

# WEC CO-OP CURRENTS

## WEC's Power Lines Are Getting Smarter Every Day

*Co-op Keeping Up With The Times*

It's ten o'clock at night and your power has just gone out. Of course, folks never used to have power, but since we do now, this is a pretty major concern – major enough that, once you or your neighbors have called to report the outage, the Co-op has summoned its linemen from the comfort of their homes out into the wilds to find and repair the problem. You, meanwhile (if you're anything like most of us), are watching the clock and wondering how long it's going to take for WEC to restore your electricity.

And the answer is that except in the very worst circumstances it's going to take a lot less time than it would have 20, 10, or even five years ago. That's because Washington Electric has been serious about keeping abreast of the technology associated with power line systems. And that technology keeps advancing. Two new mechanisms that WEC's Operations Department has been deploying on the Co-op's distribution system have typically boring names that only a technician or a lineman could get excited about – but when your power goes out at 10 p.m. you're going to be glad those devices are out there.

Meet the S.T.A.R. PATHFINDER™ trip fault indicator, and the Nova

Triple Single Vacuum Recloser™ with distance indicator!

The trip fault indicators – hey, these are important, so let's give them capital letters – the Trip Fault Indicators are small (easily held in the hand), and are mounted directly on the power lines themselves. On the bottom side there's a transparent covering that reveals a ball – larger than a ping-pong ball, smaller than a tennis ball – which is half orange and half black and is visible from the ground. Trip Fault Indicators are positioned intermittently on some of WEC's power lines.

Put simply, when a crew is trying to find a "fault" on the lines (the cause of an outage) one thing they can do is check the Trip Fault Indicators, if this is one of the circuits where they've been mounted. The crew will start at the beginning of the affected circuit, following the wires in the same direction that the current travels on its way to the members, and look up at each Fault Indicator along the way.

The reflective, orange side of the ball faces downward, and is therefore visible, when the power has stopped flowing. But the Fault Indicators "look" forward, so to speak – which means that when the linemen reach

*continued on page 4*



Reclosers at the East Montpelier substation. One monitors the three-phase "feeder" line to Cabot, the other monitors the feeder to Orange. These reclosers help avoid outages, and can also tell a repair crew how far out from the substation a "fault" has occurred.

## New Billing Practices And Options For Co-op Members

### WEC To Institute Cycle Billing In February

Washington Electric Co-op members who have been accustomed to receiving their electric bills uniformly in the middle of the month may find their schedule changed when WEC introduces "cycle billing" in February 2008. With cycle billing, WEC will institute three billing schedules in place of just one; the schedules will be based on when the Co-op's meter readers visit each meter as they rotate through their territories.

Once the new system is in place your bill will arrive at approximately the same time every month; that date could be different from the date you

are used to, but it will become regular and you'll be able to plan for it just as you have been doing under the old system.

Cycle billing is one of two new changes to the Co-op's billing and payment systems. WEC is now also offering members the option of paying their electric bills by debit card, MasterCard or VISA, or by e-check, which is an authorized deduction by the Co-op from the member's bank account and can be arranged by phone or the Internet. There is a \$3.95 fee for these

*continued on page 8*

### Inside

**We hate to be nags, but...** beginning with this issue we direct your attention to the bottom of the page – not every page, but occasional pages – where we'll be inserting tips and reminders to try to keep people's attention on the challenge of reducing our daily energy consumption. Maybe it'll help.

**WEC's power lines tell a story, if you learn how to read them.** The gadgets and machinery mounted on the poles and wires are there for a reason, which is to provide you the most reliable power that we can. To get a little more familiar with what's out there, and why, follow our feature story inside to page 4.

**There's room to grow at Coventry, where WEC generates more than half its power** using methane for fuel at the NEWS-VT landfill. The biological processes that produce methane in the



*Got a junk car around the place? In this issue our 'Waste Not' feature tells you how you can get that thing outa there. Page 5.*

landfill now warrant the installation of a fifth engine in the Co-op's power house, if regulators and members will approve it. Page 6.

**Conservation, efficiency, and investments in green energy** are steps we can take at the state, community, and personal levels. It really comes down to "us." See President's Report, page 3.

### Washington Electric Cooperative

East Montpelier, VT 05651

# Think Now About Running For The Board

## Deadlines Approaching For Candidates, Bylaw Changes

Washington Electric Cooperative has scheduled its 69th Annual Membership Meeting for Wednesday, May 28, 2008, to be held at the Barre Elks Club on Jefferson Street, behind the Aldrich Public Library. The Co-op will be returning to the Barre Elks for the third consecutive year.

With the Annual Meeting now etched onto the calendar, it's time to encourage Co-op members to think about running for a position on WEC's Board of Directors. Each year three Board seats expire (directors are elected to three-year terms). The incumbents who hold those seats can run for re-election if they choose to, but the process is open to qualified challengers as well. "Qualified" doesn't mean people who are experts in the field of electric utilities; it basically means Co-op members in good standing. The best qualification is an interest in serving on the board of an important community institution – the 69-year-old nonprofit, consumer-owned utility that provides electric power to some 10,000 rural homes, farms, schools and businesses in 41 towns in central Vermont.

