

NE CONNECTION

A PUBLICATION OF NORTHEAST OKLAHOMA ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE



GROWING STRONG
HORTON'S PRODUCE & BERRY FARM

MARCH 2024



Touchstone Energy® Cooperatives

NE CONNECTION

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Northeast Connection is published monthly to communicate with the members of Northeast Oklahoma Electric Cooperative.

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600 South Main, Grove, OK 74344

BUSINESS HOURS

Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Offices are closed Saturday, Sunday and holidays.

DISPATCHING AVAILABLE 24 HOURS AT

1.800.256.6405

If you experience an outage:

1. Check your switch or circuit breaker in the house and on the meter pole to be sure the trouble is not on your side of the service.
2. When contacting the cooperative to report an outage, use the name as it appears on your bill, and have both your pole number and account number ready.

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MORE THAN A PRIORITY

Jimmy Jester
Director of Safety & Loss Control

Making safety a priority sounds great, doesn't it? After all, what could possibly be more important than a priority?

Safety professionals have learned that safety is optimized when it is embedded into the culture of organization. Rather than being a separate component, safety should be woven into the fabric of everything we do. This requires a considerable pivot from those days when safety was considered a necessary but inconvenient addition to our jobs.

In the workplace, it's important that each employee make safety part of his or her personal value system. This concept says that working safely is not merely a program but a way of doing things.

There is a strong link between active workplace safety and low rates of occupational injury and illness. Ideally, workplace safety and health should correspond to the organization's overall mission and business plan.

You may be saying to yourself I really don't see the difference between a priority and a value. Consider this: While priorities may be altered by outside influences and demands, values are non-negotiable.

Values to which we can all relate include family, parenting, religious beliefs, and work ethic. Many of our values are generational. You learn them from your parents and they were passed down to them from their parents. Additional values are acquired through training and experience.

If we simply make our safety and the safety of those around us a priority, why do accidents continue to happen?

Continued on page 7.

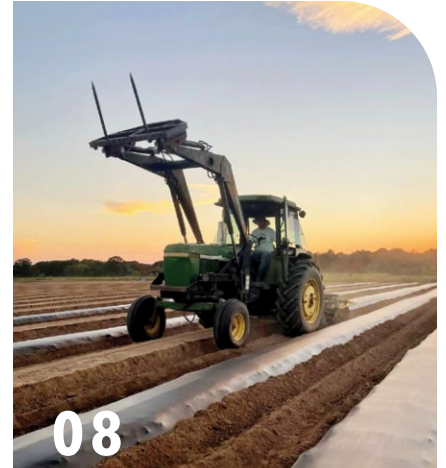
\$100 IS HIDING!

Search the pages of *Northeast Connection* for a 6-digit account number with an asterisk on each side. For example: *XXXXXX*. Compare it to your account number, which appears on your monthly electric bill. If they match, contact the cooperative at 918.256.6405, by April 1, 2024, to claim a \$100 credit on your electric account.



04

BE A WINNER WITH ORU



08

GROWING STRONG



CHEESE DIP

RUTH & ELSIE MILLER | PRYOR

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 1 large jalapeno
- 1 large onion
- 8 oz sour cream
- 1 jar pineapple cottage cheese
- 3 8 oz bars cream cheese
- 1 cup grated Gouda cheese
- 1/2 cup bacon bits
- 1 TBS onion salt
- 1 tsp celery salt
- Garlic flakes to taste
- 1 cup chopped nuts

Step 1: Combine all ingredients in bowl except chopped nuts.

Step 2: Form mixture into a ball and coat outside with chopped nuts before serving.

MARCH EVENTS

Elvis Tribute Show

Mar 2 | Miami

Coleman Theatre

Color Wheel Run

Mar 4 | Pryor

Downtown

Grand Lake Boat and Sport Show

Mar 8-10 | Vinita

Craig County Fairgrounds

Grove Home & Garden Show

Mar 8-10 | Grove

102 Lennell Drive

Classic Rock Icons

Mar 9 | Miami

Coleman Theatre

Midway USA AiA Tournament Trail

Mar 9 | Grove

Wolf Creek Park

Opening Day

Mar 9 | Grove

Har-Ber Village Museum

Rachel Wright Memorial Horse Show

Mar 10 | Miami

NEO Fieldhouse

Miami Rotary Shamrock Bash

Mar 14 | Miami

NEO Calcagno Family Ballroom

Big Meat Run 2024

Mar 15 | Disney

Main Street

Queensferry Renaissance Festival

Mar 16 | Vinita

438415 US-60

Sunny Side Up Film Festival

Mar 22 | Miami

Coleman Theatre

Okie Homesteading Expo

Mar 22-23 | Pryor

Mayes County Event Center



THANK YOU MEMBERS!

