



ECOLOGY NEWS

ACTION CENTER

Volume 26, Issue 2

Summer 2026

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Sunshine and Savings: Tips and Tricks to Keep Your Summer Bills Cool



The summer season is officially here, which means three months of warmth, sunshine, and apprehension before looking at the electricity bill. Summer is typically the most expensive time for energy bills; monthly usage increases due to air conditioning demand, and the electric rate also rises due to this increased demand. Ameren's summer rates for 2025 and 2026 especially have seen substantial increases. 2025's summer rate was set at 12.18 cents/kWh, almost 4 cents/kWh more than the previous spring rate. For 2026, the summer rate is set at 11.326 cents/kWh, almost 3 cents/kWh more than the spring rate. Compared to just five years ago, the 2021 summer rate was 4.821 cents/kWh, equivalent to a 135% increase for 2026's summer rate. These rate hikes are due to a variety of complex issues with electricity markets, such as decreased supply and projected demand increases from data centers and similar projects. But causes aside, higher electricity prices are here to stay for the for at least the near future. As frustrating as yet another cost increase is, residents can still take many steps, both small and large, to ease their energy burden and keep more money in their pockets this summer.

The Easy Steps

The cheapest energy is the energy you never use in the first place. Even with the heat that summer brings, there are still plenty of ways to reduce your energy needs. The most effective way is using passive cooling whenever possible; that is, keeping your home cool without the air conditioner. Passive cooling includes keeping your windows open at night (when weather allows), using black-out curtains during the day to keep heat from transferring through your windows, and avoiding using heat generating appliances such as the stove, oven, and dryer until nighttime, to avoid heating the home internally.

Sunshine and Savings Continued...

To address external heat, an easy and effective method is through shading. Awnings can be installed on south and west-facing windows to prevent sunlight from heating the home, and native trees can be planted in the yard as a natural source of shade. However, the most effective method of addressing external heat is preventing air leakage through the walls of the home. Air leakage can take place through unsealed gaps in the walls, and is worsened when a home lacks insulation. This causes comfort issues, along with raising your energy bills. If you're unsure whether your home is properly air sealed or insulated, schedule a BNEnergyBright energy audit at BNenergyBright.org.

Solar

If the cheapest energy is the energy you never use, then the next cheapest is energy you generate yourself. For homeowners, solar is a proven method to reduce your energy bills and gain energy independence. The EAC is now running a program to help make the cost of solar more accessible—Grow Solar Bloomington Normal is a group purchase initiative that utilizes bulk purchasing to help discount the price of solar for homeowners in McLean County. The more people that sign-up, the higher the discount becomes for everyone. This is on top of state and utility incentives to decrease the price. Once a solar system is on your roof, you will see immediate savings on your monthly energy bill. Once the system is paid off, you will no longer pay anything for a significant portion of your energy and realize substantial savings for the lifetime of the system. The EAC, in partnership with the Midwest Renewable Energy Association (MREA), has offered Grow Solar four times in past years, adding 1,178.5 kW of new solar on 95 homes and businesses in our community.

For more information about the program and its benefits, sign up for one of our upcoming Power Hours at growsolar.org/bn. Renters and homeowners with homes unsuitable for solar can sign up for our local community solar program instead, at bnenergybright.org/communitysolar.

Organic Waste and Methane Emissions

According to the EPA, landfills are the third-largest source of human-caused methane emissions after oil and gas (which are grouped together), and livestock.^{1,2} Illinois ranked 9th in Industrious Labs' analysis of states with the highest methane emissions from municipal landfills, which was published in 2023.¹ So, what's happening?

There are two categories of natural decomposition: aerobic and anaerobic, where aerobic involves oxygen and anaerobic does not.^{3,4} Natural aerobic decomposition of organic materials looks like fall leaves being gone by spring without human intervention, mold growing on old strawberries, decomposers eating roadkill, or fungi growing on fallen logs. Natural anaerobic decomposition occurs in the stomachs/digestive tracts of animals, in water bodies that don't have dissolved oxygen (waterlogged soil, ocean floors, deep lake sediment, etc.), and in environments where oxygen is unavailable.⁴

Organic Waste and Methane Emissions Continued...

