

Fuel Bills Steep? Burn Corn

Renewable Energy No Pipe Dream

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Mike TaRose owns a three-story duplex in St. Paul, Minn. In his basement sits a natural gas-fed boiler that supplies radiant heat throughout the structure. TaRose, however, doesn't use the radiators to heat the second floor -- his dwelling space. Instead, he has a corn stove. "We were thinking about having children, and I wanted to reduce my carbon footprint," said TaRose, a public television employee.

Corn Stove?

A corn stove? A thing that burns corn? Exactly. It's a freestanding unit (some fit into fireplaces, others are simply boilers). TaRose installed it last year before his daughter, Suki, was born. He says he wanted the second floor to be toasty at all times during the endless Minnesota winter -- for Suki's sake. "When you have a kid, you're not going to put (the thermostat) down to 55," he said. "You're going to have it at 70 degrees. Even a little warmer sometimes." TaRose says the corn stove allows him to turn the heat up without spending a fortune. The stove, which burns feed corn, cost him about \$2,500. With corn at about \$4 per bushel, TaRose figures it'll take about four years before the unit pays for itself. Right now, he says he pays \$50 per month for natural gas, and about \$100 for corn. That adds up to \$150. If he were just heating with natural gas, his monthly bill would be double that -- \$300. But for TaRose, it's not really about the money. It's all about not burning fossil fuels.

Negative Footprint

"By the time summer comes around, the (grown) corn that I buy will have eaten the carbon dioxide that I put out the year before," he said. "So you really get a negative CO2 footprint." But are there negatives to burning corn? Well, some say it can be a lot of work. Each day, TaRose has to fill up the stove and clean out ash -- much like maintaining a fireplace. In short, you don't just jiggle a thermostat and the heat comes on. But TaRose says it's not a big deal: "It's a daily maintenance. I get off my butt and go downstairs to the garage (where he stores his kernels) and bring up about 60 pounds of corn in about two buckets." He said it then takes him about a minute to fill the hopper and clean out the ash.

"It kind of gives me a good feeling to know that I'm trying to use a renewable energy source," said John Lindenfelsler. He's the dealer who not only sold TaRose his corn stove, but also has one that heats his basement.

Corn Futures

Lindenfelser, who lives in Northfield, Minn., has been selling corn stoves since 2001. He's also in the business of delivering corn to homes around the area. Although prices are rising, Lindenfelsler figures corn will have to hit \$8 per bushel before burning it doesn't make sense. "Unfortunately, corn has gone up quite a bit the past few years," Lindenfelsler said. "I never thought I'd see it go to \$5, but that's what they're talking about this spring." Lindenfelsler said when he first started delivering corn, he trucked out about 1,200 bushels per year to his customers. That total has since grown to 8,000 bushels per year. The corn-burning business, however, seems to have its limits. Lindenfelsler said it isn't the only answer to energy independence. "There's simply not enough corn to heat everyone's home," the native Minnesotan said. "I feel the future is going to take a lot of different energy sources to meet our demands. There are no easy answers." No easy answers, but at least consumers like TaRose feel like they're doing something positive. "I'm not an environmentalist," TaRose declared. "I just want to help clean up a place that I helped pollute for my kids. That's it."