Operation Round-Up, the benevolent arm of Northeast Oklahoma Electric Cooperative and its membership, continued reaching into surrounding communities with much-needed grant funding in 2023.

A total of \$169,302.29 in grant funding was awarded to 32 worthy causes.

Operation Round-Up stocked area food pantries and helped area emergency response agencies acquire much-needed resources. It even funded some new appliances for a center that serves area senior citizens.

How gratifying for participating cooperative members to know that simply allowing their monthly electric bills to be rounded-up to the nearest dollar is helping create a powerful, stabilizing force for northeast Oklahoma communities.

OPERATION ROUND-UP TRULY IS SMALL CHANGE THAT CHANGES LIVES.

MARCH IS OPERATION ROUND-UP

DONOR APPRECIATION MONTH

We'd like to give a shout-out to those of you who have been with us since the beginning and invite others to join the cause.

What is Operation Round-Up?

Operation Round-Up is a benevolent program generated by voluntary monthly contributions from participating members of Northeast Oklahoma Electric Cooperative.

How does it work?

NOEC members participate by allowing their monthly electric bills to be rounded up to the next dollar. For example, a bill of \$82.63 would be rounded up to an even \$83.00 dollars with the additional 37 cents going to Operation Round-Up.

How much would I be giving?

The average member contribution is 50 cents per month or \$6 per year.

Where does the money go?

Monthly member contributions are placed in a trust administered by an independent board of directors. This trust is known as the Northeast Oklahoma Electric Cooperative Foundation, Inc. The foundation board consists of one designee from each of the cooperative's nine districts. These designees are community leaders who serve the foundation on a voluntary basis. The foundation board receives and evaluates all requests, determines who receives funding and how all Operation Round-Up monies will be disbursed. Funding is typically used to address crucial community needs such as emergency equipment, food bank, and backpack program supplies—but is not limited to these categories. The foundation board meets every other month to disburse funds.

NOT PARTICIPATING IN ORU? SIGN UP TO WIN! A \$200 WALMART GIFT CARD

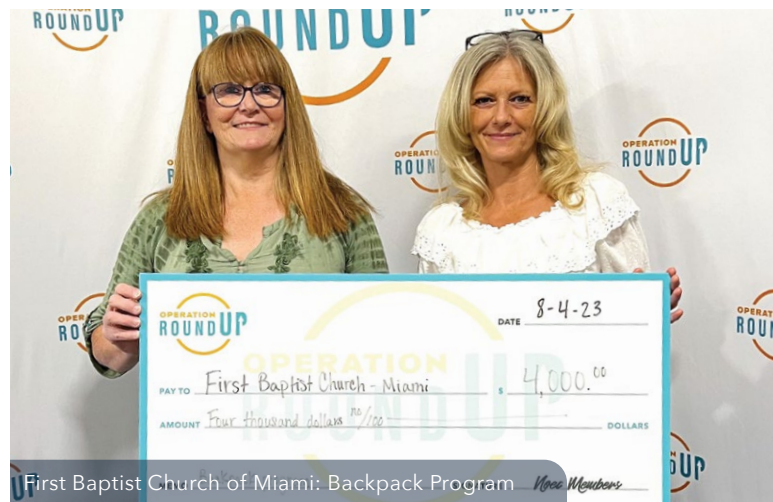
It's easy to join and this month we've made it even easier. Visit shorturl.at/bfovN to fill out the digital form and email to oru@noec.coop, or fill out the form on the **following page** and mail to PO Box 948, Vinita, OK 74301. You may also drop it by one of our office locations in Vinita or Grove.

A name will be drawn during the month of April from among the new participants to win a \$200 Walmart gift card. If you are already participating there's no need to fill out the form, your name will be placed in a separate \$200 Walmart gift card drawing.

Start giving today!