Annual elections give the membership an opportunity to replace fully a third of the nine-member board.

WEC board members serve at-large, rather than representing districts. When there are competitive races – more candidates than open board seats – the three candidates who receive the most votes win. Electric co-ops remain a bastion of democracy, and like all democracies Washington Electric Cooperative functions best when members vote and participate.

Any Co-op member interested in running for the board should contact Administrative Assistant Deborah Brown at Washington Electric, and she will send out a packet of information that includes the petition and other materials needed to become a candidate. The completed petitions, which must contain the signatures of at least 25 WEC members, will be due on Wednesday, **March 19, 2008**. The next step for candidates will be on **Monday, March 31**, when they are asked to provide a photo to be used with their campaign information in *Co-op Currents*. At that time they should also prepare a brief biographical statement, noting how long they have been Co-op members, what their professional experiences and interests are, what skills they think they can bring to the board, and how WEC members can contact them. (Details

for these deadlines and requirements will be provided personally to the candidates.)

The final deadline is **Friday, April 11**, when candidates will need to submit written answers to a short set of questions relating to Washington Electric Co-op. These will be published in the "Annual Meeting" issue of *Co-op Currents* – the issue preceding the meeting itself.

These steps require some thought and effort, and signal a candidate's willingness to work and participate while on the board. Again, however, they do not require specialized knowledge about co-ops or utilities. Service on the board is, itself, a learning experience.

The first step, though is to decide whether or not to run. We suggest you give it some thought.

### Bylaw petitions due sooner

Washington Electric Cooperative is governed by a set of bylaws, which

are the legally binding rules the Co-op lives by. The annual election process provides members an opportunity to amend those bylaws.

You don't need to be a lawyer to draft an amendment proposal. You do, however, need to know whether the subject that interests you is addressed in the current bylaws, and what those provisions are. You can obtain a copy of WEC's bylaws by contacting Debbie Brown at the Co-op's office in East Montpelier.

Along with your bylaw amendment proposal you need to submit a petition with the signatures of at least 50 Co-op members. These materials are due on or before Sunday, February 10, 2008. *Co-op Currents* will publish your amendment proposal just as it does when amendments are proposed by the Board of Directors. Approval or rejection of bylaw amendments is decided by a simple majority of votes. Ballots are cast by mail prior to the Annual Meeting, or at the meeting itself.

## Co-op Currents

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www.vermontcooperatives.coop

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The Board of Directors' regularly scheduled meetings are on the last Wednesday of each month, in the evening. Members are welcome to attend. Members who wish to discuss a matter with the Board should contact the president through WEC's office. Meeting dates and times are subject to change. For information about times and/or agenda, or to receive a copy of the minutes of past meetings, contact Administrative Assistant Deborah Brown, 802-223-5245.



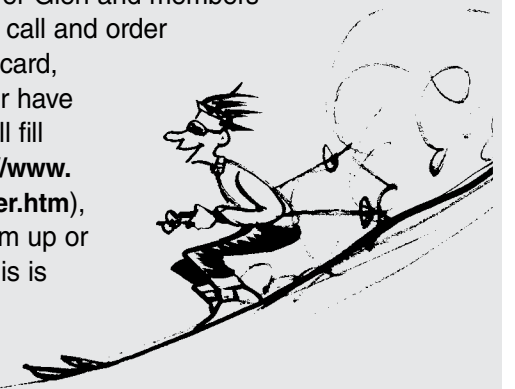
The Barre Elks Club has been selected again as the site of WEC's Annual Membership Meeting. That's not until May, but this is when the planning begins.

### Now, Call WEC for Mad River Glen Tickets

The geese have flown south, the temperatures have plunged, and ski season is coming! This year the Co-op has an improved deal for WEC members who ski at Mad River Glen – which is also a cooperative. You can now purchase day passes at the Co-op office. The ticket price varies depending on the day; weekday adult tickets are \$35.

WEC is a ticket retailer for Mad River Glen and members are eligible for special prices. You can call and order tickets by phone, paying with a credit card, then either pick your tickets up here or have us put them in the mail. The Co-op will fill orders placed from the website (<http://www.washingtonco-op.com/pages/madriver.htm>), but members must still either pick them up or have them mailed to your address. This is not an electronic ticket offer.

See you on the mountain!



### Reminder:

Turn off the lights when you leave a room.



## President's Report

# At Every Level, Action For Energy Efficiency Is Possible

By Barry Bernstein

As 2008 unfolds the presidential primaries are now in play, the Vermont Legislature has begun its deliberations, and we have gone through a period of January thaw and below-zero temperatures.

However, what seems to remain constant in this new year from the many publications I receive from national public utility organizations, in numerous other articles, and in radio and television commentaries I listen to, is the attention to global warming and its various long-term effects and implications.

### Vermont Legislature and the Governor

As the second half of the biennium begins, with the likelihood of lower state revenues, it is critical that both Governor Douglas and the Legislature not make the mistake of putting off investments that are needed to prepare the state for the future. It is far easier to draw a line in the sand in a tight fiscal environment than to talk straight with Vermonters about the need for essential infrastructure and program investments the state must make if we are going to meet the challenges presented to us by global warming and peak oil.

