virtual reality (VR) and other promising technologies, while considering how they might improve the way electric utilities serve their consumer-members. "Can AI do things better? Can it handle some of the tasks we have to do today? Can it make decisions for us? The answer to those and most other questions is the same: maybe."

Industry experts agree it's impossible to guess where AI will be in another decade or two, but it's currently not as powerful as everyone seems to think.

AI is currently being incorporated for specific tasks and activities, including automated solutions like chatbots that are capable of answering common questions. AI also has the potential to be paired with data analysis, such as retailers using data to better predict customer needs.

Despite what you may have heard, AI is not capable of thinking on its own. The functionality greatly depends on programming, how the tool is trained to handle specific tasks and the level of data being fed into the system. AI revolves around learning and adapting to decision-making.

Because these new technologies interface with internal and external systems, Venkat stresses the importance of strong cybersecurity. "We need to make sure hackers can't influence systems," he warns. "When we consider advancements like AI, we need to ensure protection of personal, critical infrastructure, proprietary and confidential data, too." Maintaining robust cyber-hygiene is very important and necessary to deploy any technology in a reliable and safe manner—AI is no different in this regard.

What Could AI and VR Mean for Electric Utilities?



AI PUT INTO ACTION

Electric cooperatives are already using artificial intelligence (AI) and augmented reality (AR) for key tasks and activities. Looking ahead, co-ops see great potential for AI and AR as helpful tools for improving grid reliability and the services they provide to consumer-members.

SERVICES FOR MEMBERS

AI tools like chatbots can enhance member interactions and provide a tailored experience based on energy use data.

WEATHER FORECASTING

With the help of AI, weather forecasts will become more accurate, pinpointing areas to station utility crews.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Through augmented reality, or AR, lineworkers can experience interactive, lifelike trainings, rather than watching a video or webinar.

As public power districts and electric cooperatives explore the possibilities of AI, they will focus on underlying needs rather than the technology itself. Examining better ways to accomplish tasks and obtain desired results will guide utilities as they consider AI tools for more efficient processes and approaches.

Despite all the hype, today's AI is mostly being used to make incremental improvements to existing products and services. That's how electric utilities are likely to experience the growth of AI in the foreseeable future. For example, the next generation of smart meters might incorporate AI tools that help homeowners better manage their energy use. AI-based systems may also be used to improve management of the nation's power grid, spotting potential problems before human operators can. Public power districts and electric co-ops could use chatbots to help answer members' questions and requests more quickly. Weather forecasts are likely to become more accurate, pinpointing the areas most likely to experience damage so crews can be stationed there.

Another promising technology currently explored is augmented reality (AR), and some utilities are already testing it, particularly in educational and training

opportunities. For example, apprentice lineworkers can become comfortable manipulating AR and VR versions of equipment before working with the real thing. Instead of watching a video or a webinar, lineworkers are able to interact with what they're doing. For example, a safety training can simulate a hazardous situation, like the aftermath of an ice storm or hurricane, providing lineworkers the opportunity to prepare for the real thing.

AR blends VR with the world around us. One day soon, a lineworker may look up at a failed transformer atop a power pole. Their safety glasses will instantly recognize the type of transformer, its exact location and when it was installed before displaying a checklist of the equipment the lineworker may need, a guide to diagnosing common problems, and even 24-hour access to technical experts.

Ultimately, the adoption of AI, VR, AR and other promising technologies share one goal for public power districts and electric co-ops. From solving outages more quickly, to allowing greater control over energy use, to lowering the cost of service, tomorrow's innovative technologies will continue to help utilities enhance the services they provide to their local communities.

Caffeine and Kilowatts | The Energy Impact of America's Coffee Obsession

Ever wondered how much energy fuels America's coffee addiction? The stats behind our daily caffeine fix and the power it takes to keep those cups flowing may surprise you.

Behind water and tea, coffee is the most-consumed beverage around the world and with 66% of all Americans drinking coffee daily, we enjoy 3.3 billion pounds per year. The National Coffee Association reports 517 million cups are consumed daily with the average U.S. coffee drinker having 3.1 cups. That earns us second place behind only Finland, whose coffee drinkers average four cups daily.

