

# Tree on GMP-VELCO Transmission Lines Causes Four Hour Outage

*Dec. 14 outage affects 4,000 WEC members*

In the early morning hours of December 14, the wind picked up, blowing north-south through the tunnels created by Central Vermont's mountain ranges. Somewhere near Ryegate, a large pine tree fell through the right of way and onto the Green Mountain Power-VELCO transmission line that runs crosswise through the state, from Graniteville, near Barre, to Comerford, near the New Hampshire border.

Like other Vermont electric distribution utilities, WEC is served by transmission lines managed by transmission utilities VELCO and GMP. These lines, the interstate highways of electricity, transmit 34,500 volts and higher (up to 345,000 volts in Vermont). The high voltage lines allow electricity to travel farther and more efficiently from where it is generated, losing less power over the mileage than if it traveled at a lower voltage. These transmission lines connect into distribution substations, where the voltage is stepped down to 12,470 volts and sent out on the three-phase and single-phase lines that serve our communities. At each home and business, a transformer—basically a personal substation—steps down the voltage for consumer use and connects to the building.

The transmission line that went out on Dec. 14 brought power to WEC's Jackson Corner substation

in Williamstown, which serves 2,141 members, and Mt. Knox substation near Orange, which serves 1,985 members. Consequently, the fallen pine knocked out power for more than 4,000 WEC members, plus more Vermonters served by other distribution utilities fed from the same transmission line.

But at four in the morning, engineers didn't yet know that the cause of the outage was a pine tree. "VELCO and GMP have what's known as telemetry, or instrumentation on both ends and along that circuit that tells them what's going on," explained Dan Weston, WEC's Director of Engineering & Operations, who was in contact with upstream utilities for the duration of the outage. "In essence, the VELCO telemetry indicated there was a fault about 21 or so miles from their breaker. The GMP telemetry system did not provide the same info."

This is where the story takes on the characteristics of a thriller—for engineers. For unknown reasons, the GMP system appeared to show the problem was at their substation, at the bus—the device that carries the substation current. If the fault were indeed at the bus, reenergizing the line in any way could cause major damage to the substation.

"So, for safety reasons and good common utility sense, both VELCO and GMP controllers agreed to not

*continued on page 8*



A VELCO transmission line. These high-voltage lines transmit up to 345,000 volts of electricity to utilities across the state, connecting with distribution utilities—like WEC—at substations. When a tree fell on a transmission line on December 14, it knocked out power to two WEC substations and more than 4,000 of WEC's members.

## Now Available: SmartHub Outage Alerts by Text and Email

*Kevin Stevens, MIS Manager, walks members through sign-up process*

"Members really want communication when their power is off," acknowledged Kevin Stevens, manager of WEC's information systems. Outages run from inconvenient to dangerous, when many homes rely on electric power for light, heat, water, and device charging. People naturally want to know when there's an outage, when crews will begin work to restore power, and what time the power is expected to return.

Now, WEC members have the ability to receive real-time text and email outage alerts. By updating notification settings in SmartHub, WEC's account management

platform, members can determine whether they want to receive alerts via cell phone or email, and which kinds of alerts they want to receive. "I am so excited we are finally able to roll this out," announced General Manager Patty Richards. "Our members have been asking for this technology. Now, all you have to do is sign up within SmartHub, and you'll get outage information and updates right to your phone, in real time."

### How it works

**Verified outages:** An outage needs to be verified before it's recognized by the system. When a

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### Washington Electric Cooperative

East Montpelier, VT 05651

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It was a banner year for electricity production at WEC's landfill gas plant at Coventry Landfill. The plant produced enough energy to power well over two thirds of WEC member homes. More in the President's and General Manager's report, p. 2.

## President's and General Manager's Message

# Good News for a New Year

*No Efficiency Vermont increase, Coventry production up, broadband progresses*

### Thank you, WEC employees

**Barry:** On behalf of the WEC Board and membership, I want to thank all our WEC employees who worked through the weekend of January 16 and 17 in the wet and heavy snow to restore power to several hundred of our members. These same employees recently came off working during the 2020 Christmas outage, delaying spending time with their own families, to bring power back on for those of us who lost power. Theirs is a team effort we always appreciate and never want to take for granted.

### No rate increase in 2021 budget

**Patty:** We just passed the 2021 operating budget for WEC, and we were excited to put it before the WEC

Board of Directors. We got it to a point where it's a balanced budget, which means it meets our lender ratios and it looks like we won't need a rate increase if our predictions and forecasts come through. We just want to let members know where we stand: bottom line, the outlook for 2021 is no rate increase.

**Barry:** Join me in wishing for no major storms, which is the one budgeting factor that we have no control over. We always encourage people to use electricity wisely, and as you make new purchases, buy more efficient devices if you can, and switch off fossil fuel. We're very proud of the fact that we have a member supported 100 percent renewable energy supply. Roughly 85 percent of it comes from

in state, and the rest comes from a federal hydro plant in New York that's been operating since 1956. Our Coventry landfill gas plant is operating well. We'll keep our fingers crossed and hope we have another good year in that respect.

**Patty:** We produced 58 million kilowatt hours at the Coventry plant last year. That's more than 70 percent of our members' needs. In terms of power generation, 2020 was a great year at Coventry, and we hope it continues to hum right along for us.

**Barry:** Congratulations to our staff and to the folks up at our Coventry plant and at NEWSVT/Casella, who have worked with us to make sure we have the gas we need to run the plant and worked with us to make it a successful year. That's the kind of news we love to celebrate.

### Broadband update

**Barry:** On another positive note, I want to say WEC is moving forward in collaboration with EC Fiber, a nonprofit CUD serving many of our southern half of our territory; and CV Fiber, working to bring high speed fiber to central Vermont; and Kingdom Fiber, operating out of the Plainfield area with wireless for a number of years, and hoping to serve a number of folks in conjunction with CV Fiber. We are hoping all the stars align and we'll start to string fiber in our territory by the end of this year.

