

# Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

## SOMERSET REC

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## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

### President

**Jerry L. Engle, District 4**

### Vice President

**Floyd T. Lehman, District 1**

### Secretary/Treasurer

**Lowell L. Friedline, District 3**

**Russ Hillegas, District 2**

**James B. Harrold Sr., District 5**

**P. Timothy Vought, District 6**

**Jason Huston, District 7**

**Joshua C. Sechler, District 8**

**Harvey W. Reckner Jr., District 9**

**Ruston Ogburn  
General Manager**

## STAFF

**Gary Gindlesperger**

*Manager of Information Technology*

**Jonathan Hillegas**

*Director of Finances*

**Andrew Phillippi**

*Manager of Outside Operations*

**Emily Baer**

*Director of Marketing and Member Services*

**Phil Stern**

*Manager of Technical Services*

**Jessi Ditzler**

*Executive Assistant*

## OFFICE HOURS

Monday through Friday  
7:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

## EMERGENCY OUTAGE NUMBERS

814-445-4106  
800-443-4255

## Keeping Your Power Reliable Through a Year of Upcoming Changes



**RUSTON OGBURN**

**THE PRESSURE THAT HAS BEEN BUILDING** to pay for rising electricity demand will significantly impact your cooperative in 2026. Starting with the billing calculations in January, rates for demand, energy and the monthly service will reflect these price increases for all our members.

An insert explaining the rate adjustment in more detail will be included with your next electric bill. For our residential members, a 1,000 kilowatt-per-hour bill will increase by approximately 16%. Commercial members will also see similar increases and these will be due to kilowatt demand.

When I last discussed new rates, I noted that the transmission and capacity portion of providing electricity to our members accounted for approximately 55% of our total costs. The demand for electricity that was highlighted in December's *Penn Lines* has now pushed this to more than 65% of the cost we pay to secure wholesale electricity for our members.

Unfortunately, most predictions continue to show the infrastructure buildout will take many years to accomplish. If this holds true, the cost to get power from generators to our substations will continue to increase.

Allegheny Electric Cooperative, Inc. (Allegheny), the not-for-profit generation and transmission cooperative owned by the 13 electric distribution cooperatives in Pennsylvania and one in New Jersey, supplies electric service for Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative (REC).

Through long-term investments in generation and transmission facilities and wholesale power purchase contracts, Allegheny works on our behalf to keep these costs as low as possible. These investments continue to show value when we compare ourselves with neighboring utilities. Even with the new rates, our cost of service remains significantly lower.

We do have some good news closer to home. The unpredictable supply chains have improved across nearly all areas of our distribution system. Even though many of these prices are higher and their lead times are longer, our inventory plans have allowed us to cut costs in 2026 for many core components.

Additionally, the long lead-time items ordered from 2021 to 2024 have arrived in 2025. So while it is surprising to be happy about inventory arriving years after it was ordered, that's the pipeline we've endured the past several years.

As we consider our work for 2026, our plans for inspecting and updating poles and wires remain on track to maintain the strong, reliable system we've built through many decades of investment. Our work will also include substation changes to ensure we keep the core equipment up to date at the 18 most critical points on our distribution system.

The vegetation management cycle we adopted nearly a decade ago continues to provide improved reliability across our system. The upcoming year will include nearly 250 miles of cycle work by contractors and additional off-cycle clearing and management with our crews.

I hope the new year fills you with optimism for the future and confidence that the men and women powering your electric cooperative continue to work on your behalf. As always, call or stop by the office if you have any questions or ideas about how we can improve your service. 

**RUSTON OGBURN**  
GENERAL MANAGER

# Powering Conservation: The Elephants Next Door

**EMILY BAER**, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING & MEMBER SERVICES

**TUCKED INTO THE ROLLING FARMLAND** of rural Fairhope are Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative's (REC) largest mammal members, who are housed at the International Conservation Center (ICC), one of North America's most unique facilities for elephant care, research and species recovery.

