

SPARKS

THE POWER OF HUMAN CONNECTIONS

SEPTEMBER 2026
MONTHLY NEWSLETTER
Steele-Waseca Cooperative Electric



Touchstone Energy
Cooperatives



SWCE HIGHLIGHTS

- Office hours on Fridays change to 8 AM – 3:30 PM
- SWCE Safety Day
- Air Source Heat Pump info and rebate
- Back to school safety

TOWN HALL MEETINGS

- **WATCH** for your mailed **POSTCARD** invitation for **TOWN HALL EVENTS!**
- Event dates are September 9, 16, 28 & 30
- RSVP required; seating is limited; **BRING YOUR POSTCARD** invitation for a free gift!

Steele-Waseca Cooperative Electric

Town Hall Meeting

Wednesday, September 9, 2026
6:30 PM – 8 PM at Torey's Restaurant & Bar (upper level),
208 N Cedar Ave., Owatonna, MN

RSVP with your guest count: 507.451.7340; seating is limited

FREE Meal will be served; Gift for every SWCE member bringing this postcard (for registration scanning)



Timely Topics

* Meet the new General Manager Kelly Hovel *
* Outage Restoration * Consolidation Update * The Regional Grid *

HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE!

During harvest: know and teach electrical safety on the farm

From dump truck driver to teenager, everyone should be aware of potential electrical hazards

Harvest means long hours, increased stress and tight schedules. Because of that, Safe Electricity® reminds farmers that it only takes a split second for someone to come into contact with electricity. Your most seasoned worker to your least, your spouse, your son or daughter or other family member, an ag-related worker dropping off a load or applying fertilizer — any person on your farm is at risk of becoming injured or killed due to electrical contact.

“Review overhead power line locations and height clearance with anyone and everyone working on the farm or doing business there,” said Erin Hollinshead, executive director of Safe Electricity. “Although harvest is filled with tight deadlines and heightened work stress, making time for safety, including electrical safety, can save lives.”

To help keep those who work or do business on your farm safe not only during harvest but year-round, follow these electrical safety tips:

- Educate everyone that potential electrical hazards include both direct and indirect contact with an overhead power line or pole. Indirect contact (coming too close to a power line or pole), could cause electricity to arc/jump.

- Both direct and indirect contact can change electricity's path to ground. Once that path changes, the stray voltage can energize anything in its path, such as a truck, a tractor, an extension, the ground, or a person.
- Start every workday with a safety meeting. Discuss all operations for the day and go over power line/pole locations. Emphasize safety above speed to everyone on the farm, especially during busy seasons like harvest. 15054
- Never assume that because someone grew up on the farm that they understand the potential of stray voltage or other electrical hazards. In fact, do not assume this for anyone. For example, teens who have moved irrigation pipes to free an animal have been seriously hurt or electrocuted.
- Encourage drivers and operators to position grain augers in their lowest position or to lower truck bed boxes before moving. Be especially cautious of overhead lines when using augers in the field to load trucks on the road.
- Review potential hazards with grain/dump truck drivers and spot them when possible.



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By SWCE General
Manager
Kelly Hovel

Safety isn't a poster on the breakroom wall, or a checklist we run through once a year.

At Steele-Waseca Cooperative Electric, safety is a culture—a shared set of values, habits, and expectations that shape how every employee approaches every task, every day. A true safety culture means safety isn't something we do; it's something we are.

What does “Safety Culture” really mean?

A safety culture exists when safe behavior becomes second nature rather than a rule imposed from above. It shows up in the small moments: a lineworker double-checking a grounding procedure even when running behind schedule, a coworker speaking up when something looks off, a new employee feeling comfortable asking questions instead of guessing. It's built on trust, communication, and the belief that everyone—from the newest apprentice to the general manager—shares responsibility for getting home safely at the end of the day.

This kind of culture doesn't happen by accident. It's the product of consistent training, open communication, and leadership that backs up its words with action.

Investing in our employees

Working around high-voltage electricity is inherently dangerous, which is why Steele-Waseca invests heavily in ongoing training for our crews. Throughout the year, our employees participate in:

- **Pole-top and bucket rescue training**, so crews are prepared to respond quickly if a coworker is injured while working aloft. 1074482
- **Chainsaw safety**, essential for the right-of-way and storm-cleanup work our crews regularly perform.