**Patty:** We have a series of hurdles to jump over to make that a reality, but we're knocking down those hurdles. We're preparing to apply for financing through the Rural Utility Service [RUS], a program of the USDA, and if all that goes through and the Public Utility Commission [PUC] gives us permission, away we go. As Barry said if we get all those approvals we'll start stringing fiber by the end of the year.

**Barry:** We're meeting with some House and Senate committees in the Vermont legislature to ask for a property tax exemption on any new fiber that's laid. We look at high speed internet as a valuable tool to both keep younger people in our area and to make our territory attractive to people looking for safer places to live because of COVID. Kids need educational service online, adults need to work remotely, many folks need high speed

internet for telemedicine appointments, and these days many of us need video chat just to keep in touch with the people we care about.

We as a WEC team are extremely excited by the tremendous community effort. It should have happened years ago, but we're now looking at broadband throughout our territory in the next three or four years. We thank all our members for helping bring this closer to reality.

**Patty:** Admittedly it's been a ton of work for our staff, but it's totally worth it. It's really an essential service, like electricity was in the 1930s, and that's the mindset we have going into it. Cheryl Willette has been running financial models, Dan Weston is working on the infrastructure plan, Bill Powell ran a survey to the membership to see how many members would participate. I'm really proud of the staff. Ron Shems, our legal counsel, continues to look at the legal issues and is helping us make our way. Barry and fellow Director Steve Knowlton have invested tons and tons of time on this. It's been a full court press by everybody.

**Barry:** What strikes me is it takes a community, and a cooperative community, to make this happen. That's what we have.

**Patty:** That's right, Barry, well said.

### Dan Weston retires

**Barry:** The next item is good news for one person, and not good news for some of the rest of us.

**Patty:** It's bittersweet. Dan Weston has been with us for 24 years and he is retiring at the end of January. We'll miss him terribly. The work he's done for our 41 towns is just monumental. Our very best wishes to Dan and his family as he embarks on new adventures. Congratulations, Dan, every day is Saturday now!

**Barry:** Dan grew up in Warren, and he's brought to the Co-op that Vermont spirit of always having the members' and community's interest at heart. When we were first putting in AMI [advanced metering infrastructure] a few years ago, Dan went to talk to one of our members. Dan met with him and realized that our member had cancer and was not doing too

## Co-op Currents

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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 Dawn Johnson, at 224-2332, or visit [wec.coop/board-of-directors](http://wec.coop/board-of-directors).*

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### Got something to say?

Letter to the editor, comment, or a story tip? Drop us a line at [currents@wec.coop](mailto:currents@wec.coop) or Washington Electric Cooperative, Inc., P.O. Box 8, East Montpelier, VT 05651, Attn: Co-op Currents.





well. That weekend, Dan Weston and his three kids showed up at that member's house, and cut up and split almost two cords of wood, and then stacked it. That's how Dan treats everybody, Co-op members, neighbors, everybody. There's nothing to say except that that's exceptionally normal for Dan. I've always really appreciated that about him and I hold him in very high regard. Good luck, Dan, we're going to miss you.

**No increase to Efficiency Vermont charge**

**Patty:** I want to make sure to let our members know that there is no increase to the Efficiency Vermont charge this year. EVT is holding the fee flat!

**Barry:** One thing in general about Efficiency Vermont: they have continued to readjust their mission to make



*The Efficiency Vermont staff has been really responsive to feedback that we hear from members—specifically, that the charge adds up. They've taken that really seriously. Last year, they decreased the rate; this year they're holding it flat.*  
— Patty Richards

sure they're serving all of Vermont. We were the first state to set up an efficiency utility. They've done great work. They continue to work closely with WEC and other utilities. When you look at how much our state has saved in terms of energy, and now they're working more in beneficial electrification, more incentives to move off fossil fuel, I want to applaud them as another positive Vermont statewide effort.

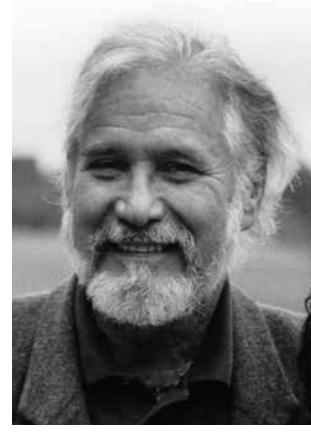
**Patty:** The Efficiency Vermont staff has been really responsive to feedback that we hear from members—specifically, that the charge adds up. They've taken that really seriously. Last year, they decreased the rate; this year they're holding it flat. They're cognizant they need to be affordable, and I appreciate that they're

respectful of that. They're trying to do the right thing and hold the bottom line as low as possible.

**Barry:** We know people in need who have benefited by having their houses tightened up. I know my heat pump water heater saved quite a bit of electricity. This is important to individuals and to us collectively as a cooperative, as we share the expenses we incur in order to serve everybody.

**Board election season**

**Barry:** As always, we encourage people to pay attention and get involved in the Co-op. Every year, three seats are up for election on our Board of Directors. We encourage people to consider running. Remember, a number of our Board members have run and not won, and run again and are now serving on the Board. It's your Co-op,



*We as a WEC team are extremely excited by the tremendous community effort. It should have happened years ago, but we're now looking at broadband throughout our territory in the next three or four years.*  
— Barry Bernstein

it's our Co-op, and it's only vibrant if we have a strong board to work with our Co-op staff in making sure we give a quality service that's member owned. Please give it consideration, every one of you.

**Patty:** It's a real hands on way to make a difference. The Board sets policy, and we on staff are in place to carry out that policy. If you want to see some changes at your electric cooperative, get involved. Running for the Board is a great way to do that.

