



Photos by Sarah Beal

HARD WORK • HIGH STANDARDS • PROUD JOURNEY MEN

Program prepares apprentice lineworkers to keep 13,000 miles of line and 144,000 meters safe and reliable

By Connie Juarez

DURING THE LAST several years, Gunnar Schwartz learned that a lineworker's job involves more than putting up poles and stringing wire.

"You learn how the control center and substations operate, which helps you see the bigger picture of how everything connects," Schwartz said. He and 11 other Bluebonnet apprentices learned how to build overhead and underground lines, troubleshoot and restore power during outages, maintain electrical equipment and install and repair meters.

Beyond the technical skills, the program emphasizes the importance of working with a team and building on

others' experience and strengths.

Schwartz, who is based in Giddings, is proud to have finished the program, but he is also aware of the expectations that come with the job.

"Now you're the one people look to for answers," the 30-year-old graduate said. "It's a good feeling, but it comes with more responsibility."

Schwartz and the other 11 apprentice lineworkers at Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative completed their training in 2025 and joined the co-op's experienced team of journeyman lineworkers. They work to ensure members have safe, reliable power across the cooperative's 3,800-square-mile service area.

Completing Bluebonnet's lineworker apprentice program requires 8,000 hours of on-the-job training and 672 hours of

technical instruction, typically requiring four years. Graduates earn certification from the U.S. Department of Labor and are prepared to handle a wide range of fieldwork.

Joining Schwartz in earning journeyman certification were Huston Burgess, Colton Harris, Cooper Lucherk, Thomas Medrano, Tanner Meuth, Darrin Ott, Ryan Smith, Terry Swonke, Brett Wellmann, Brent Westbrook and Trevor Williams.

Lucherk, Swonke, Wellmann and Williams began their careers as lineworker interns in 2021, completing a six-month training program before beginning the apprentice training.

Harris, who is based in Bastrop, said the apprentice program showed him the value of building on a team's strengths.

"There are things I'm not as good at as

others, and things I'm better at," he said. "It's all about working with people and understanding there are many ways to do things."

Working to restore power during ice storms gave Harris his most meaningful experiences on the job. "Seeing people's relief when the lights came back on — that's what makes it all worth it," he said.

Reaching journeyman status was important to Harris. "In my family, there's a long tradition of line work," he said. "It's exciting to reach this point, but the journey is just beginning. There is so much more to learn and accomplish."

Including the 2025 graduating class, 165 apprentices have completed Bluebonnet's lineworker program since it began in 2004.

Chad Weiss, operations superintendent in Brenham, said the apprentice

program provides a solid career path that is close to home.

"The majority of the candidates who take part in our program are from Bluebonnet's service area," Weiss said. "The program produces skilled, safety-driven, dependable lineworkers who take pride in their work. It's great to see them building a future in the same communities they're helping every day."

The Bluebonnet intern program, which started in 2018, provides six months of technical instruction in line work. To advance into the apprentice program, participants must also obtain power-pole climbing certification and a commercial driver's license.

To learn more about Bluebonnet's lineworker internship and apprenticeship programs, visit bluebonnet.coop/careers. ■

While some appliances have slimmed down, others still overindulge. Here's the truth about the current coursing through your home's devices.

APPLIANCE

HEROES VS. HOGS

By Sharon Jayson

Chris and Michelle Birnbaum live about 6 miles outside Giddings in Lee County with two adult children in the 2,000-square-foot "barndo-minium" home they built in 2015. The metal barn-style buildings are known for open floor plans, affordable construction costs and energy efficiency.

When it comes to appliance purchases for their four bedroom, two-and-a-half-bathroom home, Chris looks closely at how much electricity each appliance will use. "I look at Energy Star labels on everything we buy," he said, referring to the blue-and-white stickers on appliances that meet energy efficiency guidelines set by the federal government.

Most buyers look at an appliance's price, size, brand and performance before they factor in energy efficiency and features, according to Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative-area retailers and national consumer research groups.

Every appliance uses electricity. But some are energy hogs that eat more than their share of your electric bill. Others are electricity heroes that use less power or can help you cut your electric use.

Because our summers are hotter, Texas homes use at least 25% more electricity than the national average, according to a U.S. Energy Information Administration report. The biggest power hog in your house is the air-conditioning and heating, or HVAC, system. It's a pain in your wallet in the summer and a strain on the electric grid on winter's coldest days.

