

Claverack Rural Electric Cooperative

A Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 



One of 14 electric cooperatives
serving Pennsylvania and New Jersey

Claverack REC

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Office Hours

Monday through Friday

7:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Jeff Fetzer, Local Pages Editor

Guest Column



Thank a lineworker

By Doug Nichols, *Director of Operations*

APRIL IS Lineworker Appreciation month, so I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those lineworkers out there, especially our cooperative lineworkers who have dedicated their lives to this line of work.

As some of you know, I began my career at Claverack 32-plus years ago as an apprentice lineman in the Tunkhannock District. I know firsthand what your cooperative lineworkers do to keep the power flowing to your homes day in and day out, as well as the sacrifices they make when the power goes out after normal working hours.

So when are lineworkers appreciated the most? That answer is simple: Whenever the power goes out at your location! I am positive this is the time when you are most appreciative of their efforts — especially when you see our crews working in the dead of night or during miserable weather conditions to get your power back on.

I doubt the first thing that enters your mind when you see a line crew working after hours to restore your power is what each one of those lineworkers was doing when he got the call.

All of us who work at the co-op know and understand that the call to respond to an outage or emergency is just part of the job. As a result, all of us who have been in this line of work long enough have missed some very important family events and special occasions, whether it's a kid's ball game or a holiday gathering. Those are events you can never get back, but your lineworkers know what they signed up for


when they chose this career.

Dedication! I can't even begin to explain the level of dedication your cooperative lineworkers have to their jobs and our members. It is just who they are. Our members are always the main focus, and that is what drives each one of these workers to do what they do.

As a lineworker, I had the opportunity to work with quite a few lineworkers from utilities across Pennsylvania, as well as other states, during major weather-related outages that resulted in requests for mutual aid. As Claverack's director of operations for the last 15 years, I can say without hesitation that your co-op employs some of the best lineworkers in the business. They are pros at what they do, and very caring individuals, as well.

One story sticks out in my mind. The cooperative was experiencing a very large storm event that left many of our members without service for several days. As part of the storm restoration, we requested mutual aid from other cooperatives and had a full crew come all the way from Florida to help.

At one location, a co-op member offered food and drinks to the crew to show their appreciation. The crew leader looked at me and said, "I've been doing this a long time, and that's the first time that's ever happened."

If you get a chance this month and see one of your cooperative lineworkers, take a second and thank them for what they do and the sacrifices they sometimes make to keep the lights on for you and your family. 

Growing greens a year-round enterprise at Falls farm

By Jeff Fetzer

FOR MOST home gardeners and vegetable growers, April's arrival marks the start of the growing season.

For Claverack members Amanda and Bill Banta, April means the heart of the lettuce harvest season is at hand on their farm in Falls.

While harvesting lettuce is a year-round proposition for the Bantas, owners of Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce, spring signals the return to peak production inside the couple's hydroponic greenhouse.

"Once we start getting that extra sunshine in March and April, the lettuce just takes off," Amanda says, noting plants that take over three months to attain harvest size during the fall and winter can reach maturity in as little as five weeks during the spring and summer.

Over the course of the year, the Bantas expect to produce about 100,000 plants — Bibb, spring mix, and Romaine lettuces, kale and arugula — inside the hydroponic greenhouse on their Wyoming County farm.

Hydroponics is a method of growing plants in a nutrient-rich water solution, without the use of soil. Hydroponic growing has become increasingly popular in recent years because it can provide consumers with fresh produce year-round that is free of chemicals and pesticides.

While Rowlands is not an "organ-



BIBB BOUQUET: Amanda Banta displays a freshly picked head of Bibb lettuce grown inside the 6,000-square-foot hydroponic greenhouse on the family farm in Wyoming County. The bulk of the lettuce grown at the facility is sold wholesale to area restaurants.



GREENHOUSE GROWERS: Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce owners Amanda and Bill Banta of Falls grow three varieties of lettuce, along with kale and arugula, inside their main hydroponic greenhouse year-round. While the couple's primary crop is pesticide-free greens, the Bantas also offer hydroponically grown tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and herbs to retail consumers at area farmers markets during the traditional growing season.

ic-certified" enterprise, the business utilizes only nutrients and sprays that have been approved as appropriate for organic operations by the Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI).

Their locally grown salad and sandwich staples are sold wholesale to area restaurants, and are available for retail purchase at the farm as well as at various delivery points throughout the region year-round. From June through late November, Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce also peddles its greens and other vegetables at four area farmers markets on a weekly basis.

The idea for Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce sprouted after Bill Banta, who grew up on a farm in Orange and retains a passion for agriculture, read an article about hydroponic food production in 2008.