At first glance, its quiet pastures look like any countryside landscape in rural Somerset County — until you notice the silhouettes of African elephants roaming across 50 acres of pastureland.

The ICC was founded in 2006 as a satellite breeding and conservation facility for the Pittsburgh Zoo & Aquarium, sharing the zoo's core mission: to connect people with wildlife and inspire communities to conserve nature for future generations. Though often compared with elephant sanctuaries or zoos, the ICC isn't quite either of those things. Instead, it occupies a rare space in the world of wildlife conservation — an institution built not only to house animals, but also advance science, strengthen global conservation initiatives and prepare the next generation of animal welfare professionals.

## A place built for purpose

The ICC's work extends beyond traditional animal care. Its focus is primarily on conservation science, breeding, research and wildlife management, all while offering a safe, expansive environment that allows elephants to be themselves.

The animals that now call Fairhope home come from the Pittsburgh Zoo, other accredited zoos, breeding programs and even from Botswana, South Africa. Despite the distance from their native habitats, the elephants have adapted remarkably well to Pennsylvania's seasonal climate.

"African elephants can withstand short periods of cold in the wild," ICC staff members explain. "But here, we carefully monitor not just temperature, but wind, precipitation and overall conditions before deciding when they can go outside."



**COOLING OFF:** Resident elephants Vic and Zuri cool off by a watering hole at the Pittsburgh Zoo before being transferred to the International Conservation Center in rural Somerset County.

When winter settles in, two large, heated barns provide comfort and enrichment for the animals. These amenities ensure elephants remain active, healthy and engaged — even when snow blankets the surrounding hills.

## A day in the life of an ICC elephant

Every morning begins with a customized breakfast crafted to each elephant's nutritional needs. Their diet

includes grain, vitamin supplements and hay grown on-site and analyzed for quality.

Each elephant also participates in daily health checks — lifting its feet, showing its molars and demonstrating mobility while keepers observe demeanor and well-being.

As warmer weather arrives, the herd spends most of its time outdoors, grazing, exploring mud wallows, socializing and roaming.

"No two days are ever the same for our elephants," staff members say, "and that's exactly how we designed it."

## Global conservation in action

Behind the peaceful landscape is a facility deeply embedded in worldwide conservation networks. The ICC has hosted collaborators from around the globe to teach and study elephant husbandry. Its staff has assisted with tuberculosis testing for semi-domestic elephants in Zimbabwe, and the herd in Fairhope has supported genetic diversity for African elephants in North American zoos.

The ICC is also actively contributing to vaccine research to address endotheliotropic herpesvirus, one of the most serious health threats facing young elephants.

Beyond elephants, the center supports conservation breeding programs for native North American species, including a bison herd tied to national reintroduction initiatives.

**GLOBAL CONSERVATION:** The International Conservation Center in Fairhope, Somerset County, supports elephant conservation, breeding, vaccine breakthroughs and testing, as well as a variety of educational programs, tours, field trips, and elephant encounters.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION CENTER/PITTSBURGH ZOO

Together with the Pittsburgh Zoo, the ICC participates in the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Saving Animals From Extinction (SAFE) initiative and collaborates with partners in Uganda and Zimbabwe to protect wild African elephants.

Caring for the world's largest land mammals is no small feat. But the ICC's facilities and training programs allow elephants to calmly participate in procedures, such as vaccinations, ultrasounds and blood draws.

One of the ICC's most notable residents is Jackson, a bull elephant who has become a cornerstone of African elephant breeding in North America. He has fathered calves both naturally and through artificial insemination — and now has multiple grandchildren.

Advances in artificial intelligence have expanded the ability of accredited zoos to maintain genetically diverse elephant populations.

"Jackson is an incredible success story," staff says, "and a vital contributor to the future of elephant conservation."

### Education, community and access

Though located in the middle of nowhere, the ICC is far from isolated. The center offers a variety of educational programs, including guided wagon tours, elephant encounters, school and Scout field trips, summer camps, family campouts and special events throughout the year.