**Barry:** Keep up to date on what we're doing. Call our manager, any Board members, the staff: we're here to help you. Also, remember we want to be COVID-safe.

When you see our crews out there fixing a line, give them a honk and a wave. They appreciate that. Just no hugs.



Annual Meeting at the Operations Center back in 2018. Even though COVID precautions prevent an in-person annual meeting in 2021, the Board of Directors encourages all members to participate in the democratic process. There is still time for members to register their candidacy for the Board of Directors or submit suggested changes to the bylaws. All signatures may be gathered online in 2021. Contact WEC for details.

**Remembering Perry Bliss**

We were saddened to learn of the passing of Perry Bliss, who served as a WEC lineworker for 35 years before retiring in 1999. Our thoughts are with his family.

**Energy Tips**

Do your part for conservation by unplugging your wireless devices when the recharge is complete.



**What's your internet story?**

As WEC works to make high speed internet available to all members, *Co-op Currents* is looking for stories from members about the role broadband—or the lack of it—plays in their lives. Drop us a line at [currents@wec.coop](mailto:currents@wec.coop).

**WEC Office Closed to Public: Call or Email Only**

WEC's office in East Montpelier is now closed to members of the public due to the spread of COVID. Thank you for understanding. You may reach any staff member or Board member by phone or email.

WEC's website is [wec.coop](http://wec.coop) and phone numbers are 802-223-5245 and toll free at 1-800-932-5245.

*Thank you for doing your part to keep our community healthy and safe.*





# A Statement on Democracy from WEC's Board of Directors

**W**EC is first and foremost a democratic cooperative, led by and responsible to the people we serve. Each of us on the Board of Directors was elected to our seat by our fellow members. Some of us have run in contested elections; some of us ran multiple times before winning our seat. We trust and revere the democratic process, we welcome and encourage respectful debate and discourse, and we are honored to serve.


As the elected leaders of a democratic organization, and in

accordance with the cooperative principles that guide us, we believe we have a moral responsibility to respond to the events of January 6. Between the presidential election and inauguration we witnessed an unprecedented erosion of democratic norms on a national scale, starting with the number of officials perpetuating unsubstantiated accusations of election fraud. And we witnessed how easily a violent mob disrupted the democratic process, destroying federal property, threatening the lives of duly elected

representatives, and murdering a Capitol police officer.

As the pain, fear, and rupture associated with these events ripple through our society, we at WEC can continue to demonstrate our democratic strength and ideals. Democracy works when we make room for each of us to participate, and we agree that the rules and benefits should apply equally to each of us. In our small communities, this is a necessity. When a storm hits, you dig out your neighbor; in the next storm, you may need your neighbor to help

you dig out.

We, the Board of Directors, stand together, committed to democratic ideals and practice. In our commitment, we assure that WEC will continue to offer a functional example of democracy: inclusive, accessible, diverse, vibrant, and respectful. We urge WEC members to actively support and sustain this local democratic institution by voting, attending member meetings, and encouraging the service of capable and qualified director candidates. 

## Important Annual Notice Regarding Herbicide Use in the Maintenance of Electric Utility Rights-of-Way

**T**he Vermont Public Utility Commission has set forth rules under PUC 3.600 pertaining to the use of herbicides in the maintenance of electric utility rights-of-way. Each spring, herbicide applications may begin on or after April 1st. These rules afford you important rights and duties. Vermont electric utilities maintain electric line rights-of-way with several methods, including the selective use of herbicides on trees and brush. They also encourage low-growing shrubs and trees which will crowd tall-growing species and,

thus, minimize the use of herbicides. Methods of herbicide applications may include stump, stem injection, basal, soil, and foliar. Only electric utility rights-of-way that have tall-growing tree species with the potential of threatening the electric utility system are treated.

### If you reside on or own property in Vermont within 1000' of an electric utility right-of-way:

1. Sign up to receive written notification from your local electric

2. You are responsible to make your local electric utility aware of the location of any potentially affected water supply, and of any other environmentally sensitive area where herbicide application ought to be avoided.
3. Watch and listen for public service announcements in newspapers and radio ads noting upcoming herbicide applications.
4. Check with your local electric utility regarding the vegetation management cycle near your particular line.
5. You have the right to request, in writing, that the utility refrain from applying herbicides in the process of clearing the right-of-way, and the utility may offer alternatives such as herbicide stump treatment or herbicide stem injections.
6. You have the right to refuse, in writing, the use of herbicides whatsoever at no cost to you if the type of lines in the right-of-way are distribution lines, bringing electric

service directly to individual customers.

7. You have the right to refuse, in writing, the use of herbicides whatsoever by paying a \$30 administration fee if the type of lines in the right-of-way are transmission lines or sub-transmission lines, bringing electricity to or between substations.

**For more details, or to ask additional questions, please contact your local electric utility, or one of the following:**

Agency of Agriculture  
Public Health & Ag. Resource Mgmt  
116 State Street  
Montpelier, VT 05602  
1-802-828-2431

Department of Public Service  
Consumer Affairs & Public Information  
112 State Street  
Montpelier, VT 05620  
1-800-622-4496

**WEC is required to print this form and does not use any herbicides on its rights of way.**

### Efficiency Vermont Charge Remains Flat

Vermont's energy efficiency utility announced they won't increase their charge in 2021. The line you see on your bill this year will be consistent with the 2020 charge.

## Get Involved In Democracy. Run For a Seat on WEC's Board of Directors.

**T**he Board of Directors sets policy and develops the long term vision of Washington Electric Cooperative. Every year, elections are held for three of WEC's nine Board seats. Co-op members are invited to participate in democracy and run for a seat. In 2021, the three incumbents plan to seek reelection. They are Vice President Roger Fox, Stephen Knowlton, and Richard Rubin.