• **First aid and CPR certification**, ensuring trained responders are on hand at job sites and in our offices.

• **Ongoing competency and skills training**, keeping crews current on evolving equipment, procedures, and industry best practices.

Safety training goes beyond line work, too. We also focus on:

- **Traffic safety**, since many of our crews work along roadsides and highways.
- **Health and wellness initiatives**, including back safety, hearing protection, and fatigue recognition—because a healthy employee is a safer employee.
- **Workplace safety basics**, such as fire safety in our offices, warehouses, and substations.

Together, these programs reflect a simple philosophy: safety training is never “finished.” It's a continuous investment in the people who keep the light on for our members.

Extending safety to the public

Our responsibility doesn't stop at the edge of our service trucks. Farmers, contractors, emergency responders, and everyday members regularly work and play near power lines and equipment—often without realizing the risks involved. That's why public electrical safety education is a core part of our mission.



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#swceTRUST



SPARKS

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Minnesota Cold Weather Rule

Statute 216B.097; Cooperative or Municipal Utility

During the cold weather period, a cooperative electric association must not disconnect and must reconnect utility service of a residential customer during the period between October 1 and April 30, if the disconnection affects the primary heat source for the residential unit and the following conditions are met:

1. The household income is at or below 50 percent of the state median household income. A cooperative electric association may (i) verify income on forms it provides or (ii) obtain verification of income from the local energy assistance provider. A customer is deemed to meet the income requirements of this clause if the customer receives any form of public assistance, including energy assistance that uses an income eligibility threshold set at or below 50 percent of the state median household income;
2. The customer enters into and makes reasonably timely payments under a mutually acceptable payment agreement that considers the financial resources of the household; and
3. The customer receives referrals to energy assistance, weatherization, conservation, or other programs likely to reduce the customer's energy bills.

Energy Saving Tips for Your Home

- Turn off the lights in any room you're not using.
- Reduce heating costs by managing your thermostat. Just a few degrees change in temperature setting can make a considerable difference in your energy usage. During the heating season, try to set your thermostat at 66 degrees-68 degrees. For additional heating savings, try a 10-degree setback at bedtime or when you're at work.
- During heating season days, keep draperies and shades on south windows open to allow warm sunlight in.
- Replace or clean your furnace filter once a month. Vacuum registers and vents regularly and make sure they're not blocked by furniture or drapes.
- Have your heating system inspected regularly. An annual tune-up can help reduce heating costs by as much as 10 percent.
- Caulk, seal and weatherstrip all seams, cracks and openings to the outside of your home. You can save 10 percent or more on your energy bill by reducing air leaks in your home.

County Energy Assistance Providers

BLUE EARTH: 507-345-6822 / 800-767-7139 X 2433
DODGE: 507-864-7515 / 800-944-3281
FARIBAULT: 507-345-6822 / 800-767-7139 X 2433
FREEBORN: 507-864-7515 / 800-944-3281
GOODHUE: 507-316-0610 / 800-277-8418

LE SUEUR: 507-345-6822 / 800-767-7139 X 2433
RICE: 507-316-0610 / 800-277-8418
STEELE: 507-864-7515 / 800-944-3281
WASECA: 507-345-6822 / 800-767-7139 X 2433

(continued)

**THE MINNESOTA COLD WEATHER RULE DOES NOT TOTALLY PREVENT
WINTER DISCONNECTS. IF YOU RECEIVE A DISCONNECTION NOTICE,
YOU MUST ACT PROMPTLY!**

NOTICE OF RESIDENTIAL CUSTOMER RIGHTS AND POSSIBLE ASSISTANCE

This notice informs you of your rights and responsibilities under the Cold Weather Rule. These rights and responsibilities are designed to help you with your winter utility bills. You must act promptly! If you choose not to assert your rights or choose not to enter into a mutually acceptable payment schedule, your service may be disconnected.

