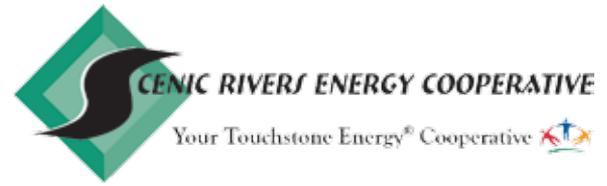




Steve Lucas, CEO

GET TO KNOW YOUR CO-OP NETWORK



Our annual meeting is now just days away. We hope you'll make plans to join us on April 9 at the Youth and Ag Building in Lancaster. The meeting gets underway at 9:30 a.m., with lunch served immediately after. We know you all have busy lives, so we're planning to conduct our business as efficiently as possible so you can get back to your Saturday.

The 2015 Annual Report, which was included in the March issue of this magazine, has all the information you need about the annual meeting, including financial reports, messages about the co-op's operations over the past year, and director election information.

The most important part of our business meeting is the election of members to represent you on the board of directors. This year terms are up in Districts 2, 6, and 7. Directors are elected for three-year terms.

Electing your fellow members to represent you on the board of directors is one of the key benefits of co-op membership. It's the second of seven principles by which all co-ops abide: Democratic Member Control. Cooperatives are controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting policies and making decisions and are accountable to the membership. In no other form of business do consumers have this kind of say. That's because at a co-op, you're not just a

consumer—you're a part-owner. I encourage you all to exercise your privilege as a member and vote for your directors; you can learn more about each candidate in the annual report.

Of course, our annual meeting is not the only opportunity this month for you to vote, as Wisconsin's presidential primary election will be held a few days earlier, on Tuesday, April 5. This has been an unusual and contentious campaign

The most important part of our business meeting is the election of directors.

season, and there are a lot of issues on the table that could have a significant impact on your electric bills; every vote counts.

To help you navigate the whole election process, America's electric cooperatives have

launched a new website, vote.coop. This is a non-partisan effort to promote civic engagement and encourage voter participation. The site provides co-op members with election dates; information about the voter registration process, absentee ballots, and early voting in each state; news on the candidates running in each election; and explanations of the key issues that are affecting electric cooperatives.

Make sure your voice is heard, both here at home and on the national stage, by casting a vote.



MEMBER PHOTOS OF THE MONTH

The winning photo from SREC's first-ever Member Photo Contest for March, left, was taken by Deb Shepard of Ferryville, who captured the old tobacco shed where her grandpa hung tobacco for years. The April winner is "Forgotten Times," a photo of a farm in Vernon County by Mark and Tiara Brothen of Viroqua. Each of the winning photos is included in our 2016 member calendar. Our Member Photo Contest for the 2017 calendar is already underway; please check our website, www.sre.coop, for contest details.

Growing Opportunities

SunGarden Greenhouse producing fresh food and meaningful work



L-R: Audrey Gaio-Johnston, executive director of Southwest Opportunities Center, and Sara Anderson-Mooney, greenhouse operations manager

Great things are growing in SunGarden Greenhouse in Lancaster. This hydroponic greenhouse, a project of Southwest Opportunities Center (SOC), is not only providing fresh, locally grown tomatoes and herbs to a variety of outlets in the Grant County area, but it's also providing jobs and community connections for individuals with disabilities in southwest Wisconsin.

Opened in January of this year, SunGarden Greenhouse is still in the midst of its first growing cycle, with about 400 of its 1,000 or so plants now producing. Once the greenhouse reaches full production, it will also provide revenue for SOC, a non-profit community rehabilitation center dedicated to providing

SunGarden Greenhouse has just recently opened an on-site retail market.

employment and programming for adults with disabilities in Grant County and surrounding communities.

SREC members who participate in the co-op's Operation Round-Up program have played a part in the success of this and other SOC projects, as Southwest Opportunities was the recipient of an Operation Round-Up grant in 2015 (*see Operation Round-Up story on page 18*). Through Operation Round-Up, members volunteer to have their power bills rounded up to the nearest dollar amount, with the difference placed in a fund to be distributed to worthy organization such as SOC within the co-op's service territory.

"We're pleased to help support an agency like Southwest Opportunities, which does so much good for so many people in our communities," said Steve Lucas, CEO of SREC.

Meeting Needs – Audrey Gaio-Johnston, SOC executive director, said the idea for the greenhouse came about after a study by the Southwestern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SWWRPC) indicated there was a need for more local produce in the area. At the time, she explained, SOC was also still recovering from the effects of the 2008 recession, which left many of the businesses that had partnered with the agency to provide employment opportunities for SOC's clients unable to continue.

"We were in the position where we needed to start a business because we rely so much on other businesses for our work and our revenue, and when the recession hit we lost almost all the work," she said. "We knew we had to start our own business to become self-sustainable."

The SWWRPC study helped convince the agency that a greenhouse could meet the needs of both SOC and the greater community. "So we spent about four years studying how to be a greenhouse," she said.

Those plans included bringing Sara Anderson-Mooney on board as greenhouse operations manager. This SREC member has a background in agriculture and is also an organic farmer, so her skill set fit in well with the agency's plans.

SOC received grant monies in December 2014 from ORC Industries in La Crosse, the USDA, and the Grant County Economic Development Corporation. Planning began in earnest in January 2015, when the grant money arrived, and construction began on the hydroponic greenhouse.

In this system, the plants are grown in clay pebbles instead of soil, giving the grower more control over the plants and reducing the risk of soil-borne diseases. The mechanics of the water system are housed in the end-building, maximizing space within the greenhouse itself. Mooney explained that the water circulates through the rows of plants automatically three times a day. The entire greenhouse is automated, with awning-like coverages that close automatically when temperatures drop below a certain level, and fans that turn on accordingly as the sensors in the building’s ceilings indicate the need.

