



Steve Lucas, CEO

GET TO KNOW YOUR CO-OP CONNECTIONS

Every day, Scenic Rivers Energy Cooperative is hard at work making sure all of our members have safe, reliable electricity at the best possible price. And behind the scenes, we are working with a network of cooperatives to make that happen.

SREC is one of 25 electric cooperatives in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois that belong to Dairyland Power Cooperative, our generation and transmission co-op (G&T). Dairyland provides the wholesale power that we in turn distribute to our members. By working together with our own G&T, electric co-ops have more control over power supply and pricing, and we get to take advantage of renewable energy sources that would not be cost-effective for us to develop on our own.

When we need to borrow capital for system improvements or other projects, we turn to either the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation (CFC) or CoBank, both of which are cooperative lending institutions. CFC is owned by electric cooperatives throughout the country, and CoBank is owned by electric and agricultural co-ops nationwide.

We are able to take advantage of the latest information technology through our membership in the National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC), which develops and supports software and hardware solutions for its member cooperatives. We rely on NISC for all of our billing and IT needs. This helps us lower your energy costs and send you timely, accurate power bills.

We are able to maintain reliable insurance coverage at an affordable cost thanks to our membership in the Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange. We are able to purchase all the equipment we need to operate—such as poles, wires, and transformers—at low, competitive prices thanks to our membership in the Rural Electric Supply Cooperative (RESCO).

When power interruptions occur, we use Cooperative Response Center (CRC) to ensure none of our members' calls go unanswered. With CRC's help, we are able to answer your

calls 24 hours a day, every day of the year, including holidays. And we have some backup help for those occasions when there's a high volume of calls, such as during a big storm. That helps us restore your power more quickly.

Your membership with SREC means you're connected to many other cooperatives.

Finally, as a Touchstone Energy Cooperative, we're part of a national alliance of 750 consumer-owned electric co-ops. Touchstone gives us access to a wealth of informational materials, from safety tips to the latest information about renewable energy. As a Touchstone member, we can also benchmark our performance in comparison with other co-ops, which helps us as we strive to continually improve our service to you.

Your membership with SREC means you're connected to many other cooperatives as well. This ensures your needs are met in the most efficient, cost-effective way possible.

MY CO-OP

MEMBER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

The winning photo from SREC's first-ever Member Photo Contest for July was taken by Michael Momot of Platteville. He captured this scene of a robin perched on a tree stump in a field in southwestern Platteville.

Each of the winning photos is included in our 2016 member calendar. Don't miss our 2016 Member Photo Contest, which runs through August 21. Submit your favorite photo capturing scenic views within SREC's service territory, and it could be featured in our 2017 calendar! Photos must be horizontal and at least 300 dpi and 8x10 inches to be of sufficient quality for the calendar.

Please see our website, www.sre.coop, for contest details and entry forms.





Green Grilling

Kickapoo John Lump Charcoal offers natural, local alternative for outdoor cooking

A Scenic Rivers Energy Cooperative member has found a way to help outdoor chefs “green up” their summer cookouts. Kickapoo John Lump Charcoal, produced by John Gibbs of Gays Mills, is a natural alternative to the uniform charcoal briquettes commonly used to fire up grills.

“It’s a local, natural, hand-made product that’s not imported long distances,” Gibbs explained. “Plus it gives grilled food a much better flavor.”

Gibbs pointed out that most commercially produced briquettes contain very little—if any—charcoal, but instead are made of a blend of coal, petroleum products, different fillers, and perhaps just a little bit of wood. Kickapoo John Lump Charcoal, on the other hand, is all locally sourced, pure wood, with no chemicals or treatments. Gibbs said his charcoal lights quickly and easily, eliminating the need for lighter fluid, and it also burns hotter than commercial briquettes. He sells the charcoal in 5-lb.

bags—which are generally good for three or four cookouts, depending on the dinner menu—in 12 different outlets in southwest Wisconsin, as well as five Gays Mills apple orchards that sell the lump charcoal during apple season.

“All my charcoal goes to co-ops or local-food markets,” Gibbs said. “That’s my market.”

Class Project – A former high school agriculture teacher, Gibbs began making lump charcoal as a hands-on learning experience for his students.

“One of the classes I taught was forestry, and I was always looking for ideas of how we could go out and get our hands dirty,” he explained. “I was out burning wood myself one day and I saw the charred pieces of wood in the fire and thought, ‘Why not make some charcoal?’”

Gibbs explained that when wood is burned slowly in the absence of oxygen—a process known as pyrolysis—im-

purities and gases in the wood are driven off, leaving mostly carbon in the form of lump charcoal.

He and his students made a single batch of charcoal as a class project, testing the finished batch with a cookout. Gibbs retired from teaching in 2003 and began producing locally sourced charcoal for sale as a retirement project in 2012, having discovered there was indeed a market for it.

“I went to the co-op in Viroqua, and here’s lump charcoal, and it’s from Bali,” he said. “And I thought, here we are with all this wood around here; we don’t need to be importing it from halfway around the world. So I started looking into it in earnest and started developing it from there.”

In the five years that he’s been producing lump charcoal, Gibbs has honed his process into a smooth and efficient system, utilizing several pieces of equipment that he designed himself to fill a specific need. However, making charcoal is still a labor-intensive process.