An energy bill that expands Efficiency Vermont's services – which now focuses solely on helping Vermonters use less electricity – to address reducing fossil fuel usage as well, and adoption of high efficiency standards for all new construction, are essential steps the state must take. But those steps are only a part of the solution.

For example, how about discussion of a State Public Power Financing Authority, similar to what was just adopted by the State of Illinois? Such an agency could combine state financing with capital from private developers in public-private joint ventures to build more renewable energy projects and to finance future generation to replace the state's Vermont Yankee and Hydro-Québec contracts.

We all know the truth: One way or another Vermonters will have to pay the public costs for infrastructure improvements, new power contracts, health care costs, etc., and it is only a matter of time. The question is how much forethought and preparation are we willing to do in order to be ready for what is coming?

### In our communities

In this Sunday's *Rutland Herald/Times Argus*, a new environmental section appeared, highlighting the

push to become greener in everything from the suppliers of parts to the automotive industry, to new, emerging, green Vermont businesses, to the deconstruction of old houses so

that most of the materials can be recycled and reused while avoiding a large quantity of debris being sent to the landfill – and avoiding the energy it would take to re-make those materials. Also mentioned was

a breakfast I recently attended at the Legislature, sponsored by the Vermont Environmental Consortium, which brought together business people, folks from Norwich University, Vermont Technical College, and UVM, renewable energy entrepreneurs and legislators, to network, socialize, and discuss projects.

As I continue to get exposed in these ways to the potential problems we face, I am drawn to the adage, "every problem presents an opportunity." It becomes increasingly clear that solutions often begin within our own communities. Just last week I was at a friend's house with a few other people, and I realized that a number of the fixtures did not have compact fluorescent bulbs (CFLs). So I mentioned this to my friend – a WEC member – and the others present, and

said how little effort it would take if each of them and others in our communities would, in the next few weeks, stop at one of the local hardware stores and purchase several compact

fluorescents to replace the regular incandescent bulbs in their homes. The new compacts available locally are far better quality, less expensive, and last much longer than those of just a few years ago, and they use signifi-

cantly less energy to give the same amount of light. In fact, as we have reported in *Co-op Currents*, the savings from modern fluorescent bulbs are so significant that in some countries low-efficiency incandescent bulbs may eventually be banned.

There are steps each of us can take. At my own home, I recently had additional insulation blown into the attic and walls to make my house tighter, more comfortable, and to hopefully reduce the energy it will take to heat it over the coming decades.

### At your Co-op

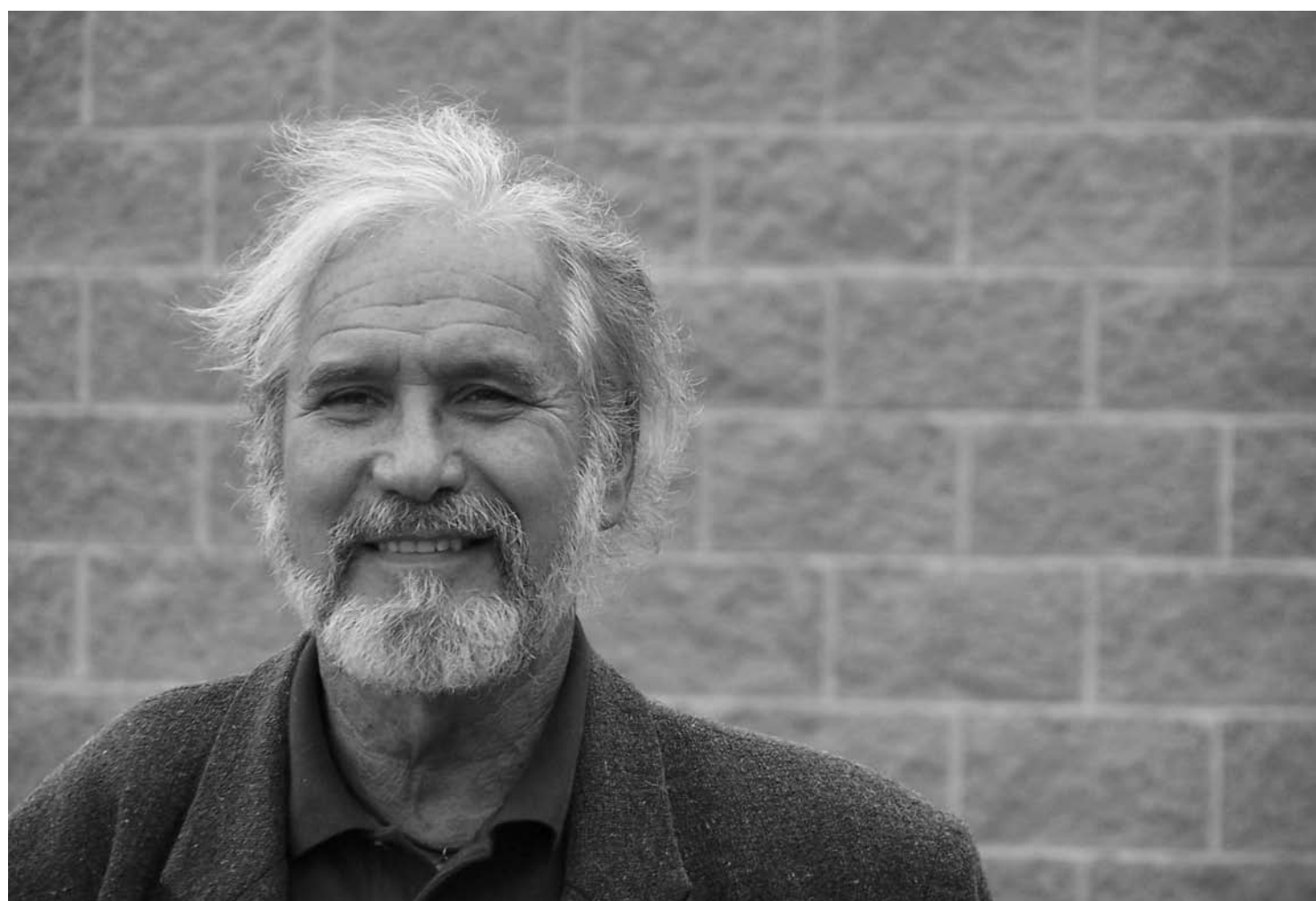
Your co-op is just beginning plans to install a fifth engine at the Coventry landfill gas plant sometime this year. This will enable us to expand a lower-cost energy supply and divert a

