

Bethel College Mennonite Church Creation Care Committee
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Controlling Energy Costs
by Mindy Pennybacker

From the melting icescapes of the Arctic to islands and coastal cities threatened by rising seas, more and more of Earth's people are experiencing the harsh effects of global warming, caused in large part by combustion of fossil fuels. At the same time, weather-spiked fuel shortages and rising energy costs are giving us—and our wallets—the chills. Worldwide, record crude oil prices have set central banks on inflation alert and consumers on edge.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, home heating bills in the United States are likely to increase an unprecedented 50 percent, according to the Energy Information Administration; the average consumer could be paying \$1,700 more for home energy and gasoline. In Asia and Africa, rising oil prices have driven up the cost of bus rides and kerosene used for cooking. But consumers don't have to accept this sorry state of affairs. We can start saving both energy and money in small daily ways that add up to long-term reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Ultimately, our reduced demand for fossil fuels should exert downward pressure on prices.

Here are some ways to save on fossil fuels this winter:

- **Turn down the thermostat**, saving yourself 5 percent on heating costs for every degree lower between 16 and 21 degrees Celsius (60 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit). Install a programmable thermostat, timed to lower temperatures while you're out and raise them just before you return. Replace or clean your furnace filters monthly.
- **Avoid drafts**. Seal all holes, cracks, and gaps where air can escape, and keep your fireplace damper closed when not in use. Before adding any insulation, caulk and weatherstrip your home, paying particular attention to gaps where ducts pierce walls and around windows and doorways. Close vents and doors of vacant rooms.
- **Install energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs**. Start with your five most-used incandescent bulbs. Not only will you save money on your electric bill, but the compact fluorescent bulbs will last far longer and will easily pay for themselves many times over.
- **Launder clothes in cold water as much as possible**, and always use cold water to rinse. Hang wet items on a line or drying rack whenever you can. This can shave up to 9 percent from your energy bill, or \$162 annually for the average American family of four.
- **Install low-flow showerheads**. Not only will they reduce your water usage by as much as 76,000 liters (20,000 gallons) per year, but you can also save 10-16 percent on water heating costs, depending on the length and heat of your showers. Lower the temperature on your water heater and wrap the tank in an insulating jacket (leaving intake vent clear) to save even more.
- **Buy energy-efficient appliances**. When you're ready to replace major energy guzzlers such as your refrigerator (represents up to one-fifth of the average energy bill), clothes washer, air conditioner, or dishwasher, choose a model labeled with a high energy-efficiency grade. Look for a European Union rating of A++ or A+, the Energy Star label in the United States, or a variety of other labels worldwide. A good spin cycle on a washing machine uses 20 times less energy than a dryer.

- **Use power strips for home electronics and office machines.** Turn them off when not in use, and you'll prevent the loss of "standby" power from your equipment. Invest in a laptop, which uses as little as one-fifth the energy of a desktop computer, and be sure to activate its power-saving features.
- **Buy local food and eat low on the food chain.** Before it reaches your table, food is carried by fossil-fuel-burning trucks and airplanes an average of 2,400 kilometers (1,500 miles). It takes 10 kilograms of grain, conventionally grown with synthetic, petroleum-derived fertilizers and pesticides, to produce 1 kilogram of beef, Earthsave Canada estimates. Choose organic foods, which are largely free of these synthetics.
- **Invest in sweaters and blankets that will deliver lasting, off-the-grid warmth.** Seek out items made from untreated wool, organic cotton, alpaca, or post-consumer recycled polyester fleece. In the United States, suppliers include gaiam.com, lifekind.com, heartofvermont.com, abundantearth.com, indigeniousdesigns.com, patagonia.com, and lambandwool.com.
- **And finally, banish chilblains by snuggling up with a loved one.** Like all the best things in life, it's free.

For more information on energy savings, see greenpeace.org/international/campaigns/climate-change/take_action/12_steps and *The Green Guide issue 110*, at www.thegreenguide.com.

Mindy Pennybacker is *editor* of *The Green Guide*, published by the Green Guide Institute, which provides the research for this department.

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