Gibbs explained there are three necessary components to his charcoal operation: a safe place to burn, the proper wood source, and help with the physically demanding aspects of the process.

The burn area is located behind Gibbs’ rural Gays Mills home, close enough to the house so he can keep an eye on the barrels as the wood is burning but far enough away to keep any smoke from bothering neighbors.

“It’s a local, natural, hand-made product that’s not imported long distances.”

–John Gibbs

Gibbs said any hardwood will make good charcoal; he typically uses oak slabs that are a byproduct of logs that are processed into lumber at local sawmills. The wood must be well dried, and debarked slabs are best, as bark makes a lot of undesirable ashes. The proper size

wood also makes a difference.

“What I want is something that’s big enough to make a chunk,” Gibbs explained. The wood comes from the sawmills in 8- or 10-foot lengths. Gibbs first cuts the wood into 30-inch slabs and places them on end in 50-gallon barrels.

He then hauls the barrels of wood—12 barrels for each burn—down to the burn site with the help of his partner, Rick Nickell. The barrels, which have holes drilled at the bottom, are placed on bricks to allow air to be drawn up through the barrel. Gibbs starts a small fire on top of the barrels, and after about a half hour places a lid resembling a chimney on top of each one. This chimney restricts the air in the barrel, allowing the wood to char instead of being consumed completely by the fire.

“This is called a top-down, upward draft method of charring,” Gibbs said. “The wood burns down, but the draft is coming up. If it’s hot enough, it burns clean, with no smoke. The wood gases burn off and are released in the chimney.”

Timing is crucial, and Gibbs checks the wood’s progress throughout the burn; any brown or uncharred wood means the burning process didn’t last long enough,

and ashes indicate it went too long. The burn process generally takes two and a half to three hours, after which Gibbs seals the barrels to stop the burning and leaves them overnight to cool completely.

Once the wood is thoroughly cooled, Gibbs and Nickel haul it back up to the workshop near the house where it’s sorted on a sifter. The small chunks of burned wood pass through a wire screen, with the smaller pieces that are not usable for charcoal dropping through to a lower tray. The charcoal pieces are then bagged into 5-pound portions on a scale that Gibbs created for easy weighing, and delivered to market.

Byproducts of Byproducts –


Kickapoo John Lump Charcoal is made from a byproduct, but it also produces byproducts, and Gibbs is resourceful with these seemingly scrap pieces as well. Wood that’s too small or otherwise inappropriate for burning into charcoal is bundled and sold for camp fires. The little scraps of charred pieces that fall through the sifter are actually a highly valued byproduct known as biochar, for which Gibbs is working to develop a local market.

“I’m actually more excited about that than I am about the charcoal, to tell you the truth,” he said. “There’s a whole movement around biochar. It’s a soil amendment. There’s nothing in it as far as nutrients, but it is amazing.”

Gibbs described biochar as “housing” for the bacteria in soil that’s needed to feed plants.

“It’s like a sponge,” he explained. “If you look at this under a microscope it’s just like a honeycomb, with a gazillion little places. That’s where the soil organisms live.”

Gibbs explained that biochar has many agriculture benefits and is particularly desirable to organic farmers because it’s a natural product that helps boost soil fertility and increase productivity. A neighbor known for growing giant pumpkins uses the biochar on his crops; Gibbs believes other growers would find it valuable as well.

That would mean folks could enjoy a meal of locally grown food, grilled with locally produced charcoal, all thanks to the same local product. Now that’s some green grilling!—*Mary Erickson* 

Contact John Gibbs at 608-735-4620 or gibbsjohn@hotmail.com.



1. John Gibbs fashions these “chimney lids” that are placed on top of barrels in which the wood burns. The chimneys restrict the air in the barrels, enabling the wood to char instead of burn completely. 2. The charred pieces of wood are sifted through this machine, with smaller pieces dropping to the tray along the bottom. 3. The pieces packaged as lump charcoal resemble the wood it comes from. 4. Finer pieces create biochar, a soil amendment highly valued for its agriculture benefits.



Safety First – Fifth-grade students attending the recent Crawford County Safety Day Camp were treated to a hotline safety demonstration put on by Earl Winsor, Reggie Lomas, and Robert Tank, SREC operations personnel working out of the co-op’s Gays Mills office. Educating the public, especially youth, about safety around power lines is part of the SREC mission. Contact our office if your school or organization is interested in hosting a safety demonstration.

WATCH FOR THE WHITE ENVELOPE

Starting with your August 1 billing statement, your bill will come in a white envelope. You will have a separate enclosed yellow return envelope in which to mail your payment back to us. If you are on our automatic payment plan, you won’t receive the return envelope. Members with bill groups will continue to receive their statement in the yellow envelope.

Don’t want to deal with mailing envelopes? We offer several convenient ways to automatically pay your bill. Contact our office at 1-800-236-2141 or visit our website at www.sre.coop to learn more.



Development Discussions – University of Wisconsin–Platteville Chancellor Dennis Shields (left) paid a recent visit to Lancaster to discuss economic development with business and community leaders, including Steve Lucas, CEO of Scenic Rivers Energy Cooperative. Discussions focused on workforce development needs, and how the university can assist with those needs, collaboration, and budget issues.



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