Deadlines are coming up quickly: if you are considering running for a seat on WEC's Board, contact WEC Administrative Assistant Dawn Johnson at 802-224-2332 to request a candidate packet that contains the materials necessary to run for a seat on the board.

The deadline to submit biographical materials for inclusion in *Co-op Currents'* March issue is **Friday, February 5**. The deadline to submit all materials, including support from a minimum of 25 WEC members, is **Monday, March 8**. All details are included in the candidate packet.

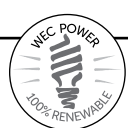
Members of the Co-op have the right to petition for changes to the Co-op's bylaws. The bylaws are available on [washingtonelectric.coop](http://washingtonelectric.coop), or you may contact WEC for a hard copy. To petition for a change, you are required to collect signatures in support from a minimum of 50 WEC members. Petitions for bylaws changes are due **Friday, February 5**.

This year, as a COVID precaution, candidates and members petitioning for bylaw changes may gather petition support electronically.

Stay tuned candidate biographies in the March issue of *Co-op Currents*, and candidate responses to policy questions in the April issue.

### Did You Know?

WEC's environmental policy dictates that no herbicides are used on the Co-op's rights of way. All tree trimming and clearing is done by hand.



## SmartHub

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member calls in to report an outage, a member services representative logs the report and the dispatcher alerts WEC's line crew. A truck goes out, lineworkers assess the situation, and report back to dispatch to confirm where the power is indeed out. Then the dispatcher verifies the outage, and all members downstream of the outage location may receive a text or email telling them it appears the power is out.

To someone sitting at home in the dark this alert may not be particularly reassuring, but it's useful for someone working outside of their home, or whose Central Vermont home is a seasonal property and the owner lives in another town or state.

As WEC crews start restoration work, they contact dispatch staff to report the extent of the damage, indicating how long it will take to repair the line. When that's logged, members may receive an update telling them the estimated time of restoration, or ETR.

And when crews report that the repair is complete, members receive a message saying "we believe that your power has been restored. If you find that your power is not back on, please report your outage through SmartHub or by calling 800-932-5245."

Why might members get a notification that their power is back on—when it's not? It's because the notification system is useful, but not perfect. On occasion, crews complete a repair only to discover that there is another problem farther down the line. If that happens, they rely on members calling in to say that they got a notification saying they should have power, but still don't. That helps crews locate the next point on the line that requires repair.

### How does it work in storms?

When there's a major storm, the process of sending crews out to verify each outage doesn't make sense, since there may be many separate locations that need to be repaired. In those cases, Stevens said, the dispatcher on duty uses WEC's smart meters to determine outage locations. "If we have the opportunity, we pick an outage, ping meters where we think the power is out, and backtrack until we find a meter that does have power. In those cases the dispatcher can verify the outage and say we are 99 percent sure this is where the power is out," he explained. In the meantime, staff also head out in

the field as "bird dogs," patrolling the lines in person to look for problems, like downed wires, trees on lines, and blown fuses on poles.

In storms, the process is only different on WEC's end, as staff reorganize to locate and verify outages. From the member's perspective, receiving outage notifications, nothing is different.

### Why haven't you told me about this yet??

If you use SmartHub, you may wonder why WEC is only now encouraging members to sign up for outage notifications. That's because it's new. "We've had SmartHub for several years, but we've only enabled this feature in the last few months," said Stevens.

That's because WEC needed to resolve a major issue with the technology: in the initial rollout, restoration notifications went to all members downstream of a repair, even if dispatchers and crews had identified more faults on the line downstream. "We couldn't send out an email to a couple hundred people saying your power is on, when in fact we know that it's not on," said Stevens.

This particular glitch has been resolved. The system now registers all known blown fuses. Unknown faults are discovered when members call in saying they got an alert that their power is back on, but the lights are still out.

### How does this help?

The system works best, said Stevens, when WEC has a dispatcher on duty to enter information and trigger notifications. "This will be very helpful during regular working hours or during a widespread outage when we have a dispatcher on duty. There will still be some snags in this process when there is no dispatcher on duty and we're relying on our call center to take calls and restore outages," he pointed out.

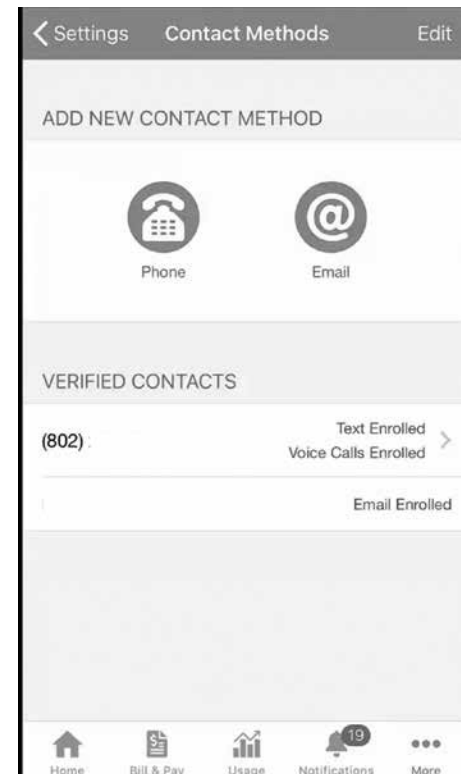
For members, who traditionally have needed to get outage updates by calling in or visiting WEC's website, signing up for notifications means receiving targeted information about the outage affecting your particular line, delivered directly to your phone or email.

It also supports WEC's restoration efforts, Stevens pointed out. As more members use SmartHub for outage information, it "relieves pressure on the telecommunications system and the dispatchers and our call takers here, and provides the information to the member without them having to wait in a telephone queue," he said.