THE RIGHT to declare cold weather protection from shut-off. If you do so and your household income is at or less than 50 percent of the Minnesota state median income level, the service affecting your primary heat source cannot be disconnected for nonpayment of your bill, provided that you have entered into a reasonable payment schedule and those payments are current.

THE RIGHT, before you are to be voluntarily disconnected, to appeal any proposed disconnection of service. You will need to provide the cooperative with proof that you need cold weather protection from shut-off. Your service cannot be disconnected until this appeal is resolved.

THE RESPONSIBILITY, if you choose to declare cold weather protection from shut-off, to complete an "Application for Cold Weather Protection from Shut-off" form and return it to Steele-Waseca Cooperative Electric within seven (7) days of the date postmarked on your disconnection/termination of service notice.

THE RESPONSIBILITY to provide documentation to Steele-Waseca Cooperative Electric that your household income is at or less than 50 percent of the Minnesota state median income.

THE RIGHT to a mutually acceptable payment schedule with Steele-Waseca Cooperative Electric. This payment schedule will cover your existing arrears plus the estimated usage during the payment schedule period. If you are unable to pay and wish to enter into a payment schedule, contact 800-526-3514 or 507-451-7340 IMMEDIATELY to arrange a schedule.

THE RIGHT not to be involuntarily disconnected on a Friday or on a day before a holiday.

THE RIGHT not to be disconnected until at least thirty (30) days after the disconnection notice and information have been mailed to you, or until fifteen (15) days after the disconnection notice and information have been personally delivered to you.

THE RESPONSIBILITY, if you choose to appeal, to deliver or mail a personal letter of appeal stating your situation and issues in dispute. Steele-Waseca Cooperative Electric must receive your letter of appeal before the date of disconnection. The cooperative's appeal board will review your appeal when received. You must call the cooperative for the date and time of the appeal review, if you wish to be present.

THE RESPONSIBILITY of making payments as agreed or promptly notifying the cooperative why you cannot keep the agreement. You may then request that the original payment schedule be changed, subject to the cooperative's approval.

THE RESPONSIBILITY to contact your county's energy assistance provider for help with weatherization and paying utility bills. Please see providers on the bottom of page one.

A heat pump is a surprisingly smart complement to a gas furnace

Courtesy: Air Source Heat Pump Collaborative

Beyond providing all your cooling, heat pumps are excellent heating sources at times of the year when furnaces are at their least effective, namely during mild and moderately cold weather.

Gas furnaces provide lots of heat quickly, even when running at their lowest level. Lots of heat is useful in colder weather but can cause issues in moderate weather when less heat is needed. The **disadvantages of using a gas furnace in moderate weather** can include:

- Uncomfortable indoor temperature swings
- Reduced energy efficiency
- More carbon emissions
- Extra equipment wear from frequent starts and stops. Like driving a car, if you need to pick up speed, it is more efficient to ease into the desired speed rather than go full bore and cause unnecessary wear on your engine.

While some heat pumps excel when heat-

ing in colder weather, **any heat pump is highly effective in moderate weather.** The advantages include:

- Provides backup heat and shields you from natural gas price swings
- Adds heating resilience and flexibility during gas outages or price spikes
- Offers a reliable backup and a buffer against volatile gas prices
- Improves heating reliability while reducing exposure to gas price fluctuations 1097125

A heat pump is a great complement to a furnace because it leverages each piece of equipment when it is advantageous: the furnace in colder weather and the heat pump in mild and moderate weather.



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What your home is trying to tell you about energy loss

Don't waste your energy dollars. Heed these warning signs that your house is losing energy and take steps to fix them.

When conditioned air escapes from your home, your HVAC system has to work harder to keep you comfortable, costing you money. Higher energy bills are your first clue that your home is losing energy. If you pay attention, however, your home can tell you a whole lot more about how and where you're losing energy and how to fix it. Be on the lookout for these common signs of home energy loss.

1. HVAC system running all the time.

Your HVAC system should cycle on and off. If it's running constantly, that means it's working too hard to maintain your desired temperatures. This issue is likely due to air escaping through gaps or poor insulation or a problem with your HVAC system.