If you are not already participating, consider joining the more than 18,000 NOEC members who are already giving to Operation Round-Up. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain. When you see the smiles on the faces of those appreciative grant recipients, you'll know you are part of something special. And all of that collective benevolence costs each participant less than what most people toss into their vehicle console after making a fast food purchase. What's even more special is that those recipients are folks from our own communities—our friends and neighbors. And who knows? Those emergency resources you helped fund may even be used one day to save the life of someone you love.

Not sure if you're participating? Look at the list of Current Charges on your latest bill. Questions? Give us a call at 918.256.6405.





NOEC Foundation, Inc. | Operation Round-Up
PO Box 948, Vinita, Oklahoma 74301 | 918.256.6405

Application for Donation

Operation Round Up

YES, I want to support my community by rounding my bill up to the next dollar!

Example: if your bill is \$82.63, \$0.37 cents would be allocated to ORU, for a total bill of \$83.00.

Name _____

Mailing address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

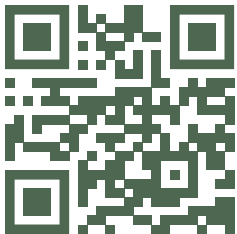
Physical address if different _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone _____ Electric account number _____

Submit Your Form

- Email: oru@noec.coop
- Mail: PO Box 948, Vinita, OK 74301
- Deliver: 27039 S 4440 Rd, Vinita, OK 74301 or 600 S Main St, Grove, OK 74344
- Digital: visit shorturl.at/bfovN and email to oru@noec.coop, or scan the code below:



Scan me!

Form must be postmarked or submitted by March 31, 2024 to be entered to win a \$200 gift card.

“Operation Round-Up has allowed cooperative members to contribute to local fire departments, law enforcement agencies, food banks, and other organizations that often times don’t have the funds to provide adequate services. The program also provides assistance for individuals with catastrophic needs.”

- Bob Eubanks, Director
Operation Round-Up Trust Foundation Board

MORE THAN A PRIORITY

CONTINUED FROM INSIDE COVER

Here's an example: Multi-tasking seems to be a necessity nowadays in order to maintain the pace of productivity, but a distracted employee who is talking on a cell phone while working may be placing themselves and others at needless risk. The bottom line is that most accidents don't stem from a lack of training, skill, or knowledge. They are the result of poor decision-making.

Turns out, many individuals are willing to bend the rules for one of the following reasons:

- An expectation that rules must be bent to get the job done.
- A feeling that one has the ability and experience to do a job without following procedure.
- Seeing an opportunity for a short cut.
- Inadequate preparation.
- The self-imposed notion that I *must* get this done.

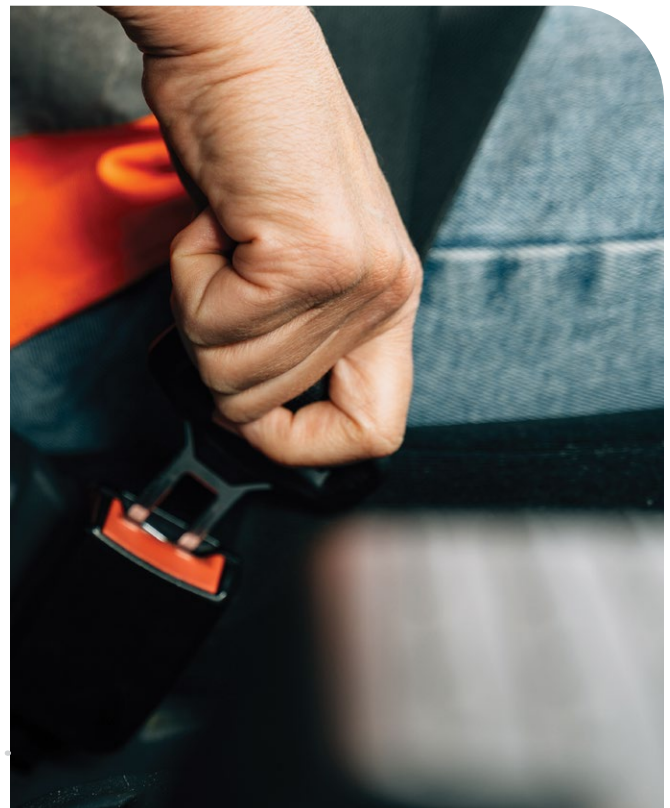
It is said that the average adult makes 35,000 decisions a day. Many of those decisions are trivial and come with minimal risk, such as what to eat for breakfast.

