

Comeback for Energy Tax Credits

Feds revive incentives for efficient home upgrades

BY MEGAN MCKOY-NOE

Ready to boost your home's energy efficiency without breaking the bank? The American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012 revived energy-efficiency tax credits to the tune of \$500.

The credit offsets the cost of upgrades such as super-efficient water heaters and heat pumps, central air conditioners, building insulation, windows and roofs.

This marks the third extension of the incentive initiated by the federal Energy Policy Act of 2005. The last round expired in 2011; the new legislation covers 2012 upgrades along with projects undertaken in 2013. If you've already received an energy tax credit, you may not qualify as there's a lifetime cap of \$500.

Go to energystar.gov/taxcredits for full details on qualifying upgrades and individual caps. Here are highlights of the tax savings available:

Insulating Factors

Recoup up to 10 percent of the cost of upgrading a home's envelope. Labor costs are not covered. Eligible upgrades are:

- ▶ Insulation materials and exterior doors
- ▶ Systems designed to reduce a home's heat loss/gain
- ▶ Skylights and windows (\$200 maximum for upgrades between 2006-13)
- ▶ Qualifying metal or asphalt roofs

Heating and Cooling

Replacing your home's heating or cooling system? You could qualify for a tax credit ranging from \$50 to \$500 for units put in place between January 1, 2012, and December 31, 2013. Eligible improvements are:

- ▶ Electric heat pump water heaters with an energy factor of at least 2.0 (\$300 cap)
- ▶ Advanced main air circulating fan (\$50 cap)
- ▶ Qualifying central air conditioner (\$300 cap)

Tax Credit Basics

Energy tax credits are nonrefundable—they can increase your refund by reducing the taxes you owe and can be carried forward to reduce taxes in following years.

File for energy tax credits with IRS Form 5695. Be sure to keep a Manufacturer Certification Statement (a signed statement from the manufacturer certifying that the product or component qualifies for the tax credit) for your records. Eligible upgrades must be made to a taxpayer's primary residence by December 31, 2013.

Megan McKoy-Noe writes for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association.

Copper Theft

Gain a buck, lose a life

Copper theft has reached an epidemic level that is not only affecting the United States, but is also international and creating havoc globally. The theft of copper costs the national economy around \$1 billion per year, according to the U.S. Department of Energy. The increase in copper theft has disrupted the flow of electricity, created electrical hazards, slowed down construction projects and knocked out irrigation networks across the country.

Additionally, when thieves cut locks or chain-link fencing surrounding an electric substation, they leave a highly dangerous area exposed for children and animals.

Stealing material from an electric substation or utility pole can cause not only serious injuries and death but also extensive outages, fires and explosions—consequences that affect innocent people. The minimum damage that can occur is an outage, which may affect thousands of people.

Always alert Wood County Electric Cooperative if you see or suspect suspicious activity, or if any gate to a substation is open. Theft and tampering with electric power facilities can result in extremely dangerous situations, and we need your help to prevent them.

If you see any suspicious activity around a substation or other electric facilities, please call Wood County EC immediately.



Don't Water Down Safety This Spring

Whether it's swimming, boating or fishing, springtime is water recreation time for millions of Texans. While enjoying water activities, don't let a safety hazard dampen your fun. Follow these tips to stay safe this swimming season:

At the swimming pool

- ▶ Do not put any electrical appliances within 5 feet of a swimming pool.
- ▶ Any electrical outlets within 20 feet of a pool should be equipped with a GFCI, or ground-fault circuit interrupter.
- ▶ Pools and decks should be built at least 5 feet away from all underground electrical lines, and at least 25 feet away from overhead electrical lines.
- ▶ Never swim during a thunderstorm or when there is lightning in the area.
- ▶ Use battery-operated, rather than plug-in, appliances near swimming pools.
- ▶ If a swimmer is electrocuted or shocked, don't dive in yourself or you could be electrocuted as well. Turn off the power and then use a fiberglass shepherd's hook to pull the victim out of the water.
- ▶ When you leave the pool, don't change the radio station or touch any electrical appliances until you are dry—never touch any electrical appliances when you are wet or standing in water. If children wish to play with sprinklers or hoses, emphasize that they should be set up well away from any electrical outlets or appliances. In most instances, if potential safety hazards are taken into consideration and handled proactively, accidents and deaths can be avoided.



