

# Connections

January 2020

For the member-owners of Brown County REA



Volume 24, Issue 1

## Whether near or far, your co-op turns to Carr's Tree Service to prevent outages

Everyone loves their shade trees or the shelter belt provided by trees. However, trees near power lines is not a good combination causing blinking lights and outages.

Many of these outages can be prevented with tree trimming. "Every 10 years BCREA likes to cover each township with tree trimming. We hire Carr's Tree Service, based out of Courtland, to do the majority of our tree trimming," stated BCREA's Operations and Engineering Manager Brandon Havemeier. With this 10-year rotation the contractors know how much to trim back on which type of trees to ensure reliable electric service."

Carr's will be trimming trees this year for BCREA during the following months: January, February, March, July, August and December.

Tree trimming provides four main benefits:

1. Keeps power lines clear of tree limbs.
2. Helps line crews restore power outages more quickly.
3. Keeps crew members and co-op members safe.
4. Preventative tree trimming reduces unexpected costs for repairs.



**Carr's Tree Service does the tree trimming for Federated. Their employees are trained on safety and tree structure, plus have the right equipment for the job.**

Besides preventing power outages, tree trimming also prevents annoying blinking lights. "With high winds or ice-laden tree branches reaching

into power lines, the branches may momentarily slap the lines causing a blink. If the branch or tree falls into the power line, it may cause a longer outage," Havemeier explained.

The standard is to avoid planting trees 10-feet from power lines. However, some trees are within that clearance range. Carr's Tree Trimming often talks to the homeowner before the trimming occurs to inform them of the work.

With the recent wet years providing precipitation for tree growth, let the cooperative know if you have trees growing into your power lines. Besides the rotation throughout the service area, the cooperative keeps a list where tree trimming is needed."

"We encourage members to never trim trees near power lines," Havemeier stated. "We want to keep you safe. Let the professionals do it. Carr's will trim branches along lines up to the site's meter. Call BCREA and we'll put your address on the do list for when crews are in the area."

In addition, Carr's can be hired for other tree trimming needs by members on their farms or homes. Visit [carrstreeservice.com](http://carrstreeservice.com) or call Carr's for a quote at 320-836-2288. ☎

### At A Glance



**Brown County  
Rural Electrical  
Association**

#### Rebates available in 2020

Brown County REA is again offering rebates to members who install a new air source heat pump or geothermal heat pump system and some energy-efficient appliances. Look for full details in the February Connections. ☎

This publication focuses on cooperative savings, programs and events. As this is the official member publication, member's story ideas, letters-to-the-editor and comments are welcomed.

Andrea Christoffer, CCC, Editor  
 "Owned by those it serves"

*Connections* (USPS 010-456) is published monthly by Federated Rural Electric, 77100 US Hwy 71, Jackson, MN 56143-0069. Subscriptions: Members \$5 a year. Nonmembers \$10 a year. Periodicals postage paid at Jackson, MN and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Connections*, PO Box 69, Jackson MN 56143-0069.

Printed by Livewire Printing, Jackson, on recycled paper with soy ink.



# \$ave: 3 DIY efficiency projects

A New Year brings new opportunities to save energy and money. You may think energy-efficiency upgrades require a great deal of time and expense, but that's not always the case.

If you're interested in making your home more efficient, but don't want to break the bank, three do-it-yourself (DIY) projects can increase energy savings. Let's take a look at these inexpensive efficiency upgrades that can help you save energy throughout the year.

### 1. Trim dryer vent

*Level of difficulty: easy.*

*Supplies needed: tin snips, gloves, measuring tape and masking tape. Estimated cost: \$25, depending on the supplies you already have.*

If your dryer vent hose is too long, your dryer is working harder, using more energy than necessary. The vent hose should be long enough for you to pull the dryer out a couple of feet from the wall, but the shape of the hose should form a line — it should not have a lot of slack, with twists and curves. A shorter, unobstructed vent hose increases the efficiency of your dryer, dries clothing faster and reduces lint buildup, which creates potential fire hazards. Be sure to also clean out the vent hose with your vacuum attachment sucking out the lint buildup.

Just measure, mark and trim the hose to the desired length; reattach the hose to your dryer and exterior vent. If you're unsure about the hose length, watch YouTube.com for a video tutorial.