In May of 2021, PR Newswire reported a study that found U.S. coffee drinkers obtained 81% of their coffee servings at home. That averages to nearly 420 million cups per year with the average cup size being nine ounces. Forty-five percent of this coffee is made using drip coffee makers, 27% with single-serve machines, 9% with cold brew makers and 8% with espresso machines.

Considering the average coffee machine uses 150 to 300

watts of electricity to create a cup, that equates to nearly 95 million kilowatt-hours or enough electricity to power about 8,800 American households for a year.

According to EnergyStar, over half of households use the warming plate for more than 30 minutes, with nearly a quarter of households using it for more than hour to maintain heated carafes of brewed coffee. In addition, some drip coffee maker owners have selected a unit that continuously maintains an internal reservoir tank of hot water to speed the brewing process when coffee is desired. Both issues provide an opportunity for saving energy. How much?

In reality, not a lot. At Nebraska's average residential electricity cost of \$0.1111 per kilowatt-hour, this only equates to one-quarter to one-third of a penny per hour. But for those who leave their machine on continuously, annual savings of 189 to 257 kilowatt-hours can range from \$21 to \$29.

Need to add some sweetener to these energy savings before cutting the power to the coffee maker after brewing?

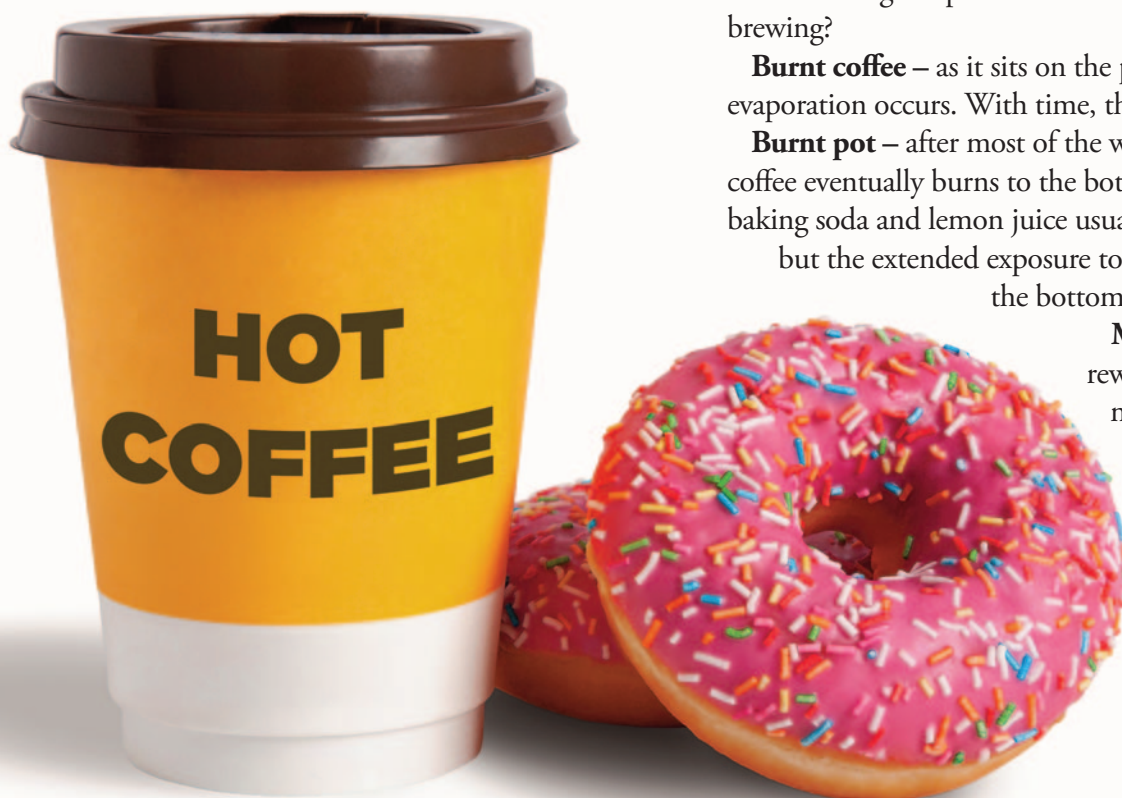
Burnt coffee – as it sits on the plate warmer, evaporation occurs. With time, the flavor becomes bitter.