Be aware of your surroundings and watch for potential electrical hazards while on the water.

On the lake

Electricity and water are dangerous around larger bodies of water as well. If you plan to go boating or fishing this spring, be aware of your surroundings and potential electrical hazards.

- ▶ Always check the location of nearby power lines before boating or fishing. Contact between your boat and a power line could be devastating. Maintain a distance of at least 25 feet between your boat and nearby power lines to be safe.
- ▶ If your boat does come in contact with a power line, never jump out of the boat into the water—the water could be energized. Instead, stay in the boat and avoid touching anything metal until help arrives or until your boat is no longer in contact with the line. Be sure dockside outlets have GFCI protection. Check cords that are plugged into them to make sure there is no broken casing or exposed wires.
- ▶ Check for the location of power lines before fishing. Make sure you are casting the line away from power lines to avoid potential contact.

Source: Safe Electricity



Wood County Electric Cooperative

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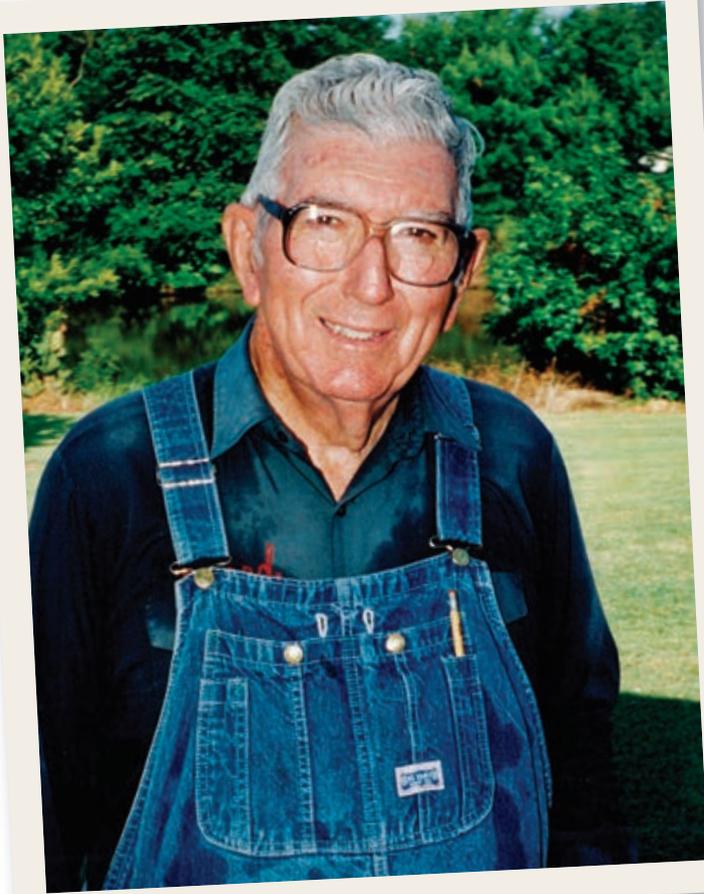
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It's hard to believe that it's been 75 years since the cooperative, yours and ours, began operations. What an amazing journey we've taken since those first power poles were placed and those first lines were strung. Astoundingly, everything we've accomplished we've done as a collective—as a group of neighbors, friends, businesses and community leaders. It's true that the visionaries who incorporated Wood County Electric Cooperative included only a handful of folks. But their early leadership paved the way for the rest of us to join in and be a part of what, 75 years later, is a significant, impactful and powerful organization. WCEC has increasingly made a mark in spurring regional growth while powering our necessities, diversions, leisure pursuits and passions.

HOWARD'S BOYS

These days there aren't many who remember life on the farm "before the lights came on," but Melba Blackwell of Quitman does. In fact, not only does she remember when the lights came on at her family farm in Clover Hill just outside of Quitman, but she also remembers when and how the cooperative was built. She also remembers the leaders, the workers and even most of the members of those first days. That's because in large part she was part of the cooperative family. She married into it, you could say. For 42 years she was the wife of Howard Blackwell, who first worked at the cooperative as a teen. Howard then went on to make a career at WCEC as a lineman and then was the line superintendent until he retired at age 62. Sadly, Howard passed away in 2003, but Melba cherishes all of the memories she made with him, as well as their time together at the cooperative.