Other decisions can have potential outcomes that are much more serious, even life-altering. Time, effort, comfort, and peer pressure are all reasons employees commit unsafe acts when they know better. As author Jim Collins once noted: "Bad decisions made with good intentions are still bad decisions."

Consider what's at stake when:

- A driver chooses to text and operate a vehicle.
- A driver sees an exit sooner than expected and must make a split-second decision.
- An employee must decide whether to continue operating a piece of equipment with safety devices bypassed or compromised.
- An employee who sees a crucial safety step overlooked and must decide whether to speak up to a more experienced co-worker.

Those are just a few examples where treating safety as a value can make a difference. To foster a culture of safety, whether in the workplace or home, do not simply prioritize it, value it.



Member Feature

Growing Strong

LOCAL FAMILY'S THUMBS STILL GREEN AFTER 140 YEARS

A multi-generational family business is in good hands. Horton's Produce & Berry Farm is still going strong nearly 140 years after family patriarch Phillip Horton relocated from Tipton County, Indiana, to Bluejacket, Oklahoma, and began farming the land while working nights in the coal mines of Craig County.



Phillip's great-grandson Chism plants tomatoes with his son Gus

Indiana Transplant

Along with an unquestionable work ethic, Phillip brought with him an exceptional ability to leverage the soil. He began clearing a 10-acre parcel of land upon his arrival in 1887 and eventually acquired thirty adjacent acres. Once the land was ready, he began planting orchards and gardens. Harvests would produce enough to supply not only his family but to sell in the surrounding community and subsidize his mining salary.



Later, during the decade-long Great Depression, food was so scarce that Phillip Horton's 40 acres was reported to have produced more income for his family than area ranches running cattle on 200-300 acres.

Future generations of the Horton family would be endowed with Phillip's green thumb so that portions of that original 40-acre tract continue producing to this today.

Horton land now covers 140 acres in Bluejacket, and it is there that Phillip's great-great grandson Chism proudly carries on the family tradition with help from his wife Montana and their children Sadie, Liam, and Gus.

If you've been to one of the farmers markets here in our area, it's likely that you've sampled their wares. The Hortons are known for fresh, homegrown produce at supermarket prices. Everything is soil grown and picked ripe daily at the family's Bluejacket farm.

Horticulture comes natural for the 33-year-old Chism, who learned much from father Russell before heading off to college. Chism graduated from nearby Northeastern Oklahoma A&M in Miami prior to enrolling at Oklahoma State University. He would leave Stillwater with a Bachelor's Degree in Natural Resources and Ecology Management.

"I would come home on the weekends and work to help pay for my tuition," he said. "I'd clear pasture and build fence."

After graduation, Chism landed a job in western Oklahoma as a range conservationist for the USDA. For a time it appeared that he wouldn't be carrying on the family tradition.

But love ultimately brought Chism back home to northeast Oklahoma where he married and started a family.

"Once I got out of school, I went and worked in western Oklahoma for a while," he said. "I came back, got married, and bought the land that belonged to my grandma after she passed away. Then I started on my own."

Between juggling a full-time job and raising three kids, there is just enough time and energy for upholding a family tradition.

Except that horticulture for Chism is more of a hobby. Unlike most hobbies, however, it is profitable.

"Just like everyone else goes hunting and fishing, I work my nine-to-five and then my hobby is growing stuff," he smiled.

Of course, it's a group effort.

"Montana takes care of the kids at home and then during the summer she does a lot while I'm at work," he said. "She also handles the farmers markets for us during the week."

Chism brings a modern approach to the operation. His tomatoes are grown inside 30-foot by 96-foot tunnels where he can control the environment and protect his investment against weather extremes.





Montana and Chism Horton with their dog

The tunnels are heated in late winter months with an old propane tank that has been converted into a custom wood-burning furnace, which allows him to start his plants much sooner than conventional growing.

“The tunnels allow me to plant everything at least a month earlier,” he said. “I always try to have tomatoes ready on Memorial Day weekend.”

He can also roll down the sides of the tunnels in warmer weather to help cool the plants and permit pollination. And, any home gardener knows that too much rain over a short period of time will crack a crop of tomatoes.

Chism’s approach is obviously effective.

“Last year we picked 7,500 pounds of tomatoes.”

he said, adding that the Red Deuce variety he grows is a good producer with fruit averaging a half-pound to three-quarters of a pound. He’s had a few tip the scales at two pounds.

