

Fearing Heat Costs, Many Take Preventive Action



With soaring energy prices, many people are turning to stoves to heat their homes. Kent Severns installed one at Rose Froese's home in Alaska.

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By PAM BELLUCK and SARAH KERSHAW

BOSTON, Oct. 10 - The price of energy has soared so high that Carol Paige has all but given up dancing.

It was a favorite hobby, twice a week at clubs in Worcester, Mass., almost a 50-mile drive from her home. For Ms. Paige, the drive is now a luxury. She is worried about a more basic need: heating her home. In the face of the surging cost of natural gas and home heating oil, Ms. Paige, a 60-year-old social worker who lives alone, has made other cutbacks, too.

She cut out the monitoring system for her burglar alarm, cancelled her garbage pickup and takes her trash to the dump herself, and plans to discontinue her Internet service.

And last week, fearful of a heating oil bill that could soar to \$1,500 this winter from about \$1,000 last year, Ms. Paige had a wood stove insert installed in her living-room fireplace at her home in Ashburnham, about 50 miles northwest of Boston. She plans to cut wood for the stove herself from trees on her property and from leftovers at nearby logging sites.

"I have a little electric chain saw," Ms. Paige said. "I'm just trying to keep this house going."

Sentiments like that are being echoed from Maine to Alaska as people, already grappling to keep up with the rising price of gasoline, have been further stunned by predictions of the skyrocketing cost of staying warm this winter.

People who heat their homes with natural gas will pay an average of 46 percent more this winter, with costs in some regions, like the Midwest, expected to be as high as 71 percent more, according to forecasts issued last month by the Department of Energy. Heating oil costs are expected to go up an average of 31 percent. And those figures were released before Hurricane Katrina made the situation worse.

More Expensive Heat

Natural gas and heating oil prices are expected to be much higher this winter than they were last winter.

Projected average price increase, winter 2004 to winter 2005

REGION	NATURAL GAS	HEATING OIL
Northeast	38%	32%
South	49	29
Midwest	57	32
West	30	27
Nation	46	31



Source: Energy Information Administration

Now, people across the country, as well as state and local governments and school districts, are scrambling to respond. Some are turning away from gas and oil, buying wood stoves, wood-pellet stoves, even corn-burning stoves. Others are replacing windows, buying carpets, adding insulation. Some are rushing to invest in alternative energies like solar, geothermal or biodiesel. And many are tightening their budgets.

"We're going to rob Peter to pay Paul," said Steven Posey, 37, an executive recruiter from Glenwood, Ill. Mr. Posey's family usually goes to Disney World or some other southern vacation spot in January, but not this winter. He and his wife, who have a 7-year-old son and a newborn girl, also said they would not give each other Christmas gifts and would cut nonessentials like their cable television package and video rental membership.

"When it comes down to it," Mr. Posey said, "we'll pay our heat, but something else is going to go unpaid."

That is not to say that everyone is in a fuel frenzy. Energy Department officials say fuel prices shot up because of Hurricane Katrina but will eventually come down. Some people, though, are changing energy sources because the sluggish response to the hurricane has raised questions about whether they can rely on things like oil and gas in an emergency.

Even though crude oil prices dropped slightly last week, officials in Washington are concerned. The energy secretary, Samuel W. Bodman, started a national conservation tour last week at a suburban Boston home-improvement store, demonstrating with Gov. Mitt Romney ways to conserve energy.

Guy Lamoureaux is doing a little bit of everything to save money. He bought a pellet stove for his home, an old farmhouse in Westminster, Mass. Mr. Lamoureaux, 27, said he had also installed new windows and insulation because "all my house had for insulation was newspapers from 1912." And for his 30-mile drive to his job at a grocery store, he swapped his gas-guzzling pickup truck for a used Ford Escort.

A poll conducted in late September for the National Oilheat Research Alliance, a consortium of oil companies, found that 28 percent of respondents planned to take steps this winter to better conserve energy, like installing new insulation, thermostats and furnaces or turning to stoves. Nearly a third said energy costs would cause them to cut back on holiday gifts and dining out.

Low- and middle-income families are not the only ones feeling the squeeze. In Wayland, a well-off suburb of Boston, Energy Unlimited has been seeing a deluge of customers wanting wood or pellet stoves, said Dave Paillier, who works in sales and marketing.

"I would call it borderline panic," Mr. Paillier said. "A lot of people here have very large houses, and big sometimes equals cathedral ceilings or other things that are very hungry in terms of energy. I think a lot of people who look affluent might have bought the biggest house they could afford, and the sticker shock with the gas bills or oil bills can be more than they counted on."