And if you don't yet use SmartHub, you can start today: it's accessible by computer, tablet, or smartphone. Call in an outage, manage your usage, pay your bill, and review your payment history all in one place. Visit [wec.coop](http://wec.coop) for the link, or call the WEC office for help from a Member Services representative.

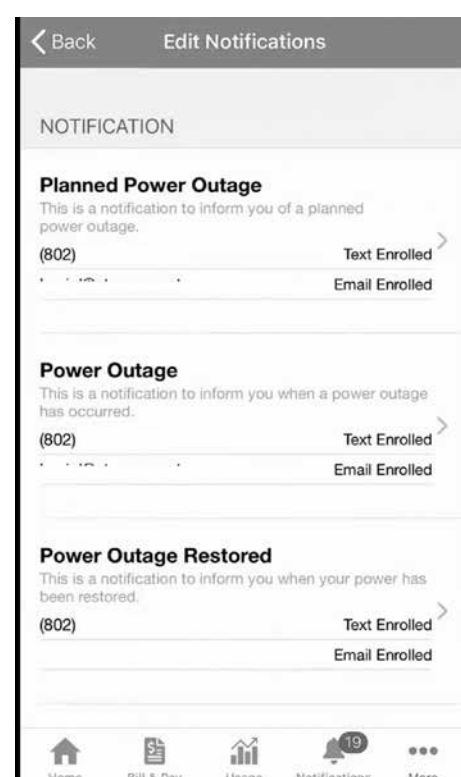
### So how do I do sign up for outage notifications?

Kevin Stevens walks us through updating notification preferences in the SmartHub mobile app:

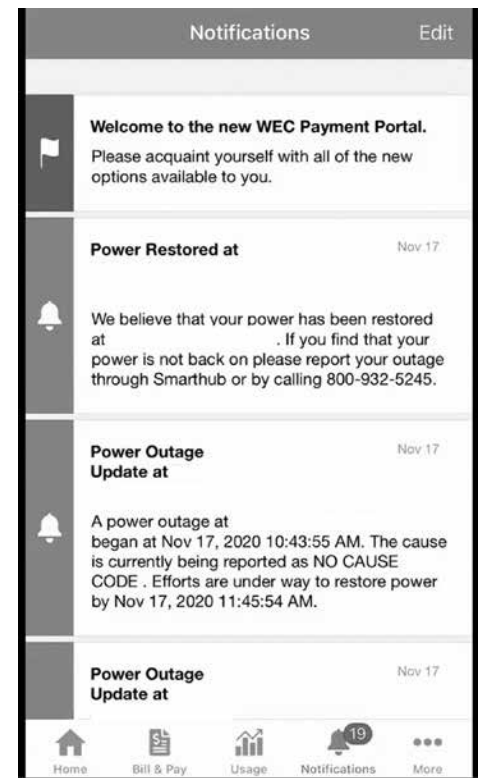


1. "From SmartHub home: hit More, then Settings, then Contact Methods. This is where you can enter your cell number and email address. This gives the initial ability to receive texts and emails.

Then go back to Settings, and to Manage Notifications. The options are: Billing, Miscellaneous, Service, Usage. You can choose to receive texts or emails about these four items. For outages specifically, go to Service."



2. "On this screen you can choose what notifications you want to receive. The options are Planned Power Outage, Power Outage, Power Outage Restored, and Power Outage Update. The descriptions for each are shown. For each option you can choose notifications by text, email, or both."



3. "Under 'Notifications' at the bottom of the screen, you can see where we've done some testing. You can see that it says "We believe that your power has been restored. If you find that your power is not back on, please report your outage through SmartHub or by calling 800-932-5245." This is a record of the notifications that would appear on your phone.

If this seems confusing or daunting, we are happy to help out. We can walk you through the steps over the phone. Just give us a ring at 802-223-5245 and we will work with you to get set up."

## Emergency Resources

### Fuel

Running out of fuel? No matter where in Vermont you live, if you are in danger of running out of fuel this winter, call the toll-free Emergency Fuel Assistance number: 1-800-479-6151

### Mental health

If you are in crisis and prefer to text, text VT to 741741 to reach a crisis counselor quickly.  
**Crisis lines:**  
 Washington County: 802-229-0591  
 Northeast Kingdom Human Services Crisis Line: (Derby) 802-334-6744; (St. Johnsbury) 802-748-3181

### Food

**Vermont Foodbank:** 1-800-585-2265.  
**Capstone Community Action:** [capstonevt.org](http://capstonevt.org)  
**NECKA:** [necka.org](http://necka.org)  
**Everyone Eats:** [vteveryoneeats.org](http://vteveryoneeats.org)

### 211

Call 211 to find any emergency resource you need: food, mental health, fuel, shelter, and anything else.

## Sign Up for Notifications About Payment and Usage, Too

This technology isn't limited to outage notifications. Members can now get updates about their electric usage and payments. In fact, bill alert notifications have been in effect for some time, and many members are used to receiving them. To adjust which notifications you receive, follow the steps above in SmartHub and explore all the options under Manage Notifications: Billing, Miscellaneous, and Usage in addition to Service.





# Pumped About Heat Pumps, Low Interest Financing, and Meeting Vermonters Where They Are

*Efficiency Vermont director Rebecca Foster talks about programs that make energy improvements accessible to everyone*

For more than 20 years, the mandate of Efficiency Vermont has been to help Vermonters reduce their energy costs while also reducing statewide grid stress and carbon emissions. This year, executive director Rebecca Foster explained, the statewide efficiency utility's main goal is "to ensure we have programs available that meet Vermonters where they are."

The pivot is in response to the economic nosedive caused by the COVID pandemic. A focus on incentive amounts tied to income levels, plus financing options as low as zero percent, puts necessary upgrades within reach of more Vermonters. Vermonters don't like to take on debt, Foster observed, but at zero percent interest, "if your dryer breaks, you can take advantage of this and get a nice, efficient new product that will lower your monthly energy cost. In some cases, that lower cost covers the loan payment. That's the win-win we're trying to make possible for people."