**This isn't a cave. This is what the inside of your dryer vent hose may look like if you haven't cleaned it for awhile. This kind of blockage can make your clothes dryer operate inefficiently.**

### 2. Seal air leaks

*Level of difficulty: moderate. Supplies needed: caulk and caulk gun, weather stripping, gloves, putty knife and paper towels. Estimated cost: \$25 to \$50, depending on the materials purchased.*

Sealing air leaks in your home can help you save 10-20 percent on heating and cooling bills. Apply caulk around windows, doors, electrical wiring and plumbing to seal in conditioned air. You should also weather strip exterior doors, which keeps out drafts and helps you control energy costs. Types of caulking and weather stripping materials vary, but ask your local hardware or home store for assistance if you're unsure about the supplies needed. For more information the Department of Energy provides step-by-step instructions for caulking and weather stripping that can be found at <https://bit.ly/2Kesu6W>.


### 3. Insulate the attic stairs' opening

*Level of difficulty: moderate. Supplies needed (if you build the box yourself): rigid foam board, faced blanket insulation, tape for foam board, measuring tape, utility knife, plywood, caulk and caulk gun. Estimated cost: \$50 to \$100.*

A properly insulated attic is one of the best ways to optimize energy savings and comfort in your home, but many homeowners don't consider insulating the attic stairs, or the opening to your attic space. Even a well-insulated attic can leak

air through the stair opening, but luckily, there's an easy fix.

An insulated attic cover box seals and insulates the attic stairs' opening. You can build your own insulated cover box or purchase a pre-built box or kit from a local home improvement store, Home Depot or Lowe's for about \$60. If you decide to build your own, check out these step-by-step instructions from the Department of Energy: <https://bit.ly/36YNCYQ>. It should also be noted, if your attic opening is located in a garage that you do not heat and cool, this upgrade will not be as effective.

Saving energy doesn't have to be overwhelming. With a little time and effort members can maximize energy savings and comfort. To learn more just contact your electric cooperative to request a 101 Energy Saving tips booklet or visit [www.energywisemn.com](http://www.energywisemn.com). 

# FitTrack scale reveals more than just your weight

People dread standing on scales to find out their weight, but the new FitTrack scale also helps you track a healthy lifestyle.

FitTrack uses advanced Bioelectric Impedance Analysis (BIA) technology. When you stand on a FitTrack monitor, a very low, safe electrical signal is sent from four metal electrodes through your feet to your legs and abdomen. The electrical signal passes quickly through water that is present in hydrated muscle tissue, but it meets resistance when it hits fat tissue. This resistance, known as impedance, is measured and input into equations to calculate body composition measurements in less than 20 seconds.

FitTrack measures 17 different health indicators including body fat, BMI, muscle mass, hydration and more; you learn your body composition and can make healthy decisions.



**The FitTrack scale measures 17 different health indicators to help you be the most healthy person you can be. What a great way to start 2020!**

Other smart scales fail to adjust their readings according to the user's body type. For more active or muscular users with increased metabolisms and elevated BMIs, FitTrack offers Athlete Mode. This feature automatically adjusts the algorithm to your body type. New parents can even use Infant Mode to watch their child grow. FitTrack automatically recognizes up to eight users with their own profiles.

Download the FitTrack app to access daily, weekly and monthly body composition reports. Monitor your history and progress to stay motivated and see how your day-to-day activities affect your body.

Previously, users made doctor visits for information on subcutaneous and visceral fat levels. Now, FitTrack lets you track your body data from home daily.

The FitTrack scale is on Amazon for about \$85. 

## Safety

### Use 'safety smarts' around smart technology

It's amazing how technology powers our lives. We have devices in our hands to give us news, check e-mail, shows us road conditions and make phone calls. Wrist devices record our steps, monitor our heart rate and tells us when to move. We can see someone in another town on our "portal" device and talk with them. Devices alert us when someone is in our yard or at our front door; we can watch them on our phone and see a video.

Our technology may be smart, but we have to be smart in how we use the technology. You see, they all have one thing in common — they need electrical power to operate/charge and we need to do it safely.

Why is having safe power important? The Electrical Safety Foundation International reports these statistics regarding electrical fires.