He said tomato production will be ramped up even more this year with the addition of a third tunnel.

“There for a while people were skeptical because I grew them in tunnels. They thought they were hothouse tomatoes or we were doing aquaponics, but we are growing them in the soil just like any other garden. I just have them covered so I can start them earlier in the season. Once summer comes I can roll down the sides and even shade them if it gets too hot. Basically, it extends the growing season and keeps the elements off of them. I can control how much water they get so they don’t crack, and I can hand feed them. I end up with more marketable tomatoes, rather than having lots of culls and canners.”

And that’s important since a portion of his crop ends up in Tulsa restaurants.

“I sent one ton of tomatoes to a Tulsa distributor last year,” said Chism. “He was buying them from us a thousand pounds at a time and selling them to restaurants.”

Chism said that the demand for fresh produce has always been high, but it increased even more during the pandemic.

“Things really changed during COVID,” he said. “People couldn’t find anything in the stores for a while. I could go one direction and Montana could go another and we could sell 700-800 pounds of tomatoes combined on a Thursday.”

Horton’s price point for produce has remained steady over the years. He typically charges a little more for his early-season tomatoes and he drops the price as the season progresses.

“I get \$3 a pound out of my early ones, which isn’t too much different than what you pay at the store. As the summer goes I lower my price a little. I haven’t really raised my price since I started out. Maybe fifty cents over the last four or five years.”

Strawberries, too, are a popular item for Horton's. Although they won't have berries available this spring, Chism said customers can look forward to them again in May 2025.

Strawberries at Horton's are also grown somewhat unconventionally. New crowns are planted outside in raised beds in late summer. They are planted on top of an irrigation network and mulched with plastic. The plants grow through the fall, winter, and early spring months. If temperatures are expected to dip too low, the plants are protected with frost covers.

That technique produced big numbers two years ago.

"Mother's Day weekend two years ago we picked 730 pounds of nice, commercial-size strawberries in one day and we sold out within four hours," Chism said, adding "I even had a guy a couple of years ago drive from Tulsa to buy a pound of strawberries."

Chism said last year wasn't a good year for strawberries.

"I didn't get my plants in on time. And then we had an early freeze on top of that. They didn't do a lot of growing and production wasn't great. Normally you don't have to cover them up until about Christmas so they can grow a long time."

What customers can look forward to this season are beautiful blackberries, a larger variety of vegetables, and bedding plants for the home gardener. Later in the season—say around the end of September—Horton's will have three-gallon mums, jack o' lanterns, and some colorful ornamental pumpkins ready to accent your autumn display.

Horton's also partners with several area schools, who purchase mums to use as fundraisers for sports programs and ag chapters.

"We grow around 1,500 mums and a lot of them go to local schools for fundraisers," Chism explained.

"The most we've ever grown is 3,000 and we shipped most of those off to Tulsa and Oklahoma City. With the cost of fuel and how much busier life is now with the kids growing up and becoming more involved in activities, we've cut back on shipping mums and are just selling them locally." Horton's blackberries will be available at a farmers market near you or you can pick them yourself at the farm. Since they are thornless, there is no need to bring your long-sleeved shirts and leather gloves should you opt for u-pick.

"Last summer was the first summer we had blackberries," Chism said. "We grew a half-acre and took them to the Vinita, Miami, and Grove farmers markets. Since they were new it took a while for everyone to find out about them. We sold 1,200 pounds last summer."

He said that number should more than double this summer.

"The plants will be more mature so we are hoping to get closer to 3,000 pounds this year," he said. "Production will always be light that first year. About your third year you should be getting 6,000 to 7,000 pounds on a half-acre. People can come pick them or we'll have them at the farmers markets."

New this year will be other vegetable varieties such as okra, green beans, squash, and peppers.

"My goal this year is to be more diversified," Chism confirmed.

With three children growing up around the soil, Chism said a sixth generation of the Horton family is already lined up to carry the mantle.

"Even Gus, he's only two, but we can take him out there when we are pulling grass out of containers. He'll see us do it and he'll walk around and start doing it to. He's like a sponge," laughed Chism. "He helped plant his first crop of tomatoes last spring at a year and a half old."

The best way to purchase Horton's produce is to follow on Facebook for where and when they'll be set up. They also have a store at the Four Corners intersection 10 miles north of Vinita on Highway 2. The store is open seasonally, early June through September. You can call or text 918.541.7209 for more information.