Income qualification bonuses are a newish boost to offset the initial capital cost of a device. For example, Foster explained, if you need a new water heater, Efficiency Vermont



Efficiency Vermont Executive Director Rebecca Foster

offers incentives between \$300-\$600 depending on the efficiency level of the device. But many Vermonters may also qualify for an extra \$200 incentive based on their household income. And for households considering newer technologies that have the potential to

dramatically cut household fossil fuel use, like cold climate heat pumps, the incentives and bonuses are higher. "We're trying to make the efficient tech that's going to reduce energy costs more accessible to lower and moderate income Vermonters," said Foster.

While many Vermonters are interested in efficiency upgrades and savings over time, it costs money to hire contractors and buy devices. Even with incentives, the initial cost can be an obstacle. Efficiency Vermont is working with lending partners (VSECU, Opportunities Credit Union, and Neighborworks) to make financing more accessible and affordable, Foster said, by way of home energy loans. Interest rates vary based on income. Some customers may qualify for a zero percent loan.

Why might some incentives drop this year? The reason is linked to the way

Efficiency Vermont's funding works. The efficiency utility is funded through a line on Vermonters' electric bills; in concept and practice, this collective funding model returns on investment as Vermonters lower energy bills through efficiency upgrades, and the state simultaneously reduces grid costs and carbon emissions. "At the PUC, right now, they're looking at how to fund thermal efficiency work. Hopefully, policymakers will develop other funding streams and sources that could be used, but as of today, we're looking at a slightly lower budget for thermal efficiency programs next year," noted Foster.

That's not to say that there will be a dramatic drop. Foster assured that Efficiency Vermont will continue to offer significant rebates and financing. Her team is fine tuning program plans for 2021, and incentives will include air sealing and insulation, heat pump water heaters, lighting fixtures, appliances, financing offers, and others.

*You can take advantage of [zero percent interest financing] and get a nice, efficient new product that will lower your monthly energy cost. In some cases, that lower cost covers the loan payment. That's the win-win we're trying to make possible for people.*


– Rebecca Foster, Efficiency Vermont

Take heart, those whose New Years resolutions include efficiency updates, but who can't find a contractor to take on a project right now.

And in most cases, it's well worth it to hire a contractor instead of taking the do-it-yourself route, Foster pointed out. While Efficiency Vermont does offer a \$100 DIY incentive for home weatherization, "for a lot of homes, the full contractor-led weatherization project is going to be more effective, find more savings, and ensure health and safety with pre- and post-air quality testing." As far as incentives go for full weatherization projects, homeowners can expect to recoup between \$1,000-\$3,000, based on income level.

So what is there to look forward to in 2021?

It's cold out, and Foster is happy to talk about heat pumps: specifically, centrally ducted heat pumps that homeowners with forced hot air furnaces can use to transition away from fossil fuel. While ductless heat pumps have become a common sight in Vermont, centrally ducted heat pumps "open heat pump technology to people who have ducts in their homes and need to make use of their duct system. I'm excited about that," said Foster.

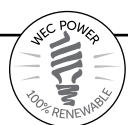
Instant discounts of \$1,000-\$2,000 for ducted heat pumps are made possible with WEC funding, plus a \$200 income-based bonus. And, she noted, for WEC members whose electricity is already 100 percent renewable, switching from forced hot air to a heat pump is a good way to cut a household's energy costs and carbon footprint at the same time. 



Members with forced hot air systems, consider the ducted heat pump. According to Efficiency Vermont Executive Director Rebecca Foster, ducted heat pumps "open heat pump technology to people who have ducts in their homes and need to make use of their duct system. I'm excited about that." Efficiency Vermont offers rebates of \$800 per ton, plus a \$500 income qualification bonus.

**For the most up to date list of Efficiency Vermont incentives, visit [efficiencyvermont.com/rebates](https://www.efficiencyvermont.com/rebates).**

If you're ready to make some upgrades and want to learn more about all the incentives and financing options available to you, call or email Bill Powell, WEC's Energy Coach: [energycoach@wec.coop](mailto:energycoach@wec.coop) or 802-224-2329.



# Efficiency Vermont Rebates for Your Home

These offers are available as of January 1, 2021 and are subject to change. Visit [www.encyvermont.com/rebates](http://www.encyvermont.com/rebates) for the most up-to-date information.



## Air Sealing and Insulation

Working with an EEN contractor (best value): 50% off eligible project costs, up to \$1,000.

Moderate income Vermonters get 50% off, up to \$3,000, while funding lasts.

DIY: \$100 back for completing eligible projects, like weatherizing windows and doors, adding storm windows, and sealing air leaks in your attic and basement

## Heating, Cooling, and Water Heating

**Air-to-Water Heat Pumps:** \$1,000/ton rebate for qualifying equipment + \$500 income bonus

**Ducted Heat Pumps:** \$1,000-\$2,000 discount at participating distributors + \$200 income bonus

**Ductless Heat Pumps:** \$350-\$450 discount at participating distributors + \$200 income bonus

**High-Performance Circulator Pumps:** \$15-\$50 discount at participating distributors

**Smart Thermostats:** up to \$100 rebate for select ENERGY STAR models

**Water Heaters:** \$300-\$600 for select heat pump water heaters + \$200 income bonus

**Window Air Conditioners:** \$200 rebate for select ENERGY STAR models

**Wood Pellet Furnaces & Boilers:** \$6,000 rebate

**Wood Pellet and Cord Wood Stoves:** up to \$600 discount at participating retailers

## Appliances

Rebates on select ENERGY STAR models:

**Clothes Dryers:** \$200-\$400

**Dehumidifiers:** \$25-\$40

## Lighting

Discounts on select ENERGY STAR LED fixtures at participating retailers  
LEDs for indoor growing: \$100 rebate for qualifying fixtures

## Income Assistance

Additional help is available in the form of free appliances, energy audits, insulation and air sealing — call to find out if you are eligible.