significant greenhouse gas (methane) from the air by using it to fuel the engines that make our power. And because Cape Light, a public utility in Massachusetts, purchases renewable energy credits from us based on our production at Coventry, Cape Light meets Massachusetts' renewable energy portfolio requirements – and we derive helpful income for our Co-op.

Meanwhile, we are looking for additional clean energy sources, to help us balance our power portfolio over the next decades. And as I have mentioned in this space, we will be starting our "pilot" Pledge Program very shortly; the pilot program will enable some of our members to work with us to lower their electrical usage while helping us further refine the program before opening it up more broadly to WEC's membership.

However, each of you can begin, on your own, to reduce your energy consumption – and costs – by replacing those incandescent light bulbs with compacts, by tightening up your houses, by replacing old appliances with newer, more energy efficient ones, and by paying closer attention to your energy use, as we all make an effort to become part of the solution.

On another note, I would also like to urge any of our members who have not signed up to pay their Co-op bills through automatic check withdrawal (ACH) to please consider doing so. It's convenient and free, and, yes, energy efficient. It's another way to cut back on our costs and consumption together.



Washington Electric Board President Barry Bernstein, at the Co-op's Coventry generating station.

**Power Lines**

*continued from page 1*

the first one with the black side of the ball showing, they'll know that the fault is behind them, not ahead of them.

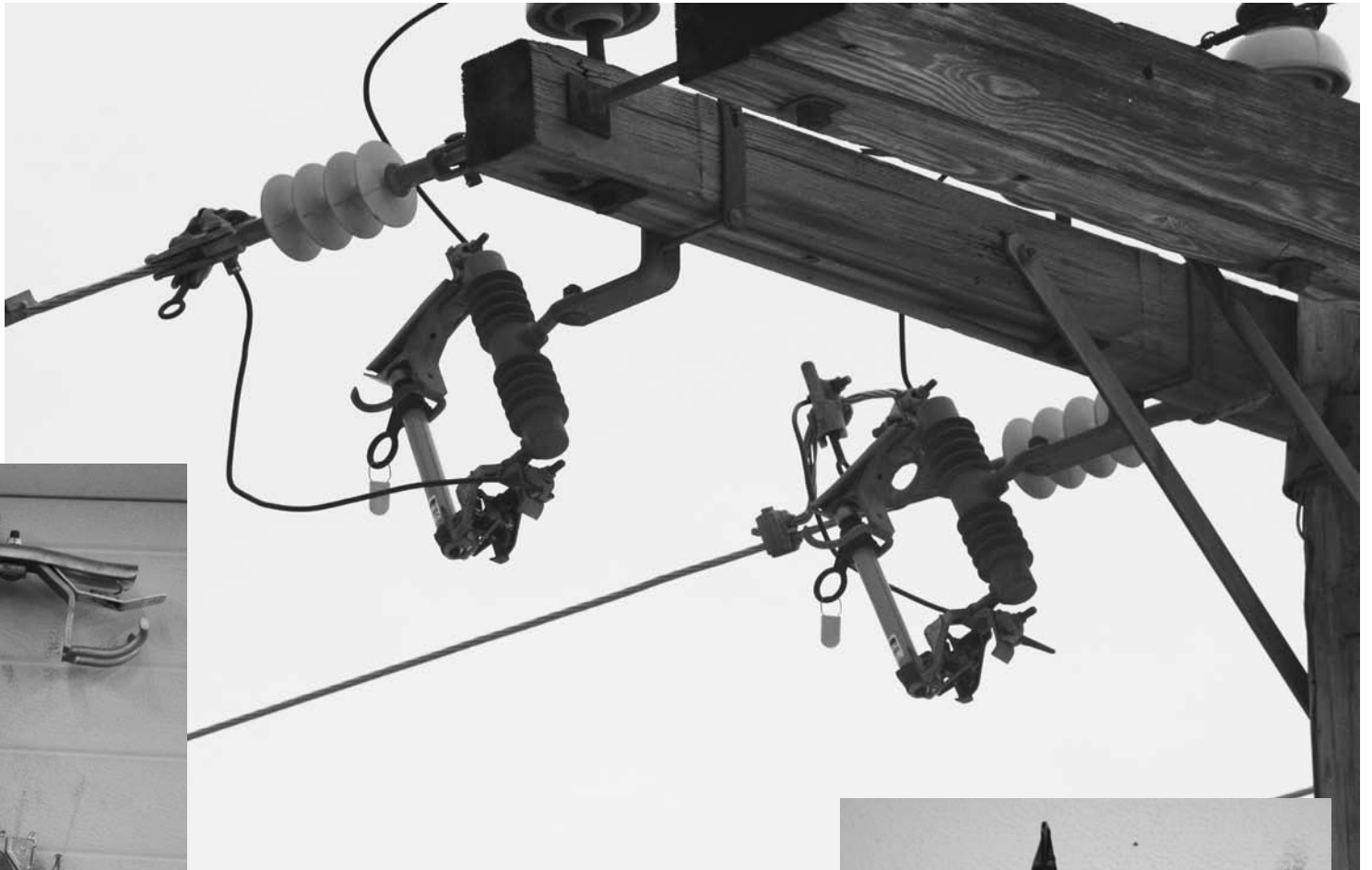
Yes, the entire line may be dead, including the area beyond the black ball. But the repair crew will know to turn around and look behind them to find the cause.