- Home electrical distribution and lighting systems are the fourth leading cause of home fires, after cooking equipment, heating equipment and intentional fires.

- In the United States 50,900 fires each year are attributed to electrical failure or malfunction, resulting in 490 deaths and 1,440 injuries. Arcing faults are a major cause of these fires. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that AFCIs could prevent more

**Laptops, smart phones, cords and bedding do not go together! It's a safety hazard!**



than 50 percent of the electrical fires that occur every year.

- About 3,300 residential fires originate in extension cords each year, killing 50 people and injuring about 270 others.

Take safe power steps with smart technology!

1. Never keep your phone or tablet in bed with you. They should stay on your nightstand. They can easily

overheat if covered under a pillow and blanket.


2. Be mindful of how you use electrical outlets. If you're using extension cords, consider having a qualified electrician add more outlets to your home. Extension cords are a common cause of home fires.

3. Unplug your electrical gadgets when they're not in use. You might be surprised by all the "blue" light in the house at night, if you walk around in the dark.

4. Keep your electrical devices away from sources of water. It was true 50 years ago and it's still true today!

5. Cords and plugs that show signs of wear or damage need to be replaced. Stop using them immediately.

6. Coil up excess cord length and keep the coil intact with plastic ties or Velcro straps.

7. Use a certified power bar if you need to plug multiple items into an outlet. 



# Brown County Briefs

## Member Advisory Council

The final meeting of the current Member Advisory Council is set for Monday, January 20 at 6:30 p.m. Snow date will be January 27.

## 2020 calendars available

Pick up your 2020 large farm pocket calendars (one per member please) at the office. Pocket-size calendars are also available to members, while supplies last.

## Operation Round Up



The Brown County Rural Electric Trust Board will meet February 18 at 5:30 p.m. to review applications for funding. ☎

## Recycle your old holiday lights



Need to dispose of old holiday lights? Brown County REA is again working with the Sleepy Eye YES! Team to collect strands of old holiday lights to be recycled. You may drop off your old lights in the box in the BCREA office entryway during regular business, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The collection runs through January 18.

Please do not place cord adapters, battery packs, plastic rope lights or CFL bulbs in the collection box. ☎

## Trip to Washington, D.C. available to one lucky high school student



Brown County REA is looking for one student to represent the cooperative and participate in a trip to Washington, D.C. June 20-25. Youth Tour is more than a sightseeing trip. While in D.C. participants have a chance to meet with their elected officials and discuss issues that are important back home. Students return home with a deeper understanding and skillset of what it takes to be a leader and can put

those skills to use in their local community. They also learn about the cooperative business model, visit numerous museums and memorials, plus gain a new appreciation of our nation's history. In the process many new friendships are created, as they spend the week with young people from electric cooperatives throughout Minnesota. Plus, it doesn't cost them anything, except their time!

The Electric Cooperative Youth Tour has sent high school students to Washington, D.C. since 1964 on an all-expense-paid, once-in-a-lifetime experience. More than 50,000 students have participated since the program was created.

Application materials are available from area high school counselors and social studies teachers and on the BCREA website at [www.browncountyrea.coop](http://www.browncountyrea.coop). Click on *Youth Tour* under the *Programs & Services* tab.

The application deadline is March 2; then we will interview the top three candidates and select one to travel to Washington, D.C. in June. A \$150 prize will be awarded for second place and \$100 to the third place finisher. ☎

## Operation Round Up offering six \$250 scholarships in 2020



Brown County REA, through its Operation Round Up program, is offering scholarships to high school seniors planning to attend college after graduation.

The Trust Board has chosen to increase scholarships to six \$250 scholarships, which will be awarded to graduating seniors whose parents/guardians are members and live in Brown County REA's service area.

Funds for the scholarships come from members who choose to round up their electric bill to the nearest dollar each month. The difference is placed in a trust, which is administered by a nine-member board, that meets four times each year to distribute funds to charitable causes, individuals and families in crisis and scholarships.

Scholarship guidelines and applications are available from area high school counselors and can also be found on the BCREA website at [www.browncountyrea.coop](http://www.browncountyrea.coop).