Burnt pot – after most of the water content evaporates, coffee eventually burns to the bottom. Scrubbing with salt, baking soda and lemon juice usually removes this mess,

but the extended exposure to excessive heat may warp the bottom of the pot.

Microwave reheating – rewarming a cup in the microwave uses less energy than an hour of warmer plate or hot water reservoir use.

Potential fire hazard – The Consumer Product Safety Commission says about 50 consumers report fires caused by coffee makers per year.



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Boat Safely This Summer

With the kickoff to summer rapidly approaching, Nebraska Game and Parks reminds boaters to brush up on safety rules in preparation for peak boating season.

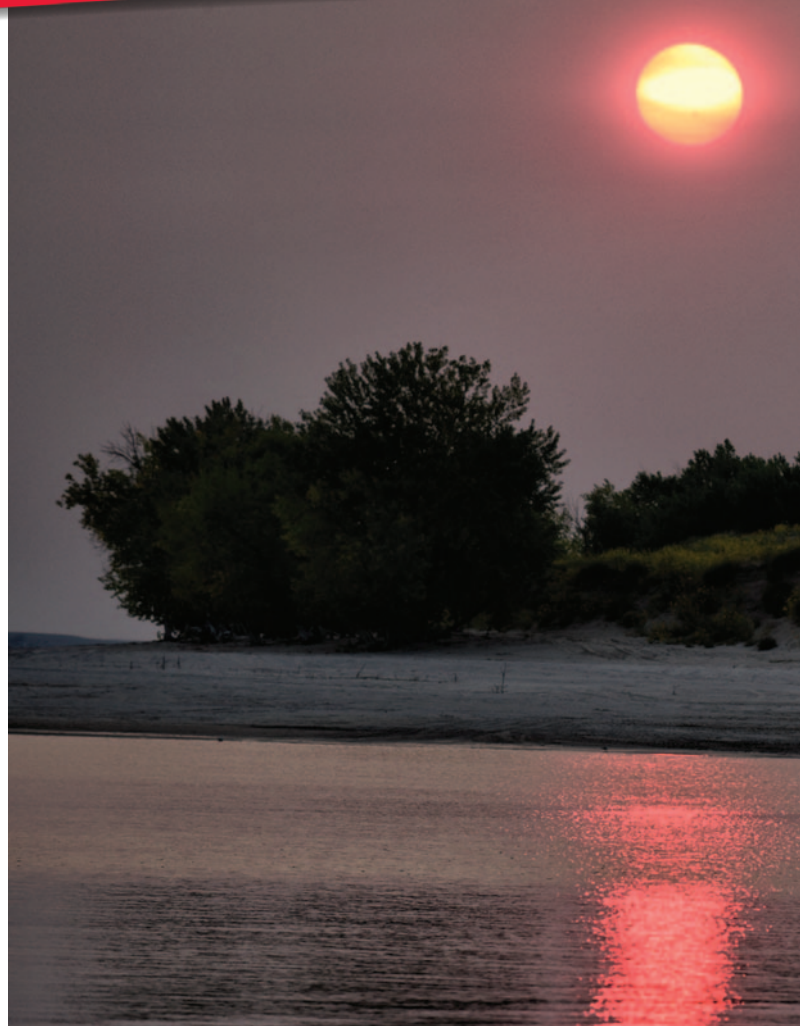
Follow these 10 tips to reduce the risk of incidents and help ensure a safe and enjoyable day on the water.

Take a boater safety course — Though it's only a legal requirement for those born after Dec. 31, 1985, consider completing the Nebraska boating safety course to learn the top things you need to know about navigating Nebraska waters, what to do in an emergency and more. Find an in-person or online class at OutdoorNebraska.gov; search for "boater education."