2. Uneven temperatures across rooms.

If some rooms are stuffy while others feel too cold, that means your HVAC system is struggling to maintain a consistent air-

flow, which wastes energy and reduces home comfort. These issues are often caused by leaky ducts or blocked vents.

3. Condensation issues. Unexplained moisture buildup on windows or anywhere in your home means that warm, moist air is coming into contact with cold surfaces, causing water droplets to form. This condensation often occurs when homes are poorly sealed or insulated.

4. Mold buildup. Mold infestation is often caused by air leaks, poor ventilation and improper insulation – issues that can also add to your energy bills.

How to cut your energy losses

Save energy and reduce your energy bills with these cost-cutting tips:

- **Weatherize doors and windows.** Check for gaps around windows and doors and seal any you find with caulk or weatherstripping.
- **Seal ducts.** Inspect accessible ductwork and seal it to prevent leaks.



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- **Ensure airflow.** Check to ensure that vents are open and unobstructed by furniture or rugs.

Courtesy: Touchstone Energy



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COOKIN' CONNECTION

Caramel Apple Pretzel Salad

Teresa Hertle

Plan your next meal with member recipes or submit your recipe at swce.coop/recipes

Please mail, email, drop-off your recipe for the SPARKS newsletter. Make sure it includes your name and SWCE account number. The member whose recipe is published will receive a **\$7 energy credit.**

INGREDIENTS

- 1 c. pretzels, chopped
- 3/4 c. brown sugar
- 1/2 c. chopped pecans
- 3/4 c. butter, melted
- Cream Cheese Mixture:**
 - (1) 8 oz. block cream cheese, softened
 - 1/2 c. caramel sauce
 - 3 c. diced apples (2-3 large apples)
 - (1) 8 oz. Cool Whip whipped topping

PREPARATION

Crush pretzels in a Ziploc® bag, mix in bowl with sugar, butter, and pecans. Spread the mixture on parchment paper-lined baking sheet and bake at 400° for 7 minutes. Let cool, break into pieces. Beat cream cheese until smooth, add caramel, beat, fold in Cool Whip. Lastly, stir in diced apples and sugared pretzels.

SWCE SPARKS IN BRIEF...

- Need a yard security light? For information, contact us between 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m., or at info@swce.coop.
- For average temperatures per day, check your SmartHub app.
- ENERGY STAR® Rebates – For a complete list of residential, commercial, industrial, and agricultural rebates, and their respective rebate form, visit swce.coop/rebates.

OFFICE HOURS CHANGE

Office hours are now M-Th, 8 AM – 4:30 PM;
Fridays, 8 AM – 3:30 PM

STEELE COUNTY TIP LINE

866.878.7964

TO BE USED TO REPORT ANY CRIME OR SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY ANONYMOUSLY COVERS ALL OF STEELE COUNTY INCLUDING THE CITIES OF: OWATONNA | ELLENDALE | BLOOMING PRAIRIE | MEDFORD

Boost comfort and efficiency in every season with a heat pump tune-up



For the remainder of 2026, receive a rebate of \$125 on a qualifying air source heat pump tune-up and help your system perform at its best when you need it most. A tune-up ensures efficient **heating and cooling**, improves year-round comfort, and helps catch small issues before they become costly repairs.

Don't wait for extreme weather to find out your heat pump needs attention.

Schedule your tune-up today and enjoy reliable comfort all season long.

This offer is available for a limited time. Please contact SWCE for more details.

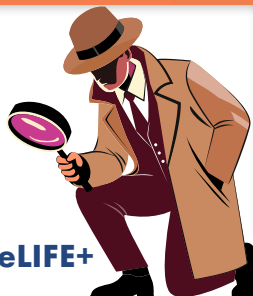
ENERGY WISE  MN

Was your account number in Sparks?

Look for your account number each month in the Sparks newsletter to win a bill credit! When you find your number, contact our office no later than the 1st day of the month following receipt of the Sparks or the amount will be forfeited. Learn more by going to swce.coop/sparks



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SWCE Safety Day

SWCE employees had the opportunity to learn from local law enforcement and EV industry experts regarding safety. The team also practiced a May Day drill as a safety procedure. 1124136



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