That is what happened to Erik Stauber, a professor of veterinary medicine. Two years ago, he built a 4,000-square-foot dream house in Genesee, Idaho, with a vaulted ceiling, an atrium and 11 skylights. During the first winter there, Mr. Stauber, 69, said he and his wife were "shellshocked" that it cost \$2,500 to heat their home with propane, so last year they switched to a wood-burning stove.

Their costs dropped to \$1,000, but only one area of the house got warm enough to sleep in, and the labor of hauling and splitting the wood compelled them to switch two weeks ago to an electric-powered geothermal system, which draws heat from well water.

State officials, however, worry the most about low-income consumers, like Mary White, a single mother of three in the Dorchester section of Boston who is on disability because of a brain tumor. Ms. White, 47, a former utility company employee, received fuel assistance last year but still owes the gas company about \$1,800.

Ms. White said she feared that her heat would get shut off because she would not be able to pay the bill, let alone keep up with rising fuel costs. To save gas, she tries not to cook, feeding her children mostly food like peanut butter sandwiches.

"I'm really scared," Ms. White said. "I pray for another day of warm weather."

John Wells, who runs the fuel assistance program at Action for Boston Community Development, said the maximum benefit of \$609 would not even fill

an oil tank and, in a state where winter runs through April, would not last most customers past early February. His agency will install free solar-powered systems in some homes.

John Drew, the agency's vice president, said, "This is the most dangerous winter I've seen, and I was here during OPEC," referring to the oil embargo of the 1970's.

Governors of 28 states have asked for nearly \$1.3 billion in additional money for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. Eight Midwestern states have started an energy conservation campaign. Some Massachusetts officials have called for making bulk purchases of heating oil or removing sales tax on insulation and energy-efficient furnaces.

Some schools are turning down thermostats, limiting bus service or hiring energy consultants. In Council, Idaho, the schools expect to halve their \$10,000 monthly heating bill with a new system that runs on wood chips produced when state crews thin trees along the highways. Last month, Gov. Sonny Perdue of Georgia closed the schools for two days because school buses were running out of diesel fuel.

In Marengo, Iowa, the county courthouse remains closed on Mondays to give its gas boilers an extra day off, and employees work four 10-hour days. In Marshalltown, Iowa, officials have traded traffic lights for stop signs at six intersections.



Don Magelitz sells corn stoves and has a backlog of 200 orders.

Some people are considering more drastic environmental changes like solar panels, wind turbines or straw insulation. The Northeast Sustainable Energy Association has had higher-than-usual attendance on tours of "green" homes from Delaware to Maine, said Anissa Sanborn, a program manager for the group.

Jack May of Canaan, Maine, recently bought a pellet stove and is considering solar power. "I'm not an environmentalist from the word go," Mr. May said. "I want to look at my bottom line."

"It was either give it to the oil company, \$4,000 a year, or buy a wood stove and have something to show for it after two years," he said.

Some suppliers of the stoves and the pellets and wood they burn are running out of inventory or hiring extra employees to meet the demand. In Walla Walla, Wash., Chris Neufeld, vice president of Blaze King Industries-USA, said his company had a backlog worth \$1 million for stoves that cost about \$2,000 apiece.

In Waverly, Ill., Don Magelitz, who sells corn stoves, is more than eight weeks behind on deliveries and has a backlog of 200 orders.

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Consumer groups and some retailers warn that stoves are not for everyone, because they require money up front and take effort to use. But Ellen Berman, president of the Consumer Energy Council of America, said that when these or other conservation steps were chosen appropriately, people might find that "if they spend \$50 today, they'll reap hundreds or thousands in the future."

That is what Mauricio Luzzi of Bayshore, N.Y., is counting on. Mr. Luzzi found a wood stove for \$300 on Craigslist last week, and he plans to burn wood scraps from his handyman business and search for downed trees along the roads he travels to construction sites.

"Give me the wood, I'll chop it up, I'll haul it off," Mr. Luzzi said. "We all know it's hurting everything. You raise the price of fuel, and everything goes up."

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Pam Belluck reported from Boston for this article, and Sarah Kershaw from Seattle.

Correction: Oct. 13, 2005, Thursday:

A credit was omitted on Tuesday with an article about efforts by homeowners to prepare for higher heating bills. Reporting was contributed by L. D. Kirshenbaum in Seattle, Colin Moynihan in New York, Gretchen Ruethling in Chicago and Katie Zezima in Boston.