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## It's Green for Blue Ridge Electric

Cooperative promotes energy conservation

By Scott Nicholson

Blue Ridge Electric Membership Corporation is swapping out the light bulbs to brighten the future of energy conservation.

Blue Ridge EMC has filed its plan with North Carolina's Public Utilities Commission for achieving the goals of the state's new Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Portfolio Standard as required by state law.

Under the new standard, all public utilities must obtain at least 10 to 12.5 percent of their electricity from renewable resources, including energy-efficiency measures, by the year 2018.

"For electric cooperatives, because we are generally smaller, that goal is 10 percent," said Renee Whitener, Blue Ridge EMC's director of public relations. "Blue Ridge Electric believes our immediate focus has to be on partnering with our members to achieve the greatest amount of energy efficiency. We're very accountable to our members and want to show we're implementing measures that are cost efficient, as well as most effective for the environment."

The cooperative's GreenSmart program has the tag line "Together we can make a world of difference." While solar, wind, and water energy are all part of the long-term plan, to meet the required standards will mean immediate changes at the consumer level. However, Whitener said the change is as simple as screwing in a light bulb, with compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) showing significant savings in energy.

"That's one of the simplest steps," Whitener said. "When we talk to our consumers about simple things they can do to save money, CFLs are the best. People tend to think of those squiggly bulbs, but there are decorative and functional options that offer immediate savings."

Whitener said any transition would have to make sense on monthly bills. "A big cornerstone is partnering with our members," she said. "Unless we all do our part, it's not going to have as big an impact."

CFLs use 75 percent less energy, put out less heat and last 10 times longer. The cooperative has already distributed thousands of CFLs, and has a campaign under way to distribute more.

Brian Crutchfield, director of sustainable development for the GreenSmart program, said, "I see a lot happening. Initially we've got big numbers here in front of us. For electric co-ops and municipal utilities, we approach most of the savings we need to acquire through conservation."

Crutchfield said every dollar spent on conservation equals \$4 spent on renewable-energy sources. Despite the development of more solar panels and wind turbines, Crutchfield said the cost-benefit formula means it will take some time to make them a significant chunk of the energy portfolio and is also beyond the ability of most consumers, while conservation measures are easily available.

"We'll be spending \$1.5 to \$1.7 million on these programs, but the savings to our customers will be amazing," he said, making about half the money back in savings in the first year and creating about \$7 million in savings over 10 years.

Water heating reflects a large portion of an electric bill. Plans call for programs to market devices that would increase heating efficiency and reduce water consumption, such as low-flow shower heads and water heater insulation.

The cooperative is also developing a weatherization program to reduce heating and cooling costs. Duct sealing and proper home insulation help energy efficiency and controlling heating and air conditioning costs.

The cooperative is currently studying a solar program that would include photovoltaics and commercial and residential water heating. An energy-cost monitoring program offers members a small countertop display unit that reflects usage and works with the cooperative's automated metering system.

Since Blue Ridge EMC is a distributor instead of a power creator, it must work with Duke Energy on renewable energy in the power grid. Duke Energy provides wholesale power to Blue Ridge Electric and also gets some hydro-generated electricity through the Southeastern Power Administration. Crutchfield said Blue Ridge EMC is partnering with Appalachian State University on several small-scale renewable energy projects. The cooperative is planning a focus on conservation while slowly beefing up its "green portfolio" through solar and wind energy.

"We think our members will be excited about coming by our office and getting CFLs and water-heating kits and educational information," Crutchfield said.

Blue Ridge Electric has already started a "Round Up" program, in which consumers voluntarily have their bills rounded up to the next dollar, with the extra balance going to charity efforts. The cooperative has also started a sign-up program so that monthly bills are paid through consumer bank drafts, reducing paper and stamps. Participants in either program get three free CFL bulbs by signing up at the district office in Boone. For any information on CFLs and Operation Round Up, call (828) 264-8894, and more information on the program is available at [www.blueridgeemc.com](http://www.blueridgeemc.com).

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