Check equipment — Before you launch, ensure your boat or kayak is in good running condition and all essential equipment is present, including a life jacket for every person on board. Paddlers of kayaks or canoes also should physically inspect their planned take-out point to make sure it is accessible.

Tell someone your plans — Before leaving home, let someone know where you are going and when you expect to return. Consider carrying a cellphone in a waterproof pouch, as well, in case an emergency occurs.

Wear a life jacket — Make your life jacket a statement piece and wear it, as it does no good stowed away if an emergency occurs. Children under age 13, those using personal watercraft and those being towed on skis or similar device must wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device; it's required by the law. Life jackets also are required for all paddleboard users, no matter their age.



Be wary of surroundings — According to the National Safe Boating Council, nearly a quarter of all reported boating accidents in 2022 were caused by operator inattention or improper lookout. Pay attention to other boats, personal watercraft, swimmers, stumps and other hazards. Speeds in excess of 5 mph are prohibited if within 30 yards of any other vessel, swimming area or dock. If padding a kayak or canoe, be aware of possible debris below the surface or under bridges.

Have all required safety equipment — Life jackets, throw cushions, fire extinguishers and bailing devices are required on most boats. An engine-cut-off device or switch also is a good idea.

Avoid alcohol — Nearly one-third of all recreational



Photograph by Larry Holscher

boating fatalities occur when someone is Boating Under the Influence, a criminal violation enforced in Nebraska. Always designate a sober driver.

Watch the weather — Storms can pop up quickly in Nebraska. Check the weather in advance and monitor it during the day, if necessary.

Avoid hypothermia — Even though temperatures are rising, the water still can be cold. Hypothermia is caused by exposure to cold weather or water. Take caution to prevent hypothermia.

Keep it legal — Make sure you've registered your boat and, if a nonresident, purchase an Aquatic Invasive Species stamp at OutdoorNebraska.gov. Also remember

Clean, Drain and Dry to stop invasive species

While Nebraskans can expect to see many boaters on the lakes on the weekend, they also can expect to find Nebraska Game and Parks staff inspecting boats for invasive zebra mussels.



Zebra mussels are a small, D-shaped clam with alternating light and dark bands across the shell. They can be as small as a pencil eraser. These non-native mussels can cause damage to Nebraska's ecosystems and economy once established. They form dense colonies, filtering nutrients from the water that native species need to survive. The mussels also can pollute swimming beaches with their sharp shells and damage public and private infrastructure.

Zebra mussels primarily are spread by boaters and anglers by "hitchhiking" on and inside watercraft and angling equipment. Veligers, or zebra mussel larvae, are microscopic and can survive in a single drop of water for several days. Adult mussels can live out of water for up to a month.

To stop zebra mussels' spread, it's important to ensure boating and angling equipment have been cleaned inside and out, drained of standing water, and allowed to dry completely before entering another water body.

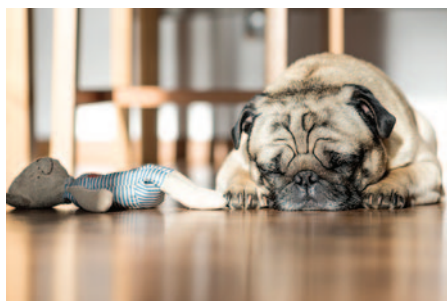
Game and Parks staff will conduct boat inspections at boat ramps statewide this summer.

anyone operating a motorboat or personal watercraft in Nebraska must be at least 14 years of age.

No one really knows why some dogs become afraid of fireworks and thunderstorms and they don't seem to bother other dogs. It could be connected to a dog's sense of hearing or to socialization and general levels of anxiety. Sometimes an otherwise happy-go-lucky dog will become almost hysterical with fear when he hears the sound of thunder. If you have a dog with one of these phobias it can be both perplexing and frustrating.

There is actually a difference between being afraid of fireworks and being afraid of thunderstorms, although the two things are similar. Both involve loud, booming sounds and some dogs are afraid of both. If your dog is afraid of fireworks then he is likely afraid of the very loud noises. He may hide or try to climb in your lap, even if he is a very large dog. He may drool, pant or shake. Trembling is common. Dogs will often try to go to a safe place to try to get away from the noise.