A typical 2,000-square-foot home uses an average of about 1,200 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per month. That amount of electricity costs about \$115 a month, or \$1,381 a year. That amount does not include additional charges that appear on the bill. Of that, an all-electric HVAC system can eat up an estimated 40% to 50% — from \$456 to \$690 — of that annual cost for electricity, according to consumer sites, state and federal sources, and other Texas utilities.

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What's the right way to load a dishwasher? When is the thermostat set too high? Experts weigh in on common household debates.

APPLIANCE ARGUMENTS



THE THERMOSTAT BATTLE

"It's too hot!"

"It's freezing in here!"

Experts say: Nobody wins completely — but you can find a middle ground.

The Department of Energy recommends 78°F when you're home in hot weather. Many homes find a compromise at 75-77°F, especially with newer HVAC systems.

Raise the thermostat gradually over a few days. Even 1-2 degrees can save noticeably on summer bills.

At night, lower the temperature only 2-3 degrees. Big drops just force the HVAC to run nonstop.

Keep the fan on Auto, not On. Running it constantly can add \$10-\$25 a month.

Smart thermostat rule: Program a schedule and resist constantly adjusting it. Used correctly, it can cut HVAC use by 10% or more.

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

Dishwasher wars, dryer dust-ups, fridge fusses and more appliance arguments online at bluebonnet.coop/appliances

AN ILLUSTRATED GUIDE TO YOUR HOME'S ENERGY HOGS AND HEROES, NEXT PAGE

WHAT'S EATING YOUR WATTS?

A GUIDE TO HOW MUCH ELECTRICITY YOUR APPLIANCES USE PER YEAR

Texas homes use more electricity than any other state, and the biggest power users are often the appliances that run the longest or cycle on and off all day. Older or poorly maintained appliances, especially those made before 2006, can use 30%–50% more electricity than newer energy-efficient models. This guide compares how much electricity common household devices use and what that means in annual cost for a typical Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative member.



THE BIGGEST ENERGY HOG

HVAC SYSTEM

(Heating, Ventilation & Air Conditioning)

On average, consumes up to **45%** of home's annual electricity use

In summer months, percent spikes to **50%-70%**

APPROXIMATE ANNUAL COST IN BLUEBONNET REGION

Old system with SEER* rating of 10: \$691

New system with SEER rating of 20: \$288

*SEER stands for *Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio*, the standard rating used to measure the cooling efficiency of air conditioners and heat pumps

Higher SEER number = more efficient = lower electricity use for the same cooling output



HUNGRY, HUNGRY POWER HOGS



ELECTRIC WATER HEATER

Old: 3,300–5,000 kWh
New: 3,000–4,500 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old unit: \$398
New unit: \$360



POOL PUMP

Old single-speed: 1,500–6,000 kWh
New variable-speed: 600–2,500 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old: \$360
New: \$148



CLOTHES DRYER

Old: 600–1,200 kWh
New: 250–600 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old: \$86
New: \$41



WINDOW AC UNIT

Old: 600–2,000 kWh
New: 300–900 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old: \$125
New: \$58



REFRIGERATOR/ FREEZER

Old: 450–1,400 kWh
New: 300–450 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old: \$89
New: \$36



CLOTHES WASHER

Old top-load: 200–400 kWh
New front-load: 50–130 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old: \$29
New: \$9



CEILING FAN

24/7: 657 kWh
8 hrs/day: 219 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old: \$63
New: \$21



ROBOT VACUUM

75 kWh

ANNUAL COST: \$7



MICROWAVE

Old: 91 kWh

New: 70 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old: \$9
New: \$7



SMART SPEAKER

Old: 15–30 kWh

New: 5–10 kWh

ANNUAL COST:
Old: \$2
New: \$1

WHAT IS A HEAT PUMP?

Appliance heat-pump technology moves heat instead of creating it. Unlike traditional appliances that generate heat with electric coils, those with heat pumps pull heat from the surrounding air and transfer it where it's needed. That makes them far more efficient — often using 50% or less electricity than standard appliances, whether heating water, drying clothes or cooling and heating a home.