## New Homes

Three hours of free technical assistance and up to \$4,000 back on your new energy-efficient home.

## Do a deep dive on your energy use.

You can often reduce your bills just by taking a look at what systems or appliances waste the most energy. If you're not sure, give us a call. We'll ask you some questions about your home's heating and cooling systems, insulation, lighting, and appliances. This gives us a better picture of where your home may be using more energy than necessary. You can also install a home energy monitor to get real-time data on your home's electrical use, including "Always-On" consumption and individual appliances.

## Seal it.

Sometimes, sealing a home's air leaks and improving insulation are all you need to make your house more efficient and comfortable. Stop drafts by sealing gaps and cracks with caulking, weather-strip windows and doors, and fill any large gaps in basement crawl spaces, dryer vents, windows, and foundations.

Find out more at [www.encyvermont.com/DIY](http://www.encyvermont.com/DIY) or work with an Efficiency Excellence Network (EEN) contractor to get up to \$3,000 back.

## Upgrade to more efficient appliances and electronics.

When an appliance is at the end of its well-worn life (like a 15-year-old refrigerator), it's time to trade it in for a more energy- and cost-efficient model. We can help you do research—find and compare products at [www.encyvermont.com/shop](http://www.encyvermont.com/shop)

## Pick the better bulb.

Get the brightness, color, and quality you demand—ENERGY STAR LEDs last up to 15 times longer than incandescent light bulbs. Plus, they are more efficient, generate less heat, and provide the same amount of light.

Not all LEDs are created equally, so make sure you look for the ENERGY STAR logo to find a quality bulb that won't quit.

## Turn it off. ALL the way off.

The easiest thing you can do to save energy is turn electronics off when you're not using them. That means powering them down completely to avoid "phantom electricity loads," or investing in an advanced power strip with technology to cut the power to devices that aren't in use. Visit [www.encyvermont.com/APS](http://www.encyvermont.com/APS) to learn more.

### Income Bonus:

If your annual household income meets the following guidelines, you may be able to receive a bonus rebate:

Number of people in household:	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Annual household income limit:</b> Chittenden, Franklin, Grand Isle counties	\$77,000	\$88,000	\$99,000	\$110,000	\$122,720
<b>Annual household income limit:</b> Addison county	\$67,800	\$77,600	\$87,200	\$104,800	\$122,720
<b>Annual household income limit:</b> Washington county	\$67,600	\$77,200	\$86,880	\$104,800	\$122,720
<b>Annual household income limit:</b> Windsor county	\$66,800	\$76,200	\$86,880	\$104,800	\$122,720
<b>Annual household income limit:</b> All other Vermont counties	\$66,400	\$75,800	\$85,400	\$94,800	\$102,400

# Public Utility Commission Reinstates Moratorium On Disconnection Of Utility Service During The Covid State Of Emergency

**M**ontpelier, VT, December 22, 2020 – Today the Vermont Public Utility Commission ("Commission") again directed the state's regulated utilities to stop any disconnection of utility service due to non-payment of electricity, natural gas, and landline phone bills. This moratorium on involuntary utility disconnections will last through March 31, 2021.

The Commission first prohibited the disconnection of utility service due to nonpayment of bills on March 18, 2020. However, the Commission

lifted that moratorium on October 15 for several reasons, including the desire to encourage utility customers to apply for funds available through the Vermont COVID-19 Arrearage Assistance Program ("VCAAP"), a time-limited program that provided financial assistance to utility customers facing the threat of disconnection due to an inability to pay bills during the pandemic. Utilities had reported that without the possibility of disconnection, few customers were applying for VCAAP assistance or engaging with

their utilities to discuss payment plans. In fact, since the moratorium was lifted on October 15, utilities were able to work with their customers to secure the full \$8 million available through VCAAP to relieve at least some of the financial pressure on utilities and their customers.

Now that the VCAAP has ended as of December 15, the Commission has decided to reinstate the moratorium to prevent the disconnection of utility service in the face of a worsening pandemic and winter conditions.

Commission chair Anthony Z. Roisman stated, "Vermonters need to be able to keep the lights on, their homes warm, and their phone lines open as they survive the winter months of the pandemic."

In renewing the moratorium, the Commission stressed to utility customers the importance of continuing to work with their utilities to make reasonable payment plans that will help them avoid building up unmanageable

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# Public Utility Commission Reduces New Net Metering Incentives

## What's the situation with net metering?

In a nutshell: For more than a decade, Vermont offered incentives for individual homeowners to install net metered solar in order to increase renewable energy on our state's grid. There were incentives to purchase and install the solar panels, and then utilities were required to purchase solar generated energy back from homeowners at a premium. For many individual Vermonters, this was an excellent return on investment.

The program was popular enough to accomplish the state's goal, and then some. In its order published November 12, 2020, the Public Utility Commission (PUC) observed, "It is worth noting that the amount of net-metering capacity commissioned in the past two years exceeded the capacity and pace of all other sources combined." It's not an optimal mix, the report says, because net metering is the most expensive source of electricity—compensation is about double the price paid to other in-state solar facilities—and should not displace less expensive, renewable sources of electricity.

Moreover, rising electric rates may have the unintended consequence of prompting ratepayers to choose fossil fuel devices for heating and transportation, counter to Vermont's efforts to reduce emissions. Now, the PUC states, "The Department argues that net-metering is among the State's least cost-effective pathways to advance Vermont's renewable and environmental objectives."