Melba and Howard had always known of each other during

childhood, but Howard was several years older, so it took awhile before he took notice of her and she took notice back. It happened with the ringing of another couple's wedding bells. Melba was asked to be the maid of honor at a friend's wedding where Howard happened to be the best man. That experience led to a first date between them, and eventual marriage on September 9, 1951.

At the time of their marriage, Howard was already an old hand at WCEC. He'd started a decade before in 1941 as part of the National Youth Administration, a federal program for teens that paid them while also training them. Howard's 19-year-old hands were among those that laid the bricks for the first cooperative building on Main Street. After that, he hired on at WCEC to become a lineman's helper, and by the time he'd proposed to Melba, he was a full-fledged lineman.

In that era, Melba says the cooperative was "the place to

LEFT: While Melba Blackwell was not an official cooperative employee, her support through the years was invaluable to cooperative members and employees alike. **ABOVE:** As a teen, Howard Blackwell helped build WCEC's building on Main Street, and he then went on to work at WCEC for 42 years.



Melba shows off some of the very first tools of the trade. She laughingly says 'the boys' are spoiled now with all of their digger trucks and automatic equipment. In his day, her Howard used these very shovels to hand-dig the holes for the power poles.

be.” Their wedding shower was even held at the cooperative in Arnold Holley Hall. She explains, “Back then, there was really no other building in Quitman to have an event. At the cooperative, you would go by and put your name on the list for the weekend you wanted.”

When they married, Melba was working at the First National Bank of Quitman, where she remained until she became pregnant with their first child. Afterward, she stayed home as their second and third child came along. But she really was not without a job, because Melba said that in those first years, Howard had a WCEC phone installed at their house. That was in the days before dispatch, and Howard received the late-night calls when people were out of power. Once Howard had left the house on a call, many times the phone would continue to ring. Melba said, “If there was one call, there were usually many calls because of a storm or accident. It was my job to write down who was calling and also to offer an encouraging word.”

Melba said that during those times, Howard would try to

call to let her know what was going on so she could relay that information to the members. She said Howard would always say, “You be sure to tell them we are out here working!”

At the time, East Texas, as well as many rural areas across the nation, was still slowly recovering from the Great Depression. Living through this era acted as a catalyst for how the Blackwells would plan their future endeavors. Melba said Howard’s paycheck from the cooperative came every two weeks, and as their family grew, they both decided they needed some other type of income to help out.

“After the Depression, you were just fortunate to be able to put food on the table,” Melba said. “We were determined that we would put our three children through college.” That’s when they decided to build a greenhouse to help supplement their income. They also built a house right on Goode Street right across from the hospital in Quitman, where they attached a flower shop.

The flower shop and greenhouse kept Melba busy and kept Howard busier than ever. He’d get up early and start watering all of the plants in the greenhouse before he headed off to work at the cooperative. She said jobs at the cooperative in those days involved some pretty hard work. Holes for the poles were dug by hand with a spoon shovel, and those holes had to be pretty deep. Linemen carried the poles

on their backs to be placed in those holes.

With hard work and his increasing knowledge, Howard eventually became the line superintendent, and all of the line crews worked for him. Melba said that both to her and Howard, the workers at the cooperative were much more than just co-workers, they were also a family. She said Howard constantly talked about “his boys,” and he worried about them, too. And not just about how they performed their jobs and about their safety, but also about their personal lives. For many of the young men, it was their first job. He would talk to them about responsibility and how to manage their money. He’d also counsel them on any other problems they may have been having.

That care did not just extend to working hours. Melba relays a story about a time when their phone rang in the middle of the night. But this time it wasn’t a power outage. It was one of “his boys,” and he was in trouble. This young man was newly married, and he and his wife had gotten into a terrible argument. This young man needed Howard. So, together, the Blackwells went over to the newlyweds’ home. Melba said

Howard just had a way of talking with people and was just more like a loving grandfather. Mind you, this was in the wee hours of the morning, but Melba said he calmly and gently reminded the young man that he had a new baby and a good job and he needed to provide for his family. He reminded the young wife that her husband worked hard for the family. And he even told her she should have the meal ready when her husband got home. Then, she said, Howard led them all in prayer. Even years after, she never did hear of that young couple ever having any trouble again.