When organic waste (which includes food scraps, yard waste, wood, and similar materials) is thrown in the trash, it gets taken to a landfill where items get buried under layers of other trash, thus limiting the oxygen supply. Here, the organic materials undergo anaerobic decomposition that produces a combination of approximately 50% methane and 50% carbon dioxide emissions. Aerobic decomposition, in contrast, produces primarily carbon dioxide gas.¹ The methane emissions are specifically harmful because it's global warming potential is roughly 80% higher than carbon dioxide over a 20-year timescale, making it a much more potent greenhouse gas. Methane has a relatively short atmospheric lifespan at 12 years, so reductions today can produce results within decades.^{2,5}

To reduce methane emissions, switch to composting organic materials instead of throwing them in the trash. In a compost bin, decomposers that need oxygen are able to break down the organic material and produce the nutrient-dense compost.^{3,4} In regard to emissions, the key difference between composting and landfiling is that proper composting does not produce the high levels of methane emissions.

There are three different versions of composting available to McLean County residents: backyard composting, vermicomposting, and community composting. Backyard composting is the most common form of at-home composting, and involves setting up a compost bin outdoors. As organic food waste is accumulated, it gets added to the compost pile along with dead leaves and yard trimmings. After food waste is added, the leaves and yard trimmings are used to cover the top. It is important to turn or "stir" backyard compost bins with a pitchfork-type tool so that oxygen is reaching all materials in the pile to allow for the aerobic decomposition. A vermicompost box utilizes worms, specifically composting worms. As they dig around and food is added, the worms create oxygen pockets and stir the compost, eliminating the need for humans to turn the pile like in backyard composting. Vermicompost bins with red wiggler worms are kept indoors in areas that will remain in temperatures between 60-77 degrees Fahrenheit. The community compost program does not require any at-home composting, instead, organic food waste is taken to either of two kiosk drop-off locations (Normandy Village in Bloomington, and A&B Hatchery in Normal). Compost collected at these drop-off bins are composted by Better Earth Logistics in Bartonville, Illinois.

For more information on composting, EAC's composting workshops, and to find out how you can start, visit CompostBN.org.

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2. Climate & Clean Air Coalition. "Methane | Climate & Clean Air Coalition." *Climate & Clean Air Coalition*, UNEP, www.ccacoalition.org/short-lived-climate-pollutants/methane.

3. "Aerobic Composting vs. Anaerobic Composting." *Moonshot Compost*, Moonshot Compost, www.moonshotcompost.com/blog/difference-between-aerobic-composting-vs-anaerobic-composting.

4. "Aerobic vs Anaerobic Decomposition." *ST Biologicals*, 27 Jan. 2026, stbiologicals.com/aerobic-vs-anaerobic-decomposition/.

5. ReFED. "1 the Methane Impact of Food Loss and Waste in the United States October 2024." *ReFED*, 2024, refed.org/uploads/refed-methane-report-final.pdf.

6. "The Problem with Organics in Landfills." *BPIWorld*, bpiworld.org/organics-in-landfills.

NPK, More Like Nutrient Pollution Kills

Gardening season is here, and many gardeners and homeowners are picking up their first bag of fertilizer for the year. However, that fertilizer is feeding more than just your plants; it is feeding pollution in our waterways.

If you've ever looked closely at a fertilizer label, you've probably noticed three numbers listed prominently on the front. Something like 10-10-10 or 12-4-8. These numbers represent the fertilizer's NPK value, which stands for Nitrogen (N), Phosphorus (P), and Potassium (K), three nutrients essential for plant health. A fertilizer labeled 10-10-10 means each nutrient makes up 10% of the package's total weight. Fertilizers are sold in different combinations, including products containing only one or two of the three nutrients, as soils and plants have different needs.¹

Many homeowners assume more fertilizing means healthier plants, but excess nutrients often wash away before plants can absorb them. When excess fertilizers run off lawns and gardens, excess nutrients enter local waterways through storm drains contributing to nutrient pollution. These excess nutrients cause eutrophication, fueling rapid algae growth that can form algal blooms reducing oxygen levels in the water which suffocates fish and other aquatic organisms. Some blooms also produce toxins that can make people and animals sick.²



EPA Social Media Graphic: Lawn Chemicals. Found at https://www.epa.gov/system/files/images/2022-10/Social%20Media_Lawn%20Chemicals_Final.png