While not open for general daily admission, the ICC welcomes visitors for pre-ticketed events and appointments. Upcoming opportunities in the new year will be announced on the ICC's website, pittsburghzoo.org/icc, and social media pages.

Elephants continue to face mounting threats in the wild that include habitat loss, fragmentation, human-elephant conflict



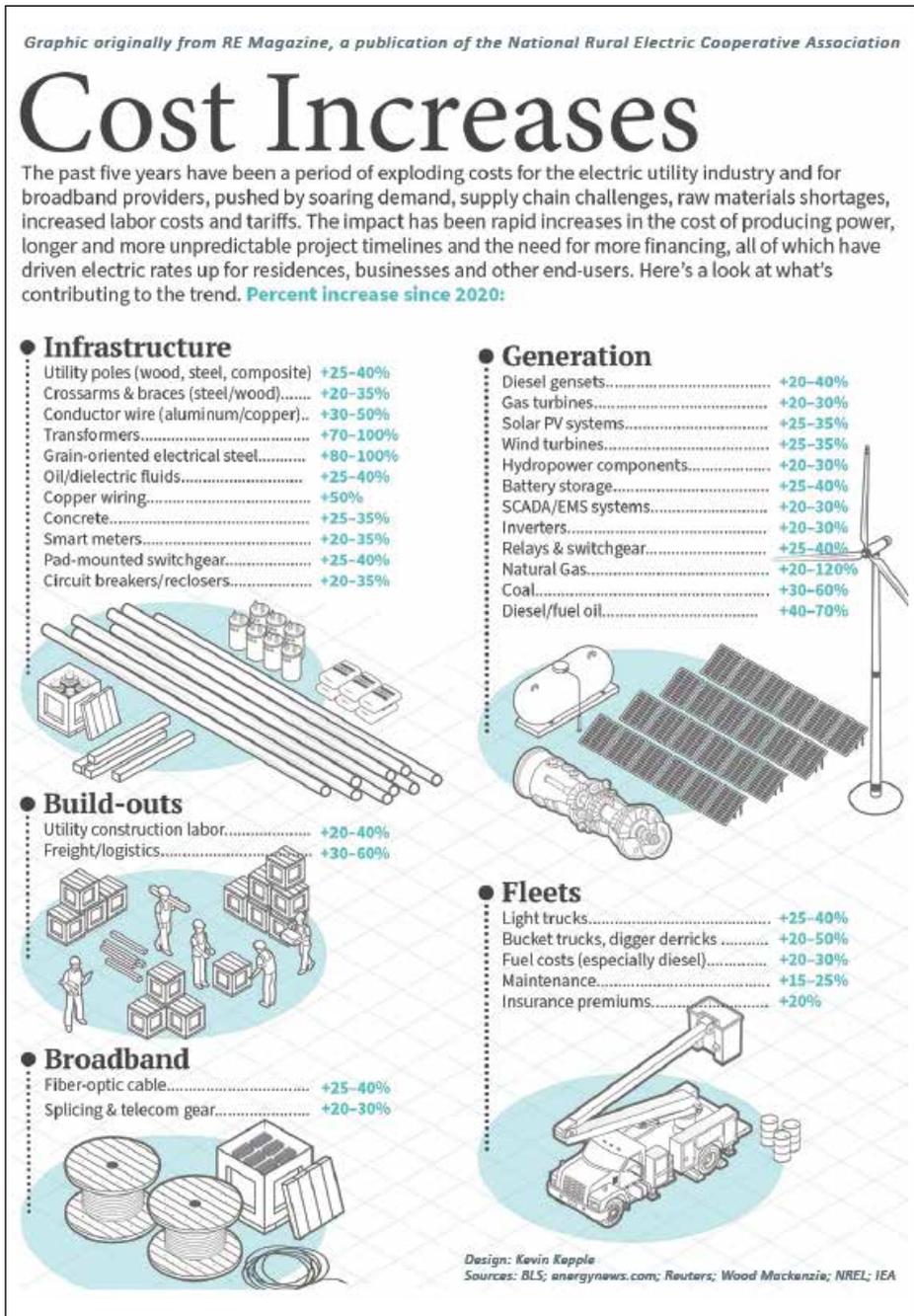
**COLD FEET:** A gentle giant in a winter wonderland roams the pastures at the International Conservation Center located in Fairhope.

and poaching. The ICC aims to combat these dangers through continued research, breeding, education and collaboration with global partners.