“That is how he loved his boys,” she said.

Beyond their fondness for the boys, Howard also loved his work and enjoyed nothing more than showing Melba the fruits of their labor. Many a Sunday afternoon, the Blackwells would go for a drive so Howard could show Melba what he and his boys had built. Melba also accompanied Howard on trips to regional safety meetings, and she was asked at one of them to help entertain the wives. She held a class on how to make corsages. She said the women seemed to enjoy it, and she was accepted very well into the group.

While the cooperative employed Howard, it just about got a “twofer” with Melba as the bonus worker. If there was a cooperative function at home or in another town, she was there. If there was an outage, she stayed up well into the night answering the phones to respond. And if one of the boys was in trouble, she was certainly right there to help. It’s no wonder that when Howard retired, “it took two men to replace him,” she said.

Melba’s work ethic is uncommon these days, and it likely has roots in the Great Depression. Melba still has vivid memories of that time, and she said, “It made me appreciate every single thing that has come since then.

“I’ve lived from the time of the coal oil lamp,” she said. And, she explained, all farming was done with a team of mules, and water was retrieved from a bucket on the porch. She said just about every single thing you wanted to accomplish back in those days took hard work.

That was until electricity arrived at the farm. She still remembers the day as a little girl when B.D. Holley did the wiring in her grandfather’s house. There was one lightbulb in every room, and that was the extent of their first electricity. The lights were then turned on and off with individual pull chains, and switches and plugs came later. And, she said, even better, after they were wired for electricity they were eventually able to get an electric pump, which led to indoor plumbing for running water and a bathroom.

Even with all of the hardship growing up, Melba said, “I have lived the very best part of history, and I began to realize that things were changing. I saw so much progress like electricity, airplanes, space exploration and computers.”

With her business as a florist, she had many experiences with other families helping them celebrate their weddings, birthdays and new babies. She also helped them grieve for lost loved ones. Because of this, she knows and relates to countless people in this area. Over the years she shared with Howard, Melba said, there were many times that she would tell him she had a feeling that she needed to go check on someone. And Howard would say, “Where’s your purse?” Usually, she says, when she’d get to the person’s house, they’d say, “How did you know I needed you?”

Melba says, she just knew, because . . . well, “It’s a God thing.”

In addition to raising her three children, having greenhouses, owning a florist’s shop and Howard’s job at the cooperative, Melba and Howard were always active in church. In fact, Melba has taught Sunday school ever since she was 21, and still has a class today. She also enjoys spending time with her family, which has grown to include six grandchildren and one great-grandchild so far. She also stays active, making beautiful quilts. She really does not know a stranger, and makes the most of these days while she fondly remembers her cooperative days.

“I do miss not knowing all of the young ones coming up,” she said. “But, I still feel I’m a part of that. The cooperative family is still intact.” And, she freely admits, after all, “Howard’s boys became mine, too.”



Keeping your refrigerator clean inside and out will help it operate more efficiently.

5 Ways To Spring into Energy Efficiency

Spring is a perfect time of year to make your home more energy efficient. Here are five quick tips that will save both energy and money.

1. SEAL THE CRACKS AND GAPS.

Adding weatherstripping and caulking around windows and sealing cracks and leaks around the floor and ceiling can save you more than \$200 annually.

2. CHANGE FILTERS REGULARLY.

Changing furnace and air-conditioner filters monthly can help lower energy bills. Dirty filters can restrict airflow and reduce the overall efficiency of your system and make it work even harder.

3. CHECK YOUR REFRIGERATOR.

Clean the outside of the refrigerator as well as the inside. Gently vacuuming the outside coils and checking the seals for air leaks can improve the efficiency of your refrigerator. Also check the temperature settings on your refrigerator. Ideally, a refrigerator’s temperature should be from 37 to 40 degrees. When it’s time to replace that old refrigerator, be sure to buy an Energy Star-labeled appliance.

4. THINK SUN BLOCK. Closing the blinds on your windows this spring and summer keeps out ambient heat.

5. CONTROL TEMPERATURE SETTINGS. Try setting the temperature to 78 degrees or greater when you are home.

A programmable thermostat will save energy by automatically adjusting the temperature based on your schedule.

ISTOCKPHOTO