SOMEWHAT PIGGY



TELEVISION

Old plasma/LCD: 200–600 kWh

New LED/LCD: 30–450 kWh

ANNUAL COST:

Cost 75": \$36

Cost 50": \$23



DISHWASHER

Old: 50–400 kWh

New: 200 kWh

ANNUAL COST:

Old: \$25

New: \$19



COOKTOP & OVEN

Coil/radiant cooktop: 250–500 kWh

Induction cooktop: ~200 kWh

Oven: 450–675 kWh

ANNUAL COST:

Old: \$65 New: \$34



DESKTOP GAMING PC

Old: 200–600 kWh

New: 60–250 kWh

ANNUAL COST:

Old: \$38

New: \$15



APPLIANCE INSIGHTS & TIPS

Appliances made in 2001 or earlier can use 40%–50% more electricity than new, more efficient models. Appliances that are more than 10 years old may use 28%–36% more electricity.

Seals, motors and insulation degrade over time, increasing electricity use.

Always-on devices continue to draw power: Refrigerators, pool pumps, desktop computers, gaming consoles, routers and digital displays.

Appliances with the greatest leaps in efficiency: HVAC systems, refrigerators, water heaters, pool pumps and dryers.

Worst in class: Old refrigerators and outdated HVAC systems (leaky ducts can cost hundreds annually).

The Department of Energy has a refrigerator-rating tool on energy.gov for year-by-year comparisons.

More tips: Texas PUC's Power to Save website, www.puc.texas.gov/waystosave.

Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration; U.S. Department of Energy; Energy Star; EPA; Lawrence Berkeley National Lab; EnergySage; NRDC; appliance manufacturers; consumer product testing; Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative residential rates.

* All annual power costs are approximate averages, calculated for Bluebonnet members

Infographic by Joe Stafford

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The energy efficiency of your system and house are big factors, especially during summer's triple-digit heat. Window AC units may be worse: An older, inefficient unit could use 1,300 kWh in just three hot Texas months. A newer energy-efficient window unit could use 30% to 50% less electricity.

Next on the list of power hogs are older swimming pool pumps, your home electric water heater, refrigerator/freezer, clothes dryer, range and oven, then the dishwasher. The clothes washer is ranked last, but its power use varies depending on the type of washer and its age. How often you use most of these appliances is another variable — except for the refrigerator/freezer, which is always running.

Replacing appliances such as old water heaters, refrigerators or single-speed pool pumps with newer, more energy-efficient versions can have a significant impact on your electricity costs.

Dryers, long considered high on the energy hog list, have improved in the last decade with sensors that control heat and cycle time, as well as some that have their own heat-pump technology. How often you use a dryer and the size of the loads you toss into it also impact the electric bill.

Then there are energy heroes. Some are familiar appliances like the microwave oven, which uses less than a third of the

SALES TAX HOLIDAY

In Texas, an energy-saving incentive is the three-day Energy Star sales tax holiday — scheduled for May 23-25 in 2026 — that lets shoppers buy many types of large appliances tax-free. Learn more at bit.ly/43qLtS7.

**THE FUTURE OF APPLIANCES**

From fridges that know what's inside to phone apps to control them, smart tech and AI are coming to home appliances. Find out more at bluebonnet.coop/appliances.

electricity of a standard oven for small meals, or a newer dishwasher, which can use less water and electricity than washing dishes by hand. The energy-saving mini-split style air conditioner/heater can replace a window AC unit. It costs less to operate and can circulate air efficiently even when it's not cooling or heating. The trusty ceiling fan, operated at a medium speed for about six hours a day, uses 150 to

200 kWh a year (about \$17). It cools you, not your room, and can help you save 10% of the electricity your HVAC would use.

Old energy hogs have slimmed down in recent years. A newer laptop uses less power than a desktop computer, and today's gaming consoles cost pennies when in standby mode, compared with their older "always-on" counterparts.

On the smaller side, the electric kettle is faster and more efficient than heating water on the stovetop, and a multicooker (the Instant Pot is a popular one) uses much less energy than the oven or stove, cooking slowly with less electricity.

Then there are energy-saving devices: A smart thermostat can reduce HVAC consumption by as much as 15%, switching to all-LED lighting can take a big bite out of your electric bill, and smart plugs and strips let you schedule or remotely turn off electronics or groups of plugged-in devices. ■

Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration (eia.gov); EIA Residential Energy Consumption Survey; energystar.gov; U.S. Department of Energy (energy.gov); federalregister.gov; bluebonnet.coop; consumerreports.org; Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory standby load studies; ecoflow.com; howstuffworks.com; energysage.com; airconditionerlab.com; consumer, manufacturer, retailer and utility websites

OFFICE CLOSINGS

Bluebonnet offices will be closed Monday, Feb. 16, for Presidents Day. Report power outages by texting OUT to 44141, online at bluebonnet.coop, on the MyBluebonnet mobile app or by calling

800-949-4414. You can pay your bills anytime online, on the mobile app or by calling 800-842-7708 (select Option 2 when prompted).