If your dog is afraid of thunderstorms he could be set off by more than just the sound of the thunder. There is a theory that dogs who are afraid of thunderstorms are bothered by the buildup of electricity in the atmosphere. This is the same electricity that causes static electricity to build up in a dog's coat. Your dog can tell when a storm



is approaching long before he hears a clap of thunder or a flash of lightning and he may start showing his fear. Signs of thunderstorm phobia are similar to fireworks phobia: your dog may try to hide or climb in your lap. He may pant, drool or start shaking. He may try to seek out a safe place. Some dogs

will try to climb in a snug place, such as a bathtub. The smooth sides of a bathtub will help dispel some of the charged electricity that they are feeling in their fur and provide them with some comfort.

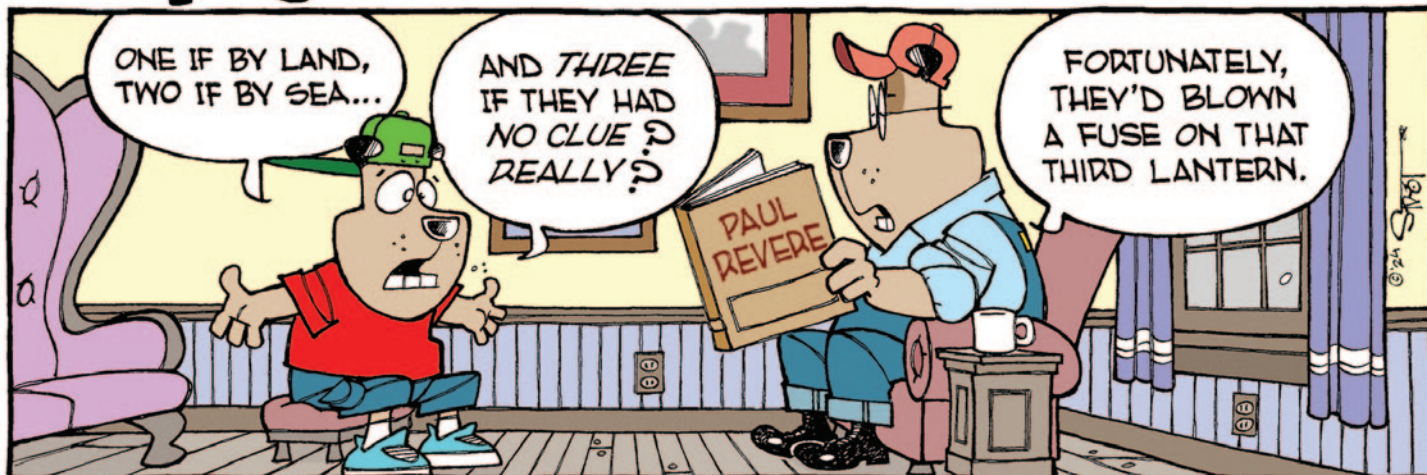
Whether your dog is reacting to fireworks or to thunderstorms there are some things you can do to help him calm down.

If your dog has a serious problem and you need something that works quickly you should consult with your veterinarian ahead of time. He may prescribe a mild sedative for your dog in case of emergency.

For dogs with thunderstorm phobias there is also a garment that can be worn that has helped some dogs.

It can also help to turn up the TV or music during fireworks and storms to try to drown out the outside noise. Do things to distract your dog. Try to play with him before he becomes aware of the noise outside. Do anything to keep his mind off the things he fears.

Murphy



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Stay Cool Without Breaking the Bank

Is there anything you can do to reduce the impact of summer electrical use on your wallet? Absolutely, there is! The wholesale purchase price your utility must pay for the electricity you use is significantly impacted by what time of day you are using it. If it is during the peak period, your utility will pay more for additional energy resources needed. But if you can reduce your usage during these peaks or shift your usage to another time of day, your utility will pay less.



