

Americans burning corn to cut heating costs

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As US heating costs spiral to all-time highs, American homeowners are turning to burning corn in special stoves to reduce their energy bills.

Sales of corn-burning stoves have tripled this year and distributors across the country have been sold out for weeks.



"We are actually taking deposits for products for next fall - it's all you can do," said Ed Hiscox, owner of furnace retailer Hiscox Sales and Service in Valparaiso, Indiana, in the middle of the US cornbelt.

"We have customers from very high-end homes to people who are not really in any financial condition at all. It doesn't seem to make a difference - everyone has problems with gas prices."

Once relegated to farmhouses and cabins, corn-burning and more common wood-burning stoves began growing in popularity four years ago among environmentally-minded consumers interested in cheaper and renewable energy sources.

But the real run began this fall when natural gas prices doubled and hurricanes slashed refinery production in the Gulf Coast, causing prices of heating oil to jump.

With natural gas prices shooting to a record high Thursday and oil prices back above 60 dollars a barrel, corn -- the price of which steadily dropped this year -- has become downright cheap as a heating fuel.

That has meant a boom for sellers of efficient corn-burning stoves, with demand far outstripping supply, according to the largest US producer of the stoves.

"We've been sold out for almost six months," said Mike Haefner, president of Minnesota-based American Energy Systems. "We're going to be building eight times as much next year just to try to keep up, but we already have 50 percent of that sold."

Haefner said there were about 65,000 corn stoves sold in the US last year. He expects about 150,000 will be sold this year and at least 350,000 next year.

Even with a retail price of 1,600 to 3,000 dollars, the stoves often pay for themselves within a year or two.

"The savings are phenomenal," said Haefner.

Corn-generated heat costs less than a fifth of the current rate for propane and about a third of electrical heat, according to Haefner. Homeowners report savings of anywhere from 600 to 1,500 dollars a year, he said.

Because of the space needed to store the dried corn kernels burned in the stoves, they are more popular in rural communities and suburbs than in big cities.

But distribution systems are evolving and Haefner is confident the market will continue to expand.

"About five years ago we proved corn could be anywhere - we put a corn silo up in Takoma Park, Maryland and you can see our nation's capital from it," Haefner said. "These things are popping up all over the country."

Turkey farmer Rick Undesser doesn't have to go far to get corn for his stove.

"We grow our own corn so it's kind of handy to have," Undesser told AFP in a recent interview at his Bristol, Illinois farm. "It starts real easy and it keeps us real warm."

Undesser bought the corn stove about three years ago to help cut down on his propane bills for his sprawling 3,500 square foot home.

The fact that it looks great next to his handcrafted furniture and hunting trophies is just a bonus.