The deadline for submission is March 30. Winners will be announced at the Brown County REA Annual Meeting April 2. A copy of the student's high school transcript and one letter of recommendation are required. Scholarship funds will be awarded after successful completion of the first semester of college. ☎

# Happy New Year from BCREA employees!



Brown County REA took advantage of the opportunity to take an all-employee photo at the #Only in MN traveling monument, while it was on display with the Holiday Lights in Motion at Sleepy Eye's Sportsman's Park. From left: Brady Kerkhoff, Terry Helget, Mike Suess, Adam Fischer, Zach Gulden, Tyler Jensen, Drew Hill, Nick Horman, Mike Heidemann and Brandon Havemeier. Back row: Robyn Walter, Jamie Goulson, Darla Ruschen, Dorine Wellmann, Marcia Solie. (C)

## Director candidates sought

Nominations are being sought for candidates to run for election in BCREA's Districts 2, 3 and 8.

District 2 consists of Mulligan and Albin townships in Brown County and part of Nelson Township in Watonwan County. District 3 is made up of Lake Hanska and Linden townships and the City of Hanska in Brown County, plus parts of Riverdale and Madelia townships in Watonwan County. District 8 includes Ridgley, West Newton, North and South Lafayette townships, portions of Cairo and Severance, plus part of Courtland townships in Nicollet County.

Nominating committees:

- District 2: Troy Windschitl, Mike Schroepfer and Peter & Colleen Vachuska.
- District 3: Adam Suess, Joe Beranek and Travis & Ashley Sondag.
- District 8: Ryan & Chelsey Franta, Sheldon & Ann Rieke and Craig Wilson.

If interested in being a candidate or have a member in mind who you believe would be a good candidate, please contact a nominating committee member prior to the January 20 Member Advisory Council meeting with your suggestion, or contact the REA office. A director candidate application can be found on the BCREA website at [www.browncountyrea.coop](http://www.browncountyrea.coop), click on *About Us* and then the *Employees & Directors* tab. Please make sure the nominee is willing to have his or her name on the ballot. The 83<sup>rd</sup> Annual Meeting occurs April 2 at the Sleepy Eye Event Center. (C)

## Want to be a BCREA Director?

BCREA's nine-member Board of Directors meets monthly, usually the last Thursday of each month, during the day at the co-op's headquarters in Sleepy Eye. Other meetings may include the annual meeting, meetings with our wholesale power supplier, Great River Energy, Minnesota Rural Electric Association (MREA), National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) and training to learn and stay current on the electric industry.

Among the responsibilities of a Director:

- Establish co-op policies, approve plans, programs and budgets, receive management reports and establish broad objectives for the General Manager/CEO.
- Develop knowledge and skills; plus stay informed of all matters affecting the operations of the cooperative.
- Authorize the budgets, facilities and equipment necessary to carry out the co-op objectives.
- Assure the financial affairs of the cooperative are being conducted and recorded in accordance with all laws and regulations and that the financial records accurately reflect the financial condition of the cooperative.
- Determine and adopt key issues, strategic initiatives and objectives, major goals and monitor results.
- Review and approve broad operating programs of service and activities developed and recommended by the General Manager. (C)



# RURAL Act & SECURE Act included in final budget deal

## Minnesota Senator Tina Smith leads bipartisan effort to pass legislation

Thanks to the strong advocacy efforts of electric cooperatives across the country – including those in Minnesota – and many of the congressional leaders who represent cooperative districts, the RURAL Act and SECURE Act provisions are included in the final U.S. FY 2020 budget agreement. The U.S. House passed the legislation December 17; it passed in the Senate December 19. President Trump then signed the bill into law.

“The RURAL Act protects electric cooperatives throughout the nation from the risk of losing their tax-exempt status when they accept government grants for disaster relief, broadband service and other programs that benefit co-op members,” said Brown County REA General Manager Mike Heidemann.

The RURAL Act was the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association’s (NRECA) top legislative priority for 2019 due to the profound threat to the business model of not-for-profit co-ops. Tens of thousands of co-op leaders, employees and members across the country rallied to advocate passage of the bill.

The legislation attracted more than 300 co-sponsors in the 435-member



House and more than half of the senators. The effort was led in the House by Representatives Terri Sewell, D-Alabama., and Adrian Smith, R-Nebraska, and in the Senate by Rob Portman, R-Ohio, and Tina Smith, D-Minnesota.