BUILDING BRIGHTER FUTURES

Bluebonnet academic and trade & technical scholarships for graduating high school seniors

Applications at bluebonnet.coop/scholarships
APPLICATION DEADLINE MARCH 6, 2026



Bluebonnet, LCRA provide grants to expand, improve area nonprofits

BLUEBONNET ELECTRIC Cooperative and the Lower Colorado River Authority recently provided grants to several community nonprofit organizations and projects within the cooperative's service area as part of LCRA's Community Grants program. Bluebonnet, one of LCRA's wholesale electric customers, partners with LCRA to support its members and communities. The next round of applications for community grants will be accepted in July 2026. For more information about this program and the application, visit lcra.org/grants.

TOP PHOTO: A \$50,000 grant will help the Rockne Community Recreation Center upgrade its community baseball field. The community grant, along with \$21,888 in matching funds from the recreation center, will be used to replace damaged wooden light poles and add energy-efficient LED lighting to increase safety. The center hosts a number of community leagues and events throughout the year. Pictured, from left, are Elizabeth Ehlers, LCRA regional affairs representative; Josh Thomas, Bluebonnet's Bastrop-area community representative; Matthew L. 'Matt' Arthur, LCRA board member; Roderick Emanuel, Bluebonnet Board Vice President/Vice Chairman; Melissa K. Blanding, LCRA board member; State Rep. Stan Gerdes; Marty Mercer Sr., recreation center president; Margaret D. 'Meg' Voelter, LCRA board member; Josh Almendarez, recreation center field commissioner; Paige Cox, recreation center vice president; Mark Mayo, LCRA board member; Al Bauer, recreation center member; Stacy Kazmir, recreation center secretary; and Gabriella Almendarez, recreation center treasurer.

MIDDLE PHOTO: A \$27,690 grant will help the Delhi Volunteer Fire Department build a concrete helicopter landing pad next to its station near Rosanky. This grant, along with \$7,386 in matching funds from the VFD, will pay for a 40-by-40-foot helipad with aviation lighting. The pad will give emergency transport helicopters a safe, permanent landing location. Pictured, seated, from left are Greg Guillot, David Reininger, Betty Platt and Joyce Rodgers, VFD supporters; Joyce Smith, EMT-B; and Rachael Guillot, VFD supporter. Standing, from left, are Joe Johnson and Cheryl Reininger, VFD supporters; Ray Rodgers, firefighter; Victor Bastien, VFD supporter; Eric Bastien, assistant chief; Cindy Woolley, treasurer and firefighter; Danney Rodgers, chief and EMT; Matthew L. 'Matt' Arthur, Margaret D. 'Meg' Voelter and Melissa K. Blanding, LCRA board members; Milton Shaw, Bluebonnet Board Director; Mark Mayo, LCRA board member; Jo Anna Gilland, Bluebonnet's Lockhart-area community representative; Josh Thomas, Bluebonnet's Bastrop-area community representative; Elizabeth Ehlers, LCRA regional affairs representative; and Roderick Emanuel, Bluebonnet Board Vice President/Vice Chairman.



ABOVE: A \$19,869 grant will help the Heart of the Pines Volunteer Fire Department, which serves the area between Bastrop and Buescher State Parks, purchase additional protective equipment to increase the number of firefighters who can safely respond to emergencies. This grant, along with \$5,159 in matching funds from the VFD, will equip four firefighters with gear such as special jackets, helmets and boots to fight wildland, vehicle and structure fires. Pictured, from left, are Kyle Ward, Mike Santucci and John R. Ertz, firefighters; Melissa K. Blanding, LCRA board member; State Rep. Stan Gerdes; Matthew L. 'Matt' Arthur and Margaret D. 'Meg' Voelter, LCRA board members; Debbi Goertz, Bluebonnet Board Director; Mark Mayo, LCRA board member; Elizabeth Ehlers, LCRA regional affairs representative; Roderick Emanuel, Bluebonnet Board Vice President/Vice Chairman; and Josh Thomas, Bluebonnet's Bastrop-area community representative.