Here are easy ways for you to help your electric utility and reduce your "peak" energy use:

- Your microwave uses about two-thirds less energy than your stove. Better yet, grill outside.
- Your dishwasher uses less water and energy than washing dishes by hand. Use the air-dry setting on

your dishwasher to save even more.

- Set your thermostat to 78°F when you are home and 85°F or off when you are away. Using ceiling or room fans allows you to set the thermostat higher because air movement will make the room feel cooler.
- Do your laundry by using the cold water setting on your washer. Line-dry clothes whenever you can.
- When you need to use the clothes dryer, run full loads, use the moisture-sensing setting, and clean the lint trap after each use.
- Unplug electronic devices and chargers when they are not in use. Turn computers and printers off at the power strip.
- Unplug and recycle that spare refrigerator in the garage if you do not really need it.
- Replace air conditioner filters. Dirty filters restrict airflow and can cause the system to run longer.
- Install patio covers, awnings, and solar window screens to shade your home.

Your heating, ventilation and air conditioning system is one of the most important and expensive systems in your home. Detecting issues early can help you plan for repairs or equipment replacement.

Equipment functionality issues can affect your electricity use, which may result in higher energy bills. The age of your equipment can be a major factor in function. The lifespan of a heating and cooling system ranges from 15 to 20 years.

Proper maintenance and lower use can increase the life of the equipment. To find out the age of your system, look for the manufactured date printed on the unit's nameplate. If you can't find it, search online using the model number or call the manufacturer.

Being thrifty by nature, I typically subscribe to the notion of "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." That said, I also believe in being prepared for the inevitable. If your system is approaching or past the 20-year mark, start saving for a new system and get replacement estimates.

There are a few warning signs to watch out for if your heating and cooling system needs to be repaired or replaced:

- **Air conditioning is not as cool as usual.** If the air from your air conditioner is warm or not as cool as it usually feels, the equipment has an issue. It could be a problem with the compressor or a refrigerant leak. Contact a professional to get the issue checked. Many refrigerants, especially the ones used in older systems, are harmful to the environment. Fix leaks before adding more refrigerant. Special certifications are required for handling refrigerants, so hire a professional to ensure the work is done properly.

- **Low airflow.** If you aren't getting good airflow, it could be an easy fix, such as filter replacement or opening closed dampers. If you've made these fixes and airflow is not at normal levels, contact a professional.



The lifespan of a heating and cooling system ranges from 15 to 20 years.

Proper maintenance and lower use can increase the life of the equipment.

Photograph by Mark Gilliland, Pioneer Utility Resources

There could be a bigger problem with a motor, fan or something else.

- **Bad odors.** Heating and cooling systems sometimes smell when you first start them up for the season. Those smells should be minor and dissipate quickly. Any serious smells—such as burning metal, melting plastic or noxious odors—are a sign that your system is in trouble. If you smell those odors, turn your system off immediately and contact a professional.

- **Strange noises.** There is typically noise associated with the fans and motors in heating and cooling systems. Take note of any excessive or new noises. If your system is making any clunking,

clanging or whistling noises, turn it off and check the filter. If that doesn't solve it, reach out to a pro.

- **Running frequently.** Your system needs to run more to keep up on extreme weather days, but there might be an issue if it runs too often. Short cycling is when a system cycles on and off before completing the heating or cooling process. Contact a professional to diagnose this issue.

Several factors come into play when deciding to fix existing equipment or invest in new equipment. Consider the severity of the issue, repair costs, the likelihood of additional repairs, equipment lifespan and your budget.

The efficiency of your existing system is also a consideration. Heating and cooling technology improvements have come a long way in the last 20 years. Lower operation costs can offset the cost of a new system over time.

Consider your options before you are in desperate need. I recommend getting estimates from at least three contractors. Ask the contractor, "If this was your home, what type of system would you install and why?" The best solution for your home might be a different type of equipment.

Smart Shopping for Energy Savings

The appliances and gadgets that make life easier are also the largest users of electricity in our homes. When buying a new appliance, look for the EnergyStar label. That simple act can result in 10 to 15 percent savings in energy consumption.