“Electric cooperatives are grateful for the support of lawmakers who supported this bill, especially for Senator Smith’s leadership,” stated Federated General Manager Scott Reimer. “The bill’s passage fixes unintended consequences of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which redefined government grants to co-ops as income, rather than capital. That change made it difficult for many

co-ops to abide by the 15 percent limit on non-member income to keep their tax-exempt status. The RURAL Act once again exempts grants from being counted as income and is retroactive to the 2018 tax year.”

Without the fix some co-ops would start paying taxes this spring after receiving grants in 2018 or 2019 to repair storm damage, bring high-speed internet to rural communities or invest in renewable energy and energy-efficiency programs. Many co-op leaders feared they would have to raise rates for members to pay the new taxes.

The SECURE Act, another legislative priority this year, will lower the amount of premiums paid by co-op pension plans to the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation (PBGC).

“This package preserves the nature of the electric co-op-business model,” said NRECA CEO Jim Matheson “It will save electric co-ops tens of millions of dollars each year. Moreover, it protects co-op members from unfair increases in their electric rates and provides certainty to co-ops that leverage federal and state grants for economic development, storm recovery and rural broadband deployment.”

## Calculate Your Space Heater Cost

Wattage

X

Hours Used per Month

X


Co-op's kWh rate/1000

=

Monthly Cost

Most space heaters are 1,500 watts. If you're operating a space heater 8 hours a day and your rate is **\$.10 per kWh** = (1,500 watts x 240 hours/month x \$.10/kWh) / 1,000 = **\$36/month**

## Santa deliver an Instapot? Now share Instapot recipes


An Instapot delivers a fast pressure-cooker meal! Now it's time to try a few new recipes in the New Year with that new Instapot. Share your family-favorite Instapot recipes. Do you use fresh or frozen food? Do you have any tips or tricks too? Share your recipes by e-mailing to christoffer@federatedrea.coop or mail to Editor, Federated Rural Electric, PO Box 69, Jackson MN 56143-0069. Thanks for sharing with us! 

### Homemade Apple Pie Filling by Terese Gruber, New Ulm

4 c. apples — peeled, cored and diced      1/3 c. cornstarch  
juice from half a lemon                              1 tsp. cinnamon  
3 c. water    1/4 tsp. salt  
1 1/3 c. granulated sugar                              1/4 tsp nutmeg

Place apples in a large bowl and toss with lemon juice.

Place water, sugar, cornstarch, cinnamon, salt and nutmeg in a medium saucepan. Stir to combine; then bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring often. Once the mixture boils, continue boiling for two minutes. Add the apples. Turn to simmer and cover. Cook, stirring often until apples soften, about 5-8 minutes.


Pour into jars to cool to room temperature. Then cover and refrigerate. The mixture will thicken more as it cools. 

### Apple Pie Bars by Sandy Kalfs, Okabena

Sift together: 2 1/2 c. sifted flour                      1 T. sugar                      1 tsp. salt

Cut in 1 c. lard (or shortening or butter) into flour mixture until crumbly.

Separate one egg. Put egg yolk into measuring cup; then add milk to make 2/3 c. Add to lard mixture. Roll out half of the dough; transfer to a 15 1/2" x 10 1/2" baking sheet. Cover with 2/3 c. crushed corn flakes. Top with 5-6 c. peeled, sliced apples. Sprinkle with 1 1/2 c sugar mixed with 1 tsp. cinnamon. (Can use less sugar from 2/3 c. to 1 c.). Roll out other half of dough for top crust. Pinch edges together. Beat egg white until stiff; spread on top of the crust.


Bake at 400° (I use 375°) for 40 minutes. While hot, drizzle glaze (1 c. powdered sugar, 2 T. lemon juice or water and 1/2 tsp. vanilla) over the top. 

### Apple Bundt Cake

by Lorie Ploehn, Alpha

1 1/2 c. corn oil  
2 c. sugar  
3 eggs  
2 tsp. vanilla  
Mix well and add: 3 c. flour  
1 tsp. baking soda  
1 tsp salt  
1 tsp. cinnamon  
1/2 tsp. nutmeg


Beat well and add 3 c. chopped apples.