Over the next decade, the ICC plans to expand educational programs, build deeper connections with universities, grow its breeding efforts and welcome additional species into its conservation initiatives.

"We're building on a strong foundation," staff says, "and preparing for a future where conservation, education and science grow hand-in-hand."

The International Conservation Center is in the southeastern part of the cooperative's service territory and symbolizes hope — an intersection of community, science and the extraordinary animals whose futures depend on both. 🐘



NRECA STRAIGHT TALK

# Celebrating Service and Dedication at Somerset REC

**IN NOVEMBER, AN EMPLOYEE-DIRECTOR BANQUET** was held at The Heritage in Rockwood to recognize the people whose commitment has strengthened Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative (REC), supported our members and upheld the values that have served as the co-op's foundation for almost 87 years.

This year, we honored Jonathan Hillegas for reaching an incredible 25 years of dedicated service. For a quarter century, his hard work, reliability and commitment to our members have made a lasting impact on our operations and community.

Jonathan, our office manager, oversees the finance department and billing representatives. He started his tenure at the cooperative as a summer intern on the right-of-way crew while attending Edinboro University. Previously, he served the members in the operations department as a lineman and staking engineer.

A second thank you went to board member Lowell Friedline. We are truly grateful for his cooperative knowledge while serving the membership — 50 extraordinary years as a Somerset REC director. Serving our co-op for half a century is a remarkable achievement and a testament to his deep commitment to our members, mission and the future of rural electric service.

In 1975, Lowell was elected to represent District 3 and replaced the board's lone charter member, E.K. Ankney, who had served continuously since 1939. Since the formation of Somerset REC, only two directors have represented District 3, which covers Donegal, Jefferson, Jenner and Lincoln townships.

Lowell's leadership, guidance and advocacy have shaped decades of growth and change. Through storms, system upgrades, industry shifts, and new technologies, he



**25 YEARS:** Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative General Manager Rus Ogburn, right, congratulates Office Manager Jonathan Hillegas on 25 years of cooperative excellence.

has remained a steady voice for members and a champion for the cooperative principles on which we stand.

The cooperative extends its heartfelt appreciation to Lowell for five decades of unwavering dedication.

Thank you to both outstanding individuals for your service, passion and leadership. Somerset REC is stronger because of people like you. 🍷



**GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY:** Somerset Rural Electric Cooperative General Manager Rus Ogburn, left, recognizes Lowell Friedline for 50 years of service and commitment to the cooperative's board.

A poster for the Youth Tour 2026. It features a red circular logo with a building icon and the text "YOUTH TOUR 2026 Make Your Mark". Below the logo, there is a paragraph of text: "More than 250 years ago, America's founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence and set in motion a legacy of leadership that shaped our nation. The Rural Electric Youth Tour gives high school juniors an opportunity to learn leadership skills, gain confidence and instill cooperative values to lead the next generation." Below this is a section titled "WHAT TO EXPECT" with a list of activities: "An all-inclusive trip to Washington, D.C. June 15-20. Tour Capitol Hill. Learn about electric cooperatives. Visit monuments and memorials. Stop at the Smithsonian museums. And so much more!" Below that is a section titled "APPLICATIONS" with contact information: "Applications are available at somersetrec.com and due Jan. 20, 2026. Please contact Emily Baer at ebaer@somersetrec.com or 814-445-4106 for more information regarding this all-inclusive once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!" To the right of the text is a photograph of a group of young women in cheerleader outfits standing in front of a Ferris wheel at night. At the bottom right, there is a red circular logo with the text "HOW WILL YOU MAKE YOUR MARK?"