

AGRICULTURE

From blossom



...to bushel

Getting to the core of apple breeding in the Midwest

NANCY DEVAULT
Illinois Farm Bureau Partners

The Midwest Apple Improvement Association is a collaborative organization dedicated to developing new apple varieties specifically suited to the region's unique growing conditions. Founded by a small group of friendly, forward-thinking farmers in the mid-1990s, MAIA now boasts more than 1,100 members committed to combining traditional and modern breeding techniques with rigorous field testing for improved outcomes.

The process of developing new fruit varieties is both an art and a science. In 2009, Bill Dodd, a fourth-generation farmer who operates Hillcrest Orchards in Amherst, Ohio, assumed the role of MAIA president to champion its core mission.

"Our goal is to increase, per capita, consumption of apples," Dodd says. "That's not an easy task, as grocery aisles are full of other competitive commodities. Ultimately, we'd like to make apples so good that people choose them as the go-to snack — even over candy — because they're so delicious and healthy"

An MAIA member, test grower and fourth-generation farmer, Craig Tanner of Tanners Orchard in the north-central Illinois community of Speer values the organization's effort to create apples with superior taste, texture and disease resistance.

"It's important for the development of new varieties to continue, as consumer preferences have changed over the years and will continue to do so," Tanner says.

Please see APPLES, Page A2

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Craig Tanner, Tanners Orchard

COST OF LIVING

Natural gas rate hikes in pipeline

ICC to rule on Nicor, Ameren applications

ANDREW ADAMS
Capitol News Illinois

Customers across Illinois could face increased natural gas rates next year, based on proposed decisions in two proceedings before the Illinois Commerce Commission.

The regulatory agency, which oversees gas utilities, is considering two requests from Nicor Gas and Ameren Illinois. A five-member panel of commissioners, appointed by Gov. JB Pritzker, will make the final decision in the cases in November.

But administrative judges overseeing the cases have released proposed decisions which suggest cutting Nicor and Ameren's requests by about one third.

Nicor, which delivers natural gas to 2.3 million customers in northern and western Illinois, asked for a \$314 million rate increase in January — equivalent to about \$91.50 per year or a 9.21% increase for residential customers, according to the company.

Ameren, which has 800,000 customers throughout downstate Illinois, asked for a \$129 million increase in January, or about \$100 per year, or about a 13% increase for residential customers, according to the Citizens Utility Board, a consumer watchdog group.

The proposed decisions cut Nicor's request by \$109.8 million and Ameren's by about \$43.7 million, according to CUB. Ameren officials said the cuts bring the increase down to \$5.80 per month, or about \$70 per year for the typical customer. Nicor officials said the increase under the order would be about 5% to 6%.

"Even with the proposed increase, our distribution rates remain among the lowest of any major natural gas utility in Illinois and the total bill for an average residential customer under proposed rates continues to remain in line with the Consumer Price Index," Nicor spokesperson Jennifer Golz said in a statement.

Brad Kloeppel, Ameren's senior director of gas operations, defended his company's request for higher rates by saying the majority of the increased revenue will go toward safety upgrades and compliance with federally required safety testing.

"Fifty percent of the pipes on our system are over 50 years old," Kloeppel said. "We have to design, operate, maintain our system to provide gas service on the coldest hour of the coldest day."

Please see GAS, Page A2

ELECTIONS

Trump allies push for voter ID

JULIE CARR SMYTH
Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A documentary proof-of-citizenship requirement for voting in U.S. elections hasn't been able to pass Congress and has been blocked by the courts, so allies of President Donald Trump's administration are pursuing another avenue to try to impose the idea — asking a little-known federal agency to do it.

By a deadline earlier this week, the independent U.S. Election Assistance Commission received more than 380,000 public comments reacting to a petition to add the requirement. The proposal is being pushed by America First Legal, a conservative group co-founded by Stephen Miller, the Republican president's deputy chief of staff.

The group is asking the commission,

composed of two Republicans and two Democrats, to add the mandate to the federal voter registration form. It says requiring people to produce documents proving their citizenship is "essential to enhance the integrity and reliability of voter registration processes, ensuring that only eligible U.S. citizens are permitted to register and vote in federal elections." A group of Republican U.S. senators and representatives described it as "simple, common-sense reform," little different from showing ID to board an airplane or open a bank account.

Voting rights groups characterize such a requirement as unnecessary, cumbersome and a potential tool for voter disenfranchisement.

Please see VOTES, Page A2



CHRIS CARLSON, ASSOCIATED PRESS

A person arrives for a U.S. Election Assistance Commission Standards Board public meeting April 24 in Charlotte, N.C.