Pour into a Bundt pan (sprayed with Pam) and bake at 325° for 1 hour and 20 minutes. Cool and store in refrigerator. Freezes well. 

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## Brown County Rural Electrical Association

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Website: [www.browncountyrea.coop](http://www.browncountyrea.coop)  
Phone: 507-794-3331 or 800-658-2368  
Office hours: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday

Mike Heidemann, Chief Executive Officer

### Board of Directors

James Mickelson, President — 794-6298  
William Berg, Vice President — 766-1497  
James D. Hanson, Sec.-Treasurer — 829-6756  
Brad Sprenger — 877-2633  
Allen Hanson — 276-0691  
Thomas Hayes — 228-8954  
Reuben Kokesch — 359-2112  
Greg Mages — 794-3540  
Joel Christensen — 828-4550  
The Board of Directors meets the last Thursday of each month.



**Mike Heidemann**  
Chief Executive  
Officer

# Staff notes

## Base charge increase on this month's bill

Our wholesale power supplier, Great River Energy (GRE), had a very good year in 2019 and will have excess margins again, like last year. GRE has adequate margins to meet their financial requirements and still have \$5 million to return to its 28 member co-ops. Brown County REA's share of that is a \$43,756 credit on our power bill. That credit, in turn, will be passed along to you, the members, reflected in your

Power Cost Adjustment (PCA) on your December bill due this month.

While GRE had a good year, unfortunately, Brown County REA did not. BCREA sales are down 27 percent from 2017. We are continually maintaining and replacing our distribution system and costs continue to rise whether or not sales increase accordingly. We work very hard to try to control these costs, but at its December meeting the Board of Directors approved a rate adjustment to generate additional annual revenue.

It has been four years since our last rate increase, except for a small change in the last quarter of 2019. Beginning with your bill for January usage, due in February, the monthly base charge for single-phase, three-phase and irrigation services will increase by \$10. An average residential bill is \$174 and will rise to \$184 per month, roughly 5.5 percent. Members in the large power rate class will see their energy charge rise from \$.067 per kilowatt hour to \$.077 per kilowatt hour. The average large power bill will increase \$150 per month. The large power monthly base charge of \$70 and demand charge of \$7.20 remain the same.

The Board and Staff have developed and reviewed the 2020 Budget throughout the last quarter of 2019 and are implementing many changes to keep costs down. This rate change is necessary for Brown County REA to meet the financial requirements to its lenders.

All of us at Brown County REA, appreciate you, our member-owners, and strive to provide you with safe, reliable electric service at the lowest possible cost consistent with sound business practices. ☺

# Board meeting highlights

The Brown County REA Board of Directors held its monthly board meeting on December 19, 2019, at the Brown County REA headquarters in Sleepy Eye.

Discussion and/or action were taken on the following agenda items:

- Reviewed and approved the cooperative's 2020 operating budget.
- Approved Troy Windschitl, Mike Schroepfer, Peter & Colleen Vachuska for District 2; Adam Suess, Joe Beranek, Travis & Ashley Sondag for District 3; Ryan & Chelsey Franta, Sheldon & Ann Rieke, Craig Wilson for District 8 as director candidate nominating committees for the 2020 elections.
- Approved the write off of \$4,052.30 in uncollectible electric bill balances.
- Discussed and approved to purchase Western Area Power Administration (WAPA) shortfall amounts through Great River Energy.
- Approved the Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action and Anti-Harassment Commitment policies as presented.

The Board will meet again on January 23, 2020, at the Brown County REA headquarters in Sleepy Eye. ☺

## Make an appointment for Community Health Day!

**Saturday, March 28, 2020 at the Sleepy Eye Public School Cafeteria**

- Time: 6:30 - 9:30 a.m. (last appointment time 9:15).
- \$50 Blood analysis: cholesterol, LDL/HDL, calcium, glucose, etc. Requires a 12-hour fast for best results.
- \$35 Thyroid Stimulating Hormone (TSH) screening
- Free blood pressure screenings.



For appointments call 800-658-2368 or 507-794-3331, Monday – Friday, 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Walk-ins accepted after 7:30 a.m. Community Health Day is a joint effort of Brown County REA, Brown County Public Health, Sleepy Eye Medical Center and Sleepy Eye Community Education. All are welcome. ☺