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SANTÉE ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE NEWS

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A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative

Where do we go from here?



IT IS NECESSARY that I touch on a difficult subject this month—unpaid power bills. The COVID-19 crisis has had a huge impact on the economy. Some have seen a reduction in wages, and some have seen wages go away altogether. While it is true that stimulus checks and

boosted unemployment payments have helped some, we recognize the fact that some of our members are in a tough spot right now.

As I am writing this column, investor-owned utilities are still required to suspend the practice of disconnecting power for nonpayment. Though the cooperatives are not bound by the same rules as an IOU, we all chose to voluntarily suspend our own disconnects as well—and we still are. At some point, however, and possibly before this magazine reaches our members, this temporary suspension of disconnects will be lifted.

What will happen then?

Before I answer that question, I need to summarize how a cooperative is operated. You know that we were created roughly 80 years ago as small organizations—that you own—to run on thin margins in order to bring electricity to the rural parts of our nation. Here in South Carolina, the cooperatives must purchase every kilowatt-hour (kWh) of energy that we deliver to you. That system works fine while SEC's member-owners also pay their power bills. However, what happens when some will not (or cannot) pay?

Normally, after a certain number of warnings, we would cut the power off. This usually encourages our

delinquent members to pay. However, each month we have a certain amount of uncollectible debt that must be written off. That power is paid for by our other members. If this is a relatively small amount, the impact is not so bad. However, when we go for months in a row without the ability to disconnect power for nonpayment, the bad debt gets large.

That brings us back to where we are today—getting close to announcing a date when disconnects will again be scheduled.

SEC is planning to waive all late penalties for anyone who brings their account current, or signs an agreement to go on Advance Pay, by the disconnect date that we will announce when we have guidance from the governor and the South Carolina Office of Regulatory Staff. Additionally, members' credit will not be affected by the late payments during the COVID-19 event. For those that cannot bring your account current (or choose not to do so), we need you to call SEC or contact member services via our SmartHub app to make a payment arrangement before the disconnect date. Those with a past due balance and no arrangement will be disconnected shortly after this emergency request is lifted.

Please, if you fall into this group, contact us—and please do not wait until the last minute.

ROBERT G. ARDIS III
President and Chief Executive Officer

Tips for managing energy use during COVID-19

BECAUSE OF THE COVID-19 crisis, families across South Carolina have been working and going to school remotely. More time at home likely means a surge in home energy use—and in upcoming electric bills. The annual rising temperatures will play a significant role, as well. Simple money-saving steps can help lower monthly electric bills without jeopardizing safety or comfort.

“Santee Electric Cooperative understands the increased financial hardships facing families and businesses due to the economic impact of COVID-19,” says the cooperative’s resident energy advisor, Kevin Myers. “As our CEO, Rob Ardis, explains in his column, Santee Electric has suspended disconnections for non-payment and will be waiving late fees for qualifying accounts. However, consumers will still be responsible for past due bills when the pandemic has passed. It’s important for families to be mindful of their energy use and consider adjusting certain habits to avoid higher costs later.”

Myers recommends the following energy-saving measures to help flatten the potential spike in energy consumption:

- ▶ As always, the number one way to reduce energy consumption is through conservative thermostat settings. SEC and the Department of Energy recommend a summer setting of 78 degrees, and a winter setting of 68 degrees. Setting your thermostat one degree higher when cooling can reduce energy use by up to 5%.
- ▶ Unplug appliances and electronics when not in use. Small appliances and electronics use energy even when not in use. When powered on, laptops, game consoles, televisions and similar electronics are responsible for up to 12% of energy use.
- ▶ Substitute LEDs for conventional light bulbs. Lighting can amount to up to 12% of monthly energy use. LED bulbs can cut lighting costs by 75%.

- ▶ Do full loads of laundry and wash with cold water. Using warm water instead of hot can cut a load’s energy use in half; using cold water will save even more.
- ▶ Air dry dishes. This step can cut your dishwasher’s energy use by up to 50%.

Santee Electric members who have questions about their energy bills should contact member services through the Smart Hub app or call (800) 922-1604.

Don’t get caught by a phisher

In times of social and economic unrest, there is often a rise in malicious activity, including email phishing attempts. The current COVID-19 situation is no exception. Bad actors see the country’s shift to remote work as an opportunity.

Protect your home and company by being aware of these possible phishing emails and scams:

- ▶ Emails designed to look like they are from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- ▶ Emails that offer purported medical advice to help protect you against the coronavirus.
- ▶ Workplace policy changes and announcements.
- ▶ Emails with official government announcements.
- ▶ Links to a map of confirmed coronavirus cases.
- ▶ Ads and emails requesting help and donations to fraudulent charities or causes.

Any unexpected or unknown solicitation, request or prompt should be met with skepticism. Verify and confirm the identity of the emailer or requester, always confirm a financial transaction, and never click on a link unless you are sure of its destination.

Wendy Walker, a Santee Electric member service representative, is serving co-op members from her home in Manning. In addition to staying safe through the quarantine, she is also saving energy by unplugging her laptop when not in use.