Simple household tips include:

- Cleaning lint traps on dryers and not over drying clothes will save energy and extend the life of your clothes.
- Replacing worn refrigerator gasket doors will stop cool air from leaking from the refrigerator.
- Clean refrigerator coils and keep refrigerators away from heat generating appliances such as an oven.

Home electronics, like computers, TVs, DVD players and other modern devices, consume power even when turned off. This is known as a parasitic load or by the more playful term “energy vampire.” The average home loses 8 percent of its monthly energy consumption to these energy vampires. A full 75 percent of the power used to run home electronics is consumed when those appliances are turned off, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

Turning lights off when leaving a room, sealing windows and doors and cleaning refrigerator coils isn't as much fun as buying a shiny new appliance. But these simple tasks are proven ways to save energy and increase comfort on a budget.



Appliances & Electronics:

Keep appliances and electronics free from lint and dust, and use a power strip to turn off electronics when not in use, avoiding “energy vampires.”



Learn How to Protect Yourself from Scams and Fraud

As technology continues to evolve, so do the tactics of scammers trying to take advantage of unsuspecting consumers. One such scam that has been making the rounds recently is individuals pretending to be representatives of your electric utility company. These scammers will call you claiming that they are from your utility company and that you have overpaid and are due to receive a credit.

The scammer will then ask for your personal information, such as your social security number or credit card information, claiming that they need it to credit your account.

Don't Get Duped

It is important to remember that your electric utility company will never call you to ask for personal information or demand immediate payment. If you do receive a call like this, it is likely a scam. If you are unsure if a call is legitimate, hang up and call your utility company directly to verify.

A Perfect Meal for Dining Outdoors

Warming weather brings with it plenty of opportunities to celebrate from holidays and birthdays to sunny afternoons offering an excuse to spend time outdoors with loved ones. Dining al fresco brings added freshness to favorite foods, and taking your next meal to the patio can be a fun, delicious way to soak in some vitamin D.

Pasta provides an easy option for sharing with a crowd, like this Creamy Tomato Smoked Sausage and Asparagus Tortellini. A cheesy, filling delight, it's ready to enjoy in less than half an hour.

It's also a sustainably produced ingredient as the asparagus season primarily relies on the weather and uses rainwater rather than irrigation. As a nutrient-dense, low-calorie vegetable with no fat, no cholesterol and little sodium, it's a family favorite you can feel good about serving your loved ones.

Find more patio-friendly recipe ideas at michiganasparagus.org.



Garlic-Parmesan Chicken Tenders with Green Beans

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided**
- 1/4 cup mayonnaise**
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder**
- 1 teaspoon salt, divided**
- 2/3 cup Parmesan cheese, shredded**
- 1/2 cup panko breadcrumbs**
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika**
- 1 1/2 pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts**
- 1 1/2 pounds green beans**
- 1/2 cup honey mustard dressing**

Preheat oven to 450 F. Coat baking sheet with 2 teaspoons oil.

In medium bowl, stir mayo, garlic powder and 1/2 teaspoon salt to combine.

In separate medium bowl, stir Parmesan, breadcrumbs and paprika to combine.

Pat chicken dry with paper towels and

slice into 3/4-inch tenders. Add to bowl with mayo mixture and toss to coat.

Working in batches, dredge tenders in breadcrumb coating, pressing to adhere. Transfer to baking sheet.

Bake until tenders start to turn golden, about 10 minutes.

On clean cutting board, wash, dry and trim green beans. Set aside.

When chicken is golden, flip and bake until cooked through, 6-8 minutes. Remove from oven.

Preheat large skillet over medium-high heat.

Add remaining oil and swirl to coat bottom. Add green beans and remaining salt; cook, stirring occasionally, until tender-crisp, 4-5 minutes. Remove from heat.

Divide chicken tenders and green beans between plates. Serve with dressing for dipping.