## Change in incentives

Under the state's new net metering rules, new installations will receive lower compensation per kilowatt hour (kWh) generated. However, the PUC took steps to preserve the investment of Vermonters with existing installations. While there is decreased incentive for new installations, existing net meterers will in fact see a bump in their overall compensation.

*From the order:*

"Incentives will decrease by two cents per kWh for new systems that apply on and after February 2, 2021, followed by another one-cent per kWh

decrease for systems that apply on or after September 1, 2021. At the same time, we are approving an approximately one-cent increase in the blended residential rate, which is the value of the bill-credit offered to all net-metering systems, both existing and proposed. As a result, the net-effect of today's decision is that overall net-metering compensation (lower incentives plus the higher blended residential rate) for new systems will decrease by only one cent per kWh in February 2021, and existing systems will actually receive higher compensation."

## Beneficial electrification

The PUC is also concerned about rising electric rates when the state's main emissions come from thermal heat and transportation. Two percent of Vermont's emissions come from the electric sector; 77 percent from heat and transportation. Lower electric rates, the PUC reasoned, will encourage more Vermonters to choose electric technologies that displace the fossil fuels conventionally used for these purposes.

*From the order:*

"The Department asserts that keeping retail electric rates low will support the adoption of beneficial electric technologies such as heat pumps and heat-pump water heaters."

## Equity

The PUC points out that utilities required to buy net metered electricity at a premium results in an inequitable cost shift to non net-metering ratepayers. Over time, and with the current pace of net metering installations, this risks drives up electric rates unsustainably, on the backs of those who can least afford high electric rates.

*From the order:*

"The Department estimates that net-metering systems installed through 2018 are costing customers an additional \$37 million annually, or \$60 per residential customer. The Department contends that this cost shift falls heaviest on lower-income Vermonters who cannot afford the up-front costs of purchasing a net-metering system."

## How this affects WEC members

WEC's leadership has long focused on the same concepts that concern the PUC: reducing emissions through incentivizing beneficial electrification,

*Two percent of Vermont's emissions come from the electric sector; 77 percent from heat and transportation. Lower electric rates, the PUC reasoned, will encourage more Vermonters to choose electric technologies that displace the fossil fuels conventionally used for these purposes.*

and improving equity among members. As a cooperative, WEC has moved toward these goals over the years through investing in shared, low-cost, renewable generation at the Coventry landfill gas plant and Sheffield wind plant as well as other renewable projects, and most recently, changing its rate structure. WEC's new rate structure lowers the cost per kilowatt hour to encourage members to use WEC's renewable electricity. The lower rates make it easier for

members to choose electric vehicles and thermal heating devices over those powered by fossil fuels. It also works to improve equity among net-metering and rate-paying members alike by charging all members a monthly customer charge in order to stabilize revenue

and even out the lower rate per kilowatt hour.

"Overall, the PUC's order recognizes the point where we are as state, and underscores the choices we at WEC have made as an electric cooperative. We should be proud, as a state, to have had these renewable incentives be so successful," pointed out Patty Richards, WEC's General Manager. "I am glad to see our current net metering members will continue to be compensated for their investment. I am glad to see the emphasis on equitable rates in the future. And I am most excited to see us taking strides, as a state, to make a huge dent in our greenhouse gas emissions by incentivizing clean—in our case, 100 percent green—electricity."

It's important to remind WEC members, said Richards, that they can feel good about using WEC electricity. "WEC power comes from an affordable, diverse, and reliable portfolio of renewable energy sources. Our staff and Board of Directors are really proud of this accomplishment!"

## Outage

*continued from page 1*

energize the line," Weston reported. Instead, both transmission utilities deployed crews to the GMP substation and the section of line to determine what had actually happened. That's why the outage lasted several long hours. Meanwhile, WEC crews waited at the Jackson Corner and Mt. Knox substations, ready to energize WEC's distribution lines as soon as they received the go-ahead from system dispatchers. WEC staff posted updates on [wec.coop](http://wec.coop), and member services representatives were prepared with all the information available to relay to members calling in.

So why wasn't the transmission utilities' telemetry accurate? Instrumentation is extremely useful, and almost always accurate, but it isn't perfect, explained Weston, who's never seen a problem exactly like this before. "Although VELCO and GMP have excellent coordination on that system, the tree that fell on the line created a situation where either too much or not enough fault current flowed to the ground," he said, impeding the instruments from being able to pick up precisely what happened and where. Other factors include the tree's pressure on the wire and moisture within the tree: a wet tree conducts current better than a dry tree.

The takeaways from the Dec. 14 outage, say Weston and General Manager Patty Richards, are

twofold: safety first, followed closely by good communication. The GMP and VELCO engineers did the right thing by prioritizing the safety of their staff and equipment, said Weston. Richards added that this was also an opportunity to look at communication among utilities when a transmission fault affects downstream utilities, and to look at how WEC communicates outage information to its members.

In a memo to members that went out earlier this month, Richards wrote, "WEC can be impacted by what happens on power lines upstream from our distribution lines. We have no control over transmission utilities' right of way clearing, and we can't backfeed the lines when the cause of the power outage is not on our system. Yet these outages still affect our members, so we are working with GMP and VELCO staff to look at this outage in terms of what could have been done differently."



*Transmission lines, managed in Vermont by VELCO and GMP, connect into distribution utilities' substations. Here, the voltage is stepped down and sent out on three-phase and single-phase lines. Each substation powers many miles of distribution lines, so if a transmission line goes out, the substations connected to it lose power—and so do thousands of members.*

## Disconnections

*continued from page 7*

balances or being disconnected when the moratorium ends.

For more information, please contact John Cotter, Deputy General Counsel, at [john.cotter@vermont.gov](mailto:john.cotter@vermont.gov). Today's Order can be found by searching for Case No. 20-0703-PET in ePUC, the PUC's online document-management system (<https://epuc.vermont.gov/>).