"From that point on, I was determined that I would do that one day," he says. "So I started doing research and getting my business plan together."

Four years later, and one month after retiring from a career with the Pennsylvania Department of Cor-



SALAD STARTER: Bill Banta holds a tray of lettuce seedlings ready for transplant into hydroponic growing trays. Over the course of the year, the Exeter Township hydroponic farm will produce around 100,000 heads of lettuce, most of it destined for restaurants in Wyoming, Luzerne and Lackawanna counties.

rections, Bill initiated construction of a 6,000-square-foot hydroponic greenhouse on the Exeter Township farmstead owned by his in-laws, Claverack members Michael and Barbara Rowlands. The Rowlands, Amanda's parents, operate Rowlands Family Greenhouse and Landscaping on the

same property that houses the Bantas' produce business.

The Bantas harvested their first crop of hydroponically grown lettuce in January 2013 and immediately set about introducing their greens to area restaurants and retailers.

"The first crop was just gorgeous," recalls Amanda. "We had an entire greenhouse of lettuce, so we just went every day with samples and visited businesses. We got a really good response from restaurants and chefs who want to focus on buying local and supporting local farms. They know our greens are super fresh, and they last a long time."

Before the coronavirus pandemic struck last spring, wholesale purchases by restaurants accounted for about 80% of the business' annual sales. But with restaurant shutdowns and seating capacity limitations enacted throughout the past year to help prevent spread of the coronavirus, many of Rowlands' restaurant clients stopped purchasing produce.

"Prior to COVID, we were supplying 12 to 15 restaurants with lettuce," Amanda says. "Now we only have about four left, because some of them closed or they are only doing takeout or they wanted to cut costs. We're hoping the restaurants all pick up their business again."

To help make up for the shortfall related to the decline in restaurant sales, the Bantas have concentrated on expanding sales to retail customers.

Produce can be pre-ordered year-



TRANSPLANT TIME: Claverack members Amanda and Bill Banta work to transplant lettuce inside their Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce operation in February.

round through the Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce Facebook page and picked up directly at the farm, located at 598 Miller Lane in Falls. And after the Christmas holiday season, when restaurant sales typically slow, Rowlands offers a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program that delivers fresh produce directly to local consumers on a contractual basis.

Customers who sign up for the CSA program agree to purchase shares of lettuce for a set period of time, ranging from 10 to 20 weeks. The customers can pick up their produce, typically four bags of greens each week, at six pickup locations in Luzerne, Lackawanna and Wyoming counties.

The CSA program runs until area farmers markets open, typically in June. At that point, Bill and Amanda peddle their greens and other produce at farmers markets in Wilkes-Barre, Dallas, Tunkhannock and Montage Mountain each week.

"Our main product at the farmers markets is the lettuce," Amanda explains, "but we also sell tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and herbs grown hydroponically at our farm, as well as produce grown at other local farms, to give us more variety."

At the weekly Saturday farmers market in Dallas, she says, the lettuce often sells out in as little as an hour. Their greens are in high demand at farmers markets, she says, because they are picked fresh the day before going to market, locally grown and last much longer in refrigeration than store-bought lettuce or fresh-cut garden lettuce grown in the ground.

"Our lettuce will last for weeks because it's still living when we pick it," she explains. "The roots are still on the lettuce when it's sold, which helps keep it fresh for up to three weeks."

Amanda, a full-time registered nurse until she and her husband opened their produce business, has deep roots in



ILLUMINATED: A small section of mixed lettuce flourishes under LED growing lights at the Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce greenhouse.

the world of agriculture. She grew up on the farmstead that now houses the couple's business and had worked in the greenhouses associated with her father's nursery and landscaping business for many years.