One of WEC's technicians provided this analogy. If the affected power line were Interstate 89, and the circuit began in Montpelier and ran up to Burlington, the exits along the way would represent the Fault Indicators.

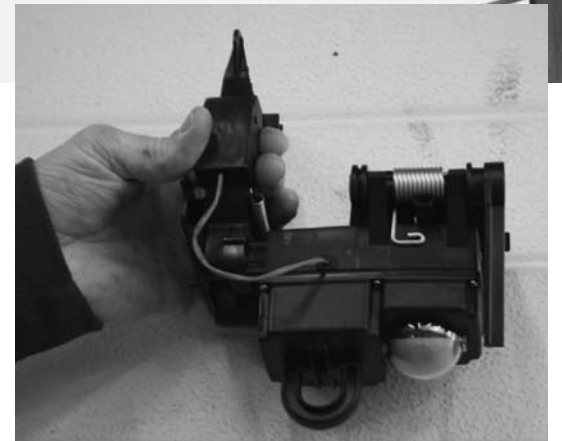
The linemen would drive first to Exit 9 (Middlesex) and shine a light (if it's night) at that device. If it showed orange they would proceed to Exit 10 (Waterbury). If that Indicator were also orange, they'd keep driving. If they got to Exit 11 (Richmond) and found the black side showing, they'd know the problem was between Waterbury and Richmond.

They've still got to find it, and that can take time. Because unlike the Interstate, many of WEC's power lines disappear for long stretches, cutting across fields, through woods, spanning gullies, stepping gingerly over swamps. Something as obvious as a tree lying on the conductor (power line) therefore may not be visible to the men in the truck, but if they know where they need to look they can get out of the truck and walk the line wherever it takes them.

Visual aids are a great help in tracking down power outages, and the Trip Fault Indicator isn't the only such



*Visual aids help the Co-op's line workers find the source of an outage more quickly. Fuses (above) are linked to the lines, and when a fault occurs and blows the fuse, the door drops open (left). That provides a clue to the location of the outage; blown fuses must be replaced. A Trip Fault Indicator (right) can tell a repair crew whether the fault is ahead of them or behind them, depending what color shows in the bubble at the bottom. No replacement necessary here.*



thing linemen have to go by. Fuses are much more common on the lines, and a blown fuse is easily seen because the fault springs open the metal door containing the fuse, which then dangles from the compartment that houses it (called a "cutout"). Fuses are also less expensive than Trip Fault Indicators.

But there is a problem with fuses. The fuses on a power line circuit must be coordinated, which means mounting progressively smaller fuses as the line proceeds outward from its current source. That's where Trip Fault Indicators can come in. They

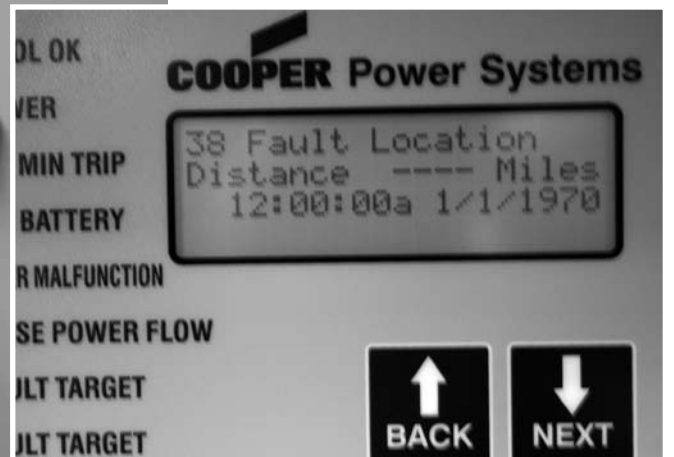
can complement the fuse system on a given line, giving the linemen another tool for quickly locating a fault. And here's something that the S.T.A.R. Fault Indicators™ do that fuses can't: they re-set themselves. Resumption of current through the lines flips the ball back to black. Fuses, on the other hand, must be replaced when they've blown – an extra cost, and more work-intensive for the linemen.