Algal blooms are increasingly becoming an issue in McLean County, specifically for Bloomington and Hudson residents who pull drinking water from Lake Bloomington and Evergreen Lake. In fact, according to the Draft Lake Bloomington & Evergreen Lake Watershed Plan published in 2021, there is a high prevalence of nutrient pollution throughout these bodies of water. Both Money and Six Mile Creek (two streams which flow into Lake Bloomington and Evergreen Lake) have regularly exceeded the Illinois Nutrient Science Advisory Committee guidelines for nitrogen and phosphorus.³

1. Finkle, Anita. "What Do the NPK Numbers on My Fertilizer Package Mean?" Plant and Gardening FAQ, March 5, 2025. <https://libanswers.nybg.org/faq/222944>.

2. "Basic Information on Nutrient Pollution," Nutrient Pollution, April 2, 2026, <https://www.epa.gov/nutrientpollution/basic-information-nutrient-pollution>.

Nutrient Pollution Kills Continued...

Excess fertilizers don't only impact surface water sources, but also cause nutrient pollution to groundwater supplies like the Mahomet Aquifer, the drinking water source for the Town of Normal and many other communities. Excess nitrogen in groundwater can lead to elevated nitrate levels in drinking water supplies. This is especially dangerous for infants as it can lead to a condition called blue baby syndrome, which interferes with the blood's ability to carry oxygen throughout the body. Public water systems are routinely tested for nitrates, but homeowners with private wells are encouraged to have their water tested regularly.⁴

What YOU Can Do

Although agriculture contributes significantly to nutrient pollution, urban and suburban households are also sources of excess nutrients entering waterways. This is due to stormwater runoff caused by lawn chemical use, pet waste, decaying organic matter like leaves and grass clippings, and more.

Homeowners can help reduce nutrient pollution and protect local waterways by testing their soil before fertilizing and applying only the nutrients that are needed. To do this pick up a soil test kit from your local garden store or send a soil sample to a certified soil test lab (list can be found at extension.illinois.edu/soil/soil-test-homepage, (note that these do not normally test for nitrogen). Testing multiple locations or in areas where there are issues can be helpful to understand the full picture of your soil health. Follow the instructions from the lab or test kit to receive your results. Once you have the results of your soil test look for fertilizing options that contain only what your soil needs to thrive. If the results come back from your soil test kit showing a surplus, sufficient, or adequate amount of nitrogen or phosphorus—stop fertilizing. If your soil is deficient in phosphorus but not nitrogen (or vice versa) look for a fertilizer that only has the component your soil needs; better yet, skip the chemicals and fertilize with dried blood for added nitrogen or bone meal for added phosphorus. For those using a lab, test results will recommend the specific PKN value to use. Continue to test your soil every 3-5 years (every year for nitrogen) to understand trends and continued deficiencies in your yard.⁵

If choosing to use chemical fertilizers, it is recommended to apply smaller amounts of fertilizer frequently instead of applying large amounts all at once as plants can absorb nutrients more efficiently over time. Additionally, make sure to read and follow all instructions on the fertilizer label to keep you, others, and our local waterways safe. Understanding NPK values makes sure that you are feeding your plants and nothing else. To learn more about how you can keep our waterways clean visit mCLEANwater.org.

3. Draft Lake Bloomington & Evergreen Lake Watershed Plan , May 2021. <https://www.bloomingtonil.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/4567/636130888246430000>.

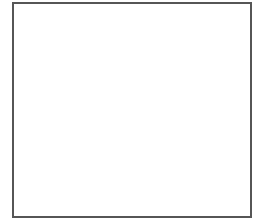
4. Beaudet, N., A. Otter, C. Karr, A. Perkins, and S. Sathyanarayana. *Nitrates, Blue Baby Syndrome, and Drinking Water: A Factsheet for Families*. Pediatric Environmental Health Specialty Unit, 2014. https://deohs.washington.edu/sites/default/files/documents/Nitrates_Blue_Baby_Syndrome_and_Drinking_Water_Community_Factsheet_Mar_2016.pdf

5. "Collecting Soil Samples for Testing." Purdue Extension, May 2018. <https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/HO/HO-71-W.pdf>.

6. Liza Ehle, "The ABCs of NPK: A Fertilizer Guide," Oregon State University Extension, June 2018, <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/em-9691-abcs-npk-fertilizer-guide>.



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