



Monica Buie's new rule for her family; Keep the bill under \$300.

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# The Buies Are Believers

One family turns to Bluebonnet's Net Energy Market to lower its electric bill

By Janet Wilson  
Photos by Sarah Beal

**M**onica Buie gasped when she opened her electric bill in September 2009. “Three hundred and eighty dollars? Holy moly,” she remembers saying. “I couldn’t figure out how we had used that much electricity.”

That’s because the bill was for power her family had used weeks earlier. Had it been hotter than usual in August, the time the bill covered? She couldn’t remember, but it was an eye opener.

“I was determined never to see a bill like that again,” said Buie, administrative assistant at the University of Texas System audit office.

Buie became even more diligent about the household budget, constantly reminding her husband, Allen, and

sons John, 17, and Peyton, 13, to turn off the lights and television when not in use. Still, it was impossible to know how well they were doing until the monthly bill hit the mailbox.

Last summer, Buie got help from Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative, which supplies electricity to their 1,850 square-foot home north of McDade. The cooperative launched a new service on its website that allows members to track the amount of electricity they use each day, find out how much their bill is expected to be and what impact their energy use is having on the planet.

Called the Net Energy Market, the program is designed to help co-op members lower consumption and save money.

“Like the Buies, many Bluebonnet members have been surprised in the past by high electric bills they didn’t anticipate,” said Mark Rose, Bluebonnet’s chief executive office and general manager. “Not any more. The Net Energy Market gives our members the ability to check their accounts and make decisions about how and when to use energy.”

“Until this came out we didn’t pay a lot of attention until we got a high bill and then we’d go ‘Whoa, what are we doing?’” Buie said. “Now I check the website several times a week to see how much we are using.”

Her goal? Keep the monthly bill under \$300.

When no one is home, it costs about \$4.50 a day to power their house. When they are home, it’s about \$10 a day. Allen Buie washed five loads of laundry one day and the bill spiked to \$15.47.

“That adds up,” she said. “I check the website regularly now and tell the kids ‘This is what we have used so far,’ and if we are going to go over \$300, I tell them no more entertainment electricity. No TV or computers.

“We’ll read books. We’ll run the air conditioner or heater to be comfortable but nothing fun that uses electricity until we see the bill going back under \$300.”

Peyton said he and John took their mother’s threat seriously.

“Once Mom sets her mind to something she does not go back,” he said.

It worked: the family has stayed within budget, and the kids have not had their electricity privileges revoked.

Bluebonnet has more than 61,000 members in all or part of 14 counties that stretch from Travis County to Washington County and from Milam County to Gonzales County. About 4,000 have signed onto the web-based program.

“Feedback from our members has been great,” Rose said. “We will continue to add features to the Net Energy Market that will improve it and provide even more information for our members. For example, in the next few months our members will be able to check their energy use on an hourly basis.”

The Buies live on an 80-acre farm where Monica grew up. They have two dogs, three cats and nine guinea hens. They grow blackberries and pears. While they have never been energy hogs, they are always looking for ways to save.

An Energy Star-rated refrigerator, purchased through a state-sponsored rebate program, sits in the kitchen. An outdoor swimming pool is heated with solar panels. Allen Buie, an Austin Fire Department captain, programmed the pool pump to cycle on only at night.

They often cook meals outside in the summer so they don’t heat the house, and cook inside in the winter so they do. Monica Buie said Peyton and John, who attend Elgin Middle and High schools respectively, “have become our own personal electricity police. Both are now extremely conscientious about turning things off when they’re not being used.”

The Buies are believers.

“There is no excuse for not going in and monitoring your electric use,” Monica Buie said. “It’s our obligation to take care of the planet.”



Thanks to Bluebonnet’s Net Energy Market, the Buies watch their kilowatts. Opposite: Clockwise, from bottom left, Monica, Allen, John and Peyton Buie. Above: Peyton was the first to install low watt, energy-saving light bulbs. And he’s virtually religious about flipping off switches in unoccupied rooms.

## Want to save on your electric bills? Let Bluebonnet help.

All you need is access to a computer and the Internet. If you already pay your bills on Bluebonnet’s website, you’re set. If not, go to [bluebonnetelectric.coop](http://bluebonnetelectric.coop), go to “myAccount” at the upper right corner of the screen, click sign up and create a private password. You’ll need your account number and billing name to complete the sign-up process. Then you’ll be taken to the Net Energy Market page. Find details about your current electric use, your impact on the environment and energy saving tips. Sign up for alerts that warn you when your bill reaches a set amount and get advice about immediate steps to reduce your consumption.