WEC is conducting a long-term fusing study of its distribution system. The study will help technicians contrive the best, most-effective fusing system

for each circuit. Trip Fault Indicators are part of the mix. The Co-op can't mount them willy-nilly because of the cost. But if you're looking, you can expect to see more of these small devices in coming years – perhaps on a power line near you.

**"Triple Single"**

The Nova Triple Single might sound like something out of an ice skating competition ("triple doubles" and "salchows"), but it is in fact an updated version of the vacuum recloser. And you may not know it, but the vacuum



*At left, the insides of a Nova vacuum recloser like those shown at the substation on page one. It conveys a lot of information, but one of the most interesting things is the screen (on the right side of the display, and magnified in the photo above), which can tell the operations workers how far away from the substation a fault has occurred. Remarkably accurate, this information cuts down on searching for the source of an outage.*



recloser is one of your best friends. The recloser gives a fault on a power line a chance NOT to turn into a full-fledged outage. When you see the lights flicker in your house, chances are that's a vacuum recloser at work.

Consider a tree falling in the forest – but think of a small tree, not an ancient, decayed maple, which would rip through everything on its way down. (But, hopefully, the Co-op's right-of-way workers would have spotted this "danger tree" and removed it before bad weather blew it over.) If this tree fell into the line and there were no recloser, the current would continue flowing – possibly causing a fire, igniting the tree, burning through the line, conceivably burning the power pole... potentially a dangerous situation.

However, a recloser "trips" (cuts off) the electric current when it senses a

*The indicator had said the fault was 8.2 miles from the substation, and when Dennis Bador and his partner had driven 8.2 miles, there it was. Talk about a time saver!*

fault. It does it quickly, in short bursts, and then allows the power to flow again. It can do this up to four times. These little interruptions give the tree a chance to burn off of the line – still potentially dangerous, but not so dangerous

as a larger fire fueled by continuous current – or perhaps just fall away from the lines harmlessly.

The short interruptions, each just a matter of seconds, are the reason your lights flicker. If they are followed by darkness, the "fault" did not correct itself. But if the lights resume at full, steady power, you've just been spared an outage.

WEC has reclosers all over its system. All utilities do. They are fairly large, cylindrical devices, easily seen.

But the Nova Triple Single Vacuum Recloser™ goes its cousins one better. The Nova Triple Single is installed


at the Co-op's substations (the goal is to have station one of these reclosers at the point that each "feeder" – the three-phase main lines carrying power – leaves the substation). It does the same thing, briefly interrupting power when it senses a fault, then allowing it to resume again. However, the Nova device comes with a distance indicator. Inside the control box there is a small screen, which displays how far out from the substation the fault has occurred. And it will do it, accurately, over long distances, which is good because WEC's three-phase lines – which carry current away from the substation, sometimes to smaller "taps" of single-phase line that serve the Co-op's rural members – can extend for many, many miles.

Dennis Bador, a senior Washington Electric line worker who has seen a lot of changes over the years, was opening

*Visual aids are a great help in tracking down power outages; the new generation of trip fault indicators can help the linemen find them more quickly.*

his lunch box in the linemen's room at the warehouse when Steve Anderson was explaining the Nova Triple Single to your Co-op Currents editor. And Dennis made it clear that he was impressed. He had recently tracked down

an outage using the Nova distance indicator as a guide. The indicator had said the fault was 8.2 miles from the substation, and when Dennis and his partner had driven 8.2 miles, there it was. Talk about a time saver!

WEC has fully installed the Nova Triple Single Vacuum Reclosers™ at five of its eight substations. At the Moretown and South Walden stations not all of the feeders are yet equipped with the Novas, and the North Tunbridge substation has none yet. But plans are to complete that work this summer – well before ice skating season. 

## WASTE NOT

**R**educing solid waste is a goal most WEC members can agree on. The Co-op reduces the waste stream's harmful impact by collecting methane formed from decomposition at the NEWS landfill in Coventry and using it to generate electricity, which avoids flaming this greenhouse gas into the atmosphere.

In this space, we help Co-op members find their own ways to reduce Vermont's waste stream, with tips about recycling, composting, the proper disposal of hazardous materials, and how to avoid generating some kinds of waste in the first place. Our information comes from the Central Vermont Solid Waste Management District (CVSWMD.org) and other sources. Readers can submit ideas or questions for Waste Not by contacting Washington Electric Cooperative.


**Junk cars and trucks** are pretty common in rural Vermont. Some of us gain junk vehicles without really knowing it. We pick up a better "ride" somehow, and park old faithful near the house or barn not really intending to abandon it; but there it sits with weeds growing under it, and in time it becomes a junker in our neighbors' eyes if not our own. When it dawns on us that the thing will never run again it's hard to know what to do with it.