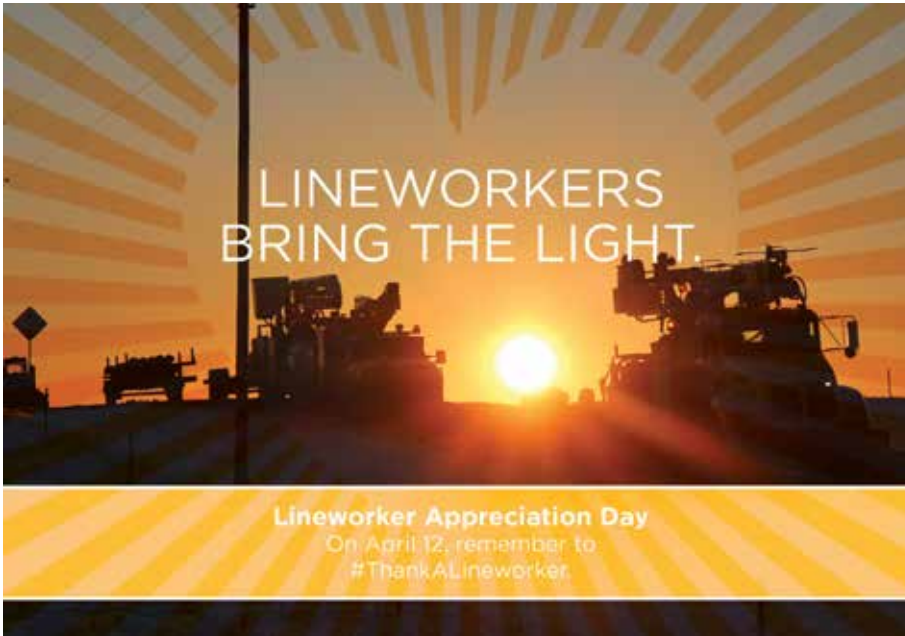
So when her husband decided to enter the hydroponic produce business upon his retirement, Amanda, with two children at home at the time and another one on the way, was happy to join him in the endeavor.

"I've always liked gardening," Amanda says, "and this gave me the opportunity to be at home with the kids."

The Bantas have four children. The oldest serves in the Navy, and the three remaining at home range in age from 5 to 16. While the business operation receives assistance from their children and other family members, Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce is primarily a two-person operation, with Bill and Amanda tackling all facets of the business: planting, transplanting and harvesting, packaging and deliveries, marketing and promotion, and sales at four farmers markets each week.

"We knew it would be a lot of work, but I don't think we realized just how time consuming it would be," Amanda says. "In our peak season, it's non-stop. In the summer, a lot of nights, we don't get back to the house until 8:30, 9 o'clock at night. Even in the summer, where there is a lot of tiredness and stress, we enjoy it. We really work at this together, and we really love it."

For additional information or to order produce from Rowlands Pennsylvania Produce, visit the farm's Facebook page or call 570-561-4093. 🌱



Call 8-1-1 before digging in to spring projects

With the arrival of warm weather, many members are gearing up for outdoor construction projects. If you are planning excavation work, get your



project off to a safe start by calling 8-1-1 before you dig. 8-1-1 is the abbreviated national telephone number homeowners and professional excavators can call to contact their state's One Call center.

State law requires that anyone doing excavation work moving earth with power equipment is required to notify the Pennsylvania One Call System three days before digging begins.

The purpose of the PA One Call System is to prevent damage to underground facilities such as electric, cable, telephone, gas, water and sewer lines during excavation projects.

Digging by an uninformed homeowner or contractor not only has the potential to damage utility lines, it can also be extremely dangerous when underground electric or gas lines are involved.

By calling 8-1-1 at least three working days before you plan to begin your project, you or your contractor will know exactly what lies beneath the surface — safeguarding everyone involved.

State law requires that the person performing the excavation be responsible for notifying the PA One Call System. There is no charge involved when a homeowner is doing work on his or her own residential property.

If you are a homeowner who has hired a contractor to work on your property, the contractor is required by law to make the call to the system to have underground lines located.

Additional information about the PA One Call System is available on the web by visiting pa1call.org.

Beware of scam artists posing as utility workers

Claverack advises members to be suspicious of anyone who attempts to get inside their homes by stating he or she works for Claverack.

“Claverack workers do not perform repairs on household wiring systems,” says Brian Zeidner, director of member services. “In fact, our employees have instructions not to enter customers’ homes unless it is an emergency or for pre-arranged visits.”

Each Claverack employee carries a laminated plastic identification card with his or her photograph.

If someone unexpected comes to your door and states he or she is a Claverack employee, protect yourself by:

- ▶ Asking to see identification
- ▶ Calling Claverack at 1-800-326-9799 to verify work and employee identities if there is any doubt
- ▶ Reporting any suspicious activity to the police

Install a heat pump, receive a rebate

IF YOU are planning to build a new home or replace your existing heating system, Claverack encourages you to consider installing one of the most energy-efficient heating and cooling systems on the market: heat pumps.

In addition to saving money on heating bills, members who install either a ground-source or air-source heat pump in their homes are eligible for a rebate from Claverack.

Rebates are based on the type of heat pump you install. Claverack offers a \$100-per-ton rebate for air-source heat pump installations, and

\$150-per-ton rebate for ground-source heat pumps. The maximum rebate amount is \$900. Only heat pumps installed within the past 12 months are eligible for rebates.

Additional information about heating and cooling is available on Claverack’s website, claverack.com.

The co-op can also direct members to local mechanical contractors who sell, install and service heat pumps. Please call the Claverack office at 1-800-326-9799 for more information about these installers or our rebate program. 🌞