

LOCAL

BELFALLS ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

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FROM THE GENERAL MANAGER

THE ELECTRIC ENERGY CONSUMER BILL OF RIGHTS

As the election season heats up, it seems like an appropriate time to look at the politics of electricity. "The politics of electricity?" you might be asking right now. "I just want the lights to come on when I flip the switch."

It may surprise you to learn that as an electric cooperative member-owner, you have a unique bill of rights. The eight rights outlined in the Electric Energy Consumer Bill of Rights were overwhelmingly approved by cooperatives nationwide five years ago.

Listed first in the document is the right to have "access to reliable, affordable and safe electric power." This right applies not only to the power you use in your home, but also to consistency in standards across the nation. Co-op member-owners can count on the best possible service from their electric cooperative, whether here in Texas or beyond.

We have the right to form cooperatives to provide ourselves with electricity according to our own needs. When big business finds it lucrative to provide us with power while providing themselves with profits, we have a way to protect ourselves—the cooperative way.

Our co-ops have the right to be treated fairly and must be recognized by federal regulators as a unique form of business, different from investor-owned systems. Since the consumer owns the business, co-ops have no motivation to mislead, cheat or overcharge.

The fourth right of cooperative member-owners is to elect their own representation to manage the co-op. We elect a board of directors to establish basic policies, goals and strategies, as well as to determine rates and types of services offered.

Cooperative member-owners also have the right to privacy. We have the right to determine how information collected about us is used, and the co-ops protect that right with great care.

Rights six and seven go hand in hand. Through their extraordinary local control and autonomy, cooperative member-owners have the right to determine the scope of energy services furnished by their co-ops. If additional services are needed, co-op member-owners have a right to join together and use their cooperative as a means to meet these needs.

The last item in this special Cooperative Bill of Rights is the right to join together with other consumer-owned entities with common goals. There are many ways that co-ops can work together to provide an open window into the operation of a competitive electric market for all consumers, balancing the power wielded by huge companies.

The fact that electric cooperatives across the nation took the time to carefully craft a document outlining these basic rights for you as consumer-members is a good indication of their ultimate motivation—providing you with safe, reliable power at a reasonable cost. That gives them an "A+" in my book.

IT'S TIME TO WINTERIZE

Autumn is almost here, and it's not too early to winterize your home. A winterized home will keep you out of the cold and leave a few extra dollars in your pocket.

- Most heat loss in homes is due to poor attic insulation, which drives up energy bills. If you can see the joists in your ceiling, you don't have enough attic insulation.

- Make sure to seal any cracks in your home that could let cold air in. Use standard caulking to seal leaks around windows, electrical sockets, pipes and ductwork. Keep an eye out for cracked or peeling caulk.

- Check your basement foundation for cracks, and repair any you find with heavy caulk or ready-mix cement.

- Keep your heating system running efficiently with a professional inspection.

- Changing or cleaning filters will improve the air quality in your home and keep your heating system from overworking. Replace Fiberglas filters, which are less effective once they're cleaned and reused.

- Insulate your water heater and pipes to prevent heat loss through the plumbing.

- Consider investing in an automatic thermostat that will lower the temperature in your home slightly when no one is around and bring it back up when people return. It's less expensive to raise and lower the temperature of your home than it is to keep it constant throughout the day when no one's around.

- Close the fireplace flue when you're not using it. Reopen it before you make the season's first cozy fire. A closed flue prevents heat from escaping up an open chimney.

The U.S. Department of Energy says it costs about \$1,400 per year to heat the average home. When you stop heat from leaking through cracks and holes in the building, you cut that price.

PROTECT YOURSELF WITH SURGE PROTECTORS

Surge protectors are not just for your computers or to be used as glorified extension cords. They save our sensitive home components from becoming toast.

Electrical surges can be caused from nearby lightning or from sudden changes in power needs. An electrical surge from lightning is able to travel through phone, electrical and cable lines up to a half-mile and still cause harm. The majority of surge-related damage is caused by downed power lines, changes in seasonal energy demands, or the usage of high-powered appliances like refrigerators, electric dryers and air conditioners.

A good way to protect yourself is to get a surge protector to fit your needs, whether it is to protect the whole house or a few appliances. Normally, a surge protector allows the electricity to

flow through it to the appliance. Once a higher voltage is detected, the surge protector diverts excess voltage to a ground wire. The better surge protectors are able to divert the voltage quicker, within a nanosecond.

Whole-home surge protectors are available. The system, which costs about \$200, should be hardwired into your electrical system by a licensed electrician. Separate suppressors are recommended for your cable and phone lines to protect your phones, TVs and fax machines.

Plug-in surge protectors come in three different categories:

power strip, power station and uninterruptible power supply. The power strip provides basic protection and is able to buffer 400 volts or less. The power station is able to protect plug-in appliances as well as phone lines and



coaxial cable. It is able to protect up to a 330-volt surge. An uninterruptible power supply is able to supply non-fluctuating power, courtesy of a battery. The battery backup allows for extra time to save data on a computer.

Before buying a plug-in surge protector, make sure it follows these criteria:

- UL 1449 rating
- Absorbs at least 600 joules of energy.
- 400 or less clamping voltage (the amount of electricity needed to trigger

the surge protector to divert the voltage to the ground line).

Protects all three incoming lines: hot, neutral and ground. Look for "L-N, L-G, N-G" (line to neutral, line to ground, neutral to ground) on the product's spec sheet.

If its circuits are damaged from a surge, the surge protector will stop working and should then be replaced with a new one.

Source: This Old House Magazine, www.thisoldhouse.com



LOOK FOR SECRET PLACES WHERE AIR LEAKS HIDE

Cracks around windows and doors were once considered to be the home's most prominent air leaks. Then building specialists starting measuring air leakage with a device called a blower door. As a result of that research, we've learned that caulking small cracks and weather-stripping doors and windows isn't very effective at reducing air leakage.

The biggest air leaks are lurking in the attic, around the foundation, and where utilities pass through the building's outer shell. When you have large hidden air leaks, sealing the little ones doesn't reduce your heating costs much.

Find a specialist in your region who performs energy audits and blower-door testing. The blower door could tell you whether or not air leakage is a problem in your home. If your energy audit shows that air leakage is an energy and comfort problem, go looking for large openings in your home's shell. You'll often find

large air leaks under bathrooms and kitchens where pipes and wires are installed. Go into your attic, too, and note where pipes, wires, recessed light fixtures and chimneys penetrate your ceiling. Follow the plumbing and wiring and you'll be on the right track.

When you find openings that allow air to leak into and out of your home, seal them with durable materials. Don't worry about cracks smaller than 1/4 inch. For cracks between 1/4 inch and 1 inch, use liquid foam that comes in a can, or stuff Fiberglas tightly into the opening. For larger openings, use rigid foam board or plywood, and seal the edges with more liquid foam. If you seal around chimneys, be sure to use fire-proof materials such as sheet metal. Every opening you seal will reduce the amount of heated air you lose next winter.

Source: John Krigger, Saturn Resource Management (www.residential-energy.com)

IN EMERGENCIES

These are telephone numbers to call to report outages after business hours and on weekends and holidays.

Kenneth Fikes.....(254) 583-4556

Larry Koslosky(254) 583-4555

Doug Matous(254) 583-2957

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