Call the junkyard. But "junkyard" isn't a fair name for these because they provide the important environmental (and safety) service of recycling usable metals and other salvageable components – which is why they are more accurately called salvage yards. CVSWMD lists four in the central Vermont



area, without implying an endorsement. They are Gates Salvage in Hardwick, Bolduc Auto Salvage in Montpelier, Metal Recycling Enterprises in Waterbury, and King's Salvage in Chelsea. Check the CVSWMD web site, or the phone book, for numbers, or for other salvage businesses.

Their services are not free; they may quote a price over the phone or come out to assess the job and provide a quote then. It will also be your responsibility to clean out trash, extra tires, or other waste that has accumulated around the old car or truck. You may need to contact the Vermont Department of Motor Vehicles to clear up title questions. (There's an "Application for Duplicate Title" form if you have lost yours.) Junk cars aren't the easiest thing to get rid of, but one thing is for sure: you'll be relieved when you see it hauled away.

A subset of the junk car is the unwanted-but-still-usable car. These you can donate, to Community Action Motors (call Central Vermont Community Action) or to Good News Garage in Burlington, which fix cars up and provide them to needy families. They will tell you what restrictions apply, and whether you would receive tax benefits. One thing you will receive is the knowledge that you have helped someone out. 



**Half of your home's energy consumption goes toward heating and cooling. Have you remembered to replace the filter(s)? Your system will run more efficiently, and you'll save money.**



# WEC Eyes Another Expansion At Coventry

*Methane Production At The Landfill Believed to Justify a Fifth Engine*

Since 2005, when WEC installed the first three Caterpillar engines at its electric-generation plant in Coventry, the story has been one of continued growth. The plant is on Vermont's largest lined landfill, and harvests landfill gas (methane) to fuel the engines that produce the power. The \$8 million facility went into production in July of that year, and after a predictable period of modest electricity yield while technicians fine-tuned the equipment to the landfill's gas-production and pipeline system, it reached a generation level of 3 megawatts (MW) within a couple of months and began to exceed that, soon generating about a third of the power WEC needs to provide for its members.

But that was just the start. With three engines the Coventry facility was rated to reach 4.8 MW, and it was climbing toward that level when, about a year into production, an engine room fire sidelined the plant for four months. Meanwhile, though, the methane content within the landfill had been increasing as the organic waste trucked there from most of northern Vermont decomposed, and the potential for greater electric production was growing, too. The building had been constructed with an eventual fourth engine in mind. In fact, just three days before the fire, the Co-op had filed its application with the Public Service Board to install a fourth engine. Despite the temporary shutdown, the regulatory process went forward.

The Board granted its approval, and the members did the same, in a special vote held October 31, 2006. When the plant reopened in December of that year it did so with the fourth engine in place, and that new engine began generating in January 2007. It was now rated at 6.4 MW (the rating indicates its production potential), and in the 13 months since that expansion Coventry's production is, in fact, reaching that level. Washington Electric's landfill gas-to-electric plant now provides more than 50 percent of the power WEC members use.

And it's not over yet. WEC's leadership expects to come back to the membership again, perhaps in the spring or early summer, with a request to approve the purchase and installation a fifth engine for the generating facility.

The process will be the same as before, as required by state



*The photo above, taken two years ago, indicates the volume of the NEWS-VT lined landfill at Coventry, which explains why WEC will be able to increase the power it generates from landfill methane if it installs a fifth engine. Below, the Co-op's power house adjacent to the landfill; the expansion would necessitate an addition to the building.*



law: application for a Certificate of Public Good from the PSB, which, if successful, will be followed by a vote of the Co-op's membership. A membership vote is required by the state because this would be a significant financial investment for the Co-op – so the Co-op therefore needs the approval of its owners, WEC's customer/members.

The prospect of a fifth engine does

not come as a surprise to the board and management. The landfill, owned by New England Waste Systems of

Vermont (NEWSVT), was seeking Act 250 permits to expand at around the same time WEC was pursuing its original power-generation proposal through the regulatory process; and though the applications each succeeded on

their own merits the two made sense together – finding a beneficial use for

the methane that would result from a larger lined landfill.

In fact, said WEC General Manager Avram Patt, if the fifth engine is not installed, NEWSVT will have to flare some of the methane, which is a greenhouse gas and therefore must be burned, by law, before it is discharged into the atmosphere. Diverting it to fuel has kept the landfill from needing to do that.


"They're producing a lot of methane there," Patt explained, "and it's going to exceed the amount that we can use to fuel the four engines we already have. We want to get the fifth engine in place as soon as possible, rather than seeing the additional gas just flared and wasted. One of our goals has been to provide a better use than that for the gas, so we're hoping that our application and regulatory process goes smoothly."

WEC members will hear more about the proposal in coming months. Details about cost, construction plans (the project will necessitate an addition to the existing building), the time frame, and how much additional power WEC expects to generate will be clearer, and will be reported in Co-op Currents.

"We just want to give people a heads-up now that this will be happening," said Patt. "We think it's a great development for the Co-op. We're getting very reliable production from the plant, we have the rights to all the gas at the landfill for 30 more years, and the cost of the electricity we're getting is looking more and more like a bargain as energy prices rise all around us."

Could there be a sixth engine at the plant someday? Patt said there was every reason to think so.