Creamy Tomato Smoked Sausage and Asparagus Tortellini

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 pound smoked turkey sausage, sliced into bite-sized rounds
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 2/3 cups chicken broth
- 1 can (15 ounces) tomato sauce
- 3/4 cup heavy cream
- 18 ounces cheese tortellini
- 1/2 pound fresh asparagus, trimmed and cut into bite-sized pieces

In large rimmed skillet, heat olive oil over medium heat.

Add sausage and brown on both sides. Add garlic and stir until golden, 20-30 seconds.

Add broth, tomato sauce, cream and tortellini; stir to combine. Bring to light simmer.

Cover and simmer over low heat 10 minutes. Add asparagus during last 5 minutes of cooking until tortellini is tender and sauce has reduced.

Reader Submitted Recipes

Crockpot Apricot Chicken

- 2 whole chicken breasts, cut up
- 1 8-oz. bottle French dressing
- 3/4 cup apricot preserves
- 2/3 cup water
- 1 envelope onion soup mix

Coat crock pot with cooking spray. Add chicken. Mix the remaining ingredients in a separate bowl and pour over chicken. Cook on low for 8-10 hours, or on high 4-6 hours. Recommended sides: rice and broccoli.

Joan Wiese, Oakland, Nebraska

Corn Salsa

- 4 cups cooked corn
- 1/3 cup chopped red pepper
- 1 jalapeno, chopped
- 1 green onion, sliced
- 1/4 cup cilantro, chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- Dash of pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon cumin
- 3 tablespoons lime juice

Toss all together and serve with tortilla chips.

Hanna Cox, Kearney, Nebraska

Green Tomato Cake

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 3/4 cup butter or margarine | 2 teaspoons vanilla flavoring |
| 2 cups sugar | 2 1/2 cups flour |
| 3 eggs | 1/2 cup cocoa |
| 2 cups diced or minced green tomatoes | 2 1/2 teaspoons soda |
| 1 cup chopped walnuts | 1 teaspoon salt |
| 2 teaspoons orange flavoring | 1 teaspoon cinnamon |
| | 1/2 cup milk |

Cream butter or margarine and sugar, then beat in eggs one at a time. Stir in green tomatoes, walnuts and flavorings. Combine dry ingredients and add alternating with milk. Pour batter into greased and floured 10-inch tube pan or bundt pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 1 hour or until done. Cool in pan for 15 minutes and put on cake plate. Frost.

Darlus McWilliams, Norfolk, Nebraska

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ENERGY EFFICIENCY FOR BETTER BUILDINGS

Whether your home or business, the buildings you enter daily consist of several layers that create one building envelope, or shell. The envelope begins with the foundation in the ground and ends with the roof, and includes everything in between such as walls, windows and doors. To save energy and maintain comfort, an envelope should limit the transfer of heat in or out of the building. Improve your building envelope by applying weatherization best practices.

+ AIR SEAL CRACKS AND HOLES

Caulking and weatherstripping are cost-efficient air-sealing techniques that help maintain a comfortable temperature in your space. Air-seal gaps around windows, doors, electrical outlets, and other wall or ceiling penetrations to reduce drafts. Weatherstripping around the interior of door frames and window sashes will also limit drafts in these areas and improve the energy efficiency of your home.

+ ENSURE ADEQUATE INSULATION

One of the best ways to reduce your energy bills and increase the comfort of your home is by ensuring adequate and effective insulation in your home. The Department of Energy recommends that a home have 12 to 16 inches of attic insulation. However, not all insulation has the same effectiveness for energy efficiency, and as insulation ages that effectiveness declines. There are also several methods for insulation depending on where you live and the part of your home you are insulating (walls, crawlspace, attic, etc.) so it's best to contact a local certified contractor. Check your local building codes for requirements.

+ RESEARCH INCOME-QUALIFIED PROGRAMS

Some income-qualified programs provide air sealing and insulation, along with making sure your home is safe, if you have combustion appliances like a gas furnace or water heater. Certain programs even cover up to 80% of the median area income and provide these improvements at no cost to the homeowner and in many cases renters as well.

To learn more about income-qualified programs, rebates, and incentives for energy-efficient upgrades, contact your local co-op or public power district. Visit us at www.tristate.coop/electrify-and-save



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