Navigating the lush rows of tomatoes, it’s clear to see that the plants are thriving in this system.

“It’s a constant race to keep up with them,” Mooney said. “You give them exactly everything they want and they will give you rows and rows of production. We’ve given them the right temperature, the right mixture of nutrients, the right airflow, and they just keep giving back.”

Brisk Sales – So far, all the SunGarden produce has sold. Customers include area hospitals and rehab centers, which are using the produce in their cafeterias; Southwest Technical College in Fennimore; some local restaurants; and local sales outlets such as the Driftless Market in Platteville.

Production has developed to the point where SunGarden has just recently been able to open an on-site retail market and can now provide work opportunities for SOC clients, who assist with pollinating the plants, managing the facilities, packing and labeling the tomatoes, and sometimes delivering them.

Gaio-Johnston and Mooney expect the greenhouse will provide employment opportunities for five to eight SOC clients and possibly more to eventually work outdoors on the grounds. They also envision the greenhouse serving as a cheerful, warm outing for all clients, including those who don’t have the skills or desire to work there.

“We can see day-services clients coming down here just to enjoy the environment and get some sunshine,” Gaio-Johnston pointed out.

Summer Break – Production will continue through mid-summer, when home gardens are ready for harvest.

“Our plan is to shut down in late July and into August when the local tomatoes are coming in, take our breaks, clean everything out, start the seedlings, and then get back into production in the fall,” Mooney explained. “Just as soon as the last garden tomatoes get canned up, we’ll be back in production.”

And likely back in demand. Fresh, summer-sweet tomatoes are a treat, especially in the cold of winter—the greenhouse’s early success attests to that. That they’re locally grown by an organization that so benefits the community makes the tomatoes even better. Gaio-Johnston said she was surprised by and appreciates the support the project has received.

“It’s been embraced by the community,” she said. “We did do a lot of marketing and reaching out, but we’re having people now coming to us and asking for our produce. It’s nice to be able to give back to the community.” —*Mary Erickson*



1. SunGarden is experimenting with growing herbs like basil directly in the water. 2. Sweet cherry tomatoes are just one of the many varieties of tomatoes produced in SunGarden Greenhouse. 3. The plants are potted in clay pebbles, with water constantly circulated through the rows via the white tubes. 4. The canvas coverings installed in the ceiling of the greenhouse unfold automatically when the temperatures drop. 5. Initially, SunGarden will be focusing primarily on tomatoes, although some pepper plants grow here as well.





OPERATION ROUND-UP MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE WITH SMALL CHANGE

Great things can happen when people work together—SREC’s Operation Round-Up program is evidence of that.

Operation Round-Up is one way the co-op fulfills its vision “to improve the quality of life for our community.” It’s a voluntary program for which members agree to have their power bills rounded up to the nearest dollar each month, with the difference placed in a special fund that’s distributed among various community organizations as well as individuals facing extreme challenges within SREC’s three-county service area.

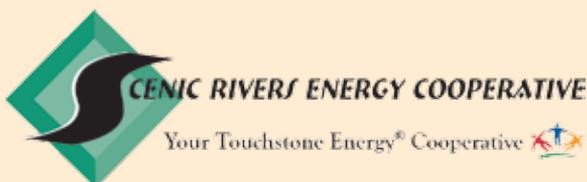
It’s an easy, inexpensive way to give back; the individual member contributions average just \$6 a year. That might not sound like much, but when one member’s \$6 is combined with that of thousands of other SREC members, the resulting total is significant enough to make a big difference to lot of worthy causes that benefit the entire community.

Last year, the Operation Round-Up board of directors allocated funds to Alzheimer’s Association; Wisconsin Badger Camp; Crawford Opportunity Center; Hodan Center; Southwest Opportunities Center (*see pages 16 and 17*); American Cancer Relay for Life; InHealth Community Wellness Clinic; 16 food pantries; 73 fire and rescue operations; Grant County Cancer Coalition; hospitals in Darlington, Lancaster, Platteville, Prairie du Chien, and Boscobel; and United Way.

SREC appreciates all members for their generous support of this worthwhile program.

SCHOLARSHIP DEADLINE APRIL 4

The deadline for applying for a SREC scholarship is fast approaching! Applications can be picked up at any of SREC’s offices or found online at www.sre.coop. Please return applications to the co-op by April 4. Scholarships will be announced through a drawing at the co-op’s annual meeting April 9 at the Youth and Ag Building in Lancaster. Students must be present to win. Contact Carrie at 608-723-2121 or 800-236-2141 with questions.



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YOUTH LEADERSHIP CONGRESS OFFERS FUN, EXCITING EXPERIENCE FOR TEENS

Member high school students who are looking for an exciting and fun opportunity this summer are invited to participate in the Youth Leadership Congress (YLC) July 15–17 at UW–River Falls.

This is a dynamic event for teens across Wisconsin to develop their leadership skills while learning about the cooperative form of business. The program is planned by teens who were elected to the youth board at the previous year’s YLC. These board members have an opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C., in June as part of the National Youth Tour. Last year, SREC’s own Allison Stader was elected to the youth board and will join other student leaders across the country on the National Youth Tour this summer.

“I cannot express enough how many more teens I want to participate in this opportunity,” Stader said after last summer’s YLC. “I can only say when given the chance, take it and run with it!”

YLC is open to students entering grades 10, 11, or 12 next fall whose parents or grandparents are members of SREC. Registration costs are covered by Wisconsin’s electric cooperatives and the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation. SREC will even provide transportation to and from UW–River Falls.

Interested students should contact Heidi at SREC, 608-723-2121 or 800-236-2141, or hpierce@srec.net.

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