"Our consultants and engineers have told us all along that there would be the capacity to support six engines eventually," he said. "Exactly when that will be is hard to say, but we will be monitoring that"

"Right now, though, we're only thinking about the fifth engine. We'll get our application in to the Public Service Board soon, and hope to bring it to the members in the next few months. And at that time we'll hope the members will agree with us that this has been a very productive investment for the Co-op, financially, environmentally, and in terms of controlling our own destiny – and that it can even get better." 

*"We just want to give people a heads-up now that this will be happening, and will require a vote by the members."*

— Avram Patt

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## Cycle Billing

continued from page 1

payment services, which is levied upon each transaction by NISC, the company that provides billing services for Washington Electric. It is important to know that these new payment methods are not automatic and must be arranged separately for each monthly payment.

Members who want an automatic deduction of their monthly electric bill from their checking account without paying the per-transaction fee can sign up for the Co-op's automatic payment plan, an option that Washington Electric has offered for several years and recommends highly. Automatic payment is free, and is easier than writing and mailing a check.

The schedule for WEC's automatic payment plan will not be affected by the Co-op's switch to cycle billing. "Right now, all of those members are charged on the 26th of the month," said Member Services Director Susan Golden. "It's conceivable that may change in the future, but not right now. If we do eventually change that, too, we'll notify people ahead of time."

Referring to the new options – credit and debit card payments, and e-check – Golden said, "They are a way for people to get their bill paid quickly, without having to come to the office."

An example of when this could be helpful could be when a member is facing the possibility of disconnection from falling behind in their payments. Paying by debit, credit, or e-check

could not only get them caught up but would also enable them to avoid the \$20 fee customers must pay when a technician is sent to their house to disconnect the meter. But there could be any number of reasons for people to use these payment options. Golden noted that some people use their credit cards at every opportunity in order to accumulate frequent flyer miles. No matter what your reason, you are welcome to use these alternatives for your WEC bill – but please be aware of the \$3.95 fee.

For more information on these and other billing and payment issues, visit WEC's website ([www.washingtonelectric.coop](http://www.washingtonelectric.coop)) and follow the appropriate links (for example, the one that says "E-bill is now available – Pay your bill online").

"We're trying to find ways to make it easier for our members to pay their bills," said Golden. "That's what this is all about."

### Cycle billing

WEC's introduction of cycle billing – establishing different billing schedules for the Co-op's membership – follows research into this system and contact with other electric utilities that already practice it. Washington Electric has concluded that cycle billing will have benefits for the Cooperative and for its



**Big Sky Country.** But not Montana; this is Co-op Country, a southeastern view from East Montpelier on a winter morning, with the sun attempting to penetrate the low-lying clouds.

members.

Under cycle billing, people who receive monthly electric bills by mail will be separated into three groups, and the groups will be billed approximately a week apart.

"For a long time the Co-op has sent everyone's bill out at the same time,"

said Golden. The bills were mailed from NISC's billing center in St. Louis on the 10th of the month (barring weekends) and reached Vermont within a few days. "Moving to cycle billing will even out our workload at the office because the payments will be spread out over a longer period. It will also even out the revenue stream for the Co-op."

Perhaps more important, the new schedule will ensure that WEC members receive their bills closer to when their electric meters actually were read. Under the longstanding procedures ending in January, the lag time for some people between meter reading and receipt of their bills could be as long as six weeks. Once the system is changed that period could be shortened to two weeks.

Why does that matter?

"The new schedule will give us a better opportunity to go through the meter reports before the bills go out, to look for unusually high or unusually low usage of electricity," said Golden. "When we spot dramatic changes one way or the other we try to follow up on them to make sure they're accurate and that people are aware of their usage."

For example, someone may inadvertently be using electricity they don't intend to use – forgetting to unplug a camper, or leaving lights or an

appliance running that they usually shut off in winter. The sooner WEC's member services representatives spot the uncharacteristically high usage and inquire about it (if that seems appropriate), the sooner the member can figure out the problem and correct it – saving that person money and preventing further waste of electricity.

Of course, the higher usage might be intentional. The member may have purchased and installed new electrical equipment. Knowing sooner what the impact is on the electric bill might influence the person's decision about continuing, or controlling, its use.


WEC also responds to unusually low usage, because it can mean that a meter has stopped working.

The Co-op employs four meter readers, who work on a three-week cycle. Under cycle billing, rather than waiting for the readers to provide the information from all of the meters at once at the end of those three weeks, WEC will calculate bills based on the meters that have been read each week,

and send them out a week at a time.

"Prior to adopting this, we spoke quite a bit with Vermont Electric Co-op, which uses 20 billing cycles," said Golden. "Of course, they're a much larger utility. More typical for other utilities is four to six cycles. Everything we've heard about cycle billing has been positive – that it's definitely a good thing to do."

WEC members should prepare for a bump, of sorts, as the Co-op changes to the new cycle billing schedule. The February 2008 bill will cover a longer-than-usual period in order to synchronize the meter readings with the new billing plan. This will mean the February bills will be somewhat higher than normal. This will be a one-time occurrence. If it presents a problem, people are invited to call Washington Electric's member services department and ask a representative for help and advice about making the transition.

Seasonal Co-op members who pay twice a year also will not be affected by the change to cycle billing. 



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