Cut Electric Bills—and Help the Environment Too

Electric bills in Illinois have risen sharply since January 2007. Much of the increase has been related to the end of a ten-year freeze on electric rates. The new rates reflect the higher costs to utility companies —Commonwealth Edison here in the Chicago area—in purchasing electricity and delivering it to our homes. During the dog days of summer, electric bills jump still higher as energy-intensive air conditioners are switched on.

Two programs offered by ComEd can help consumers reduce those bills—and can yield important environmental benefits as well.

Both programs promote lower electrical consumption during times of peak demand on the system. This helps reduce the need to draw electricity from "peaker plants"—natural-gas-fired generators that provide power during peak periods when base load nuclear power plants cannot meet demand. Not only are natural-gas-burning plants more expensive sources of electricity, they also generate more greenhouse gases and require substantial water resources to operate.

Real-Time Pricing

All ComEd residential customers now have the option to participate in the Residential Real-Time Pricing (RRTP) Program. Ordinarily, consumers pay a fixed price per kilowatt-hour (kWh) of electricity, no matter what time of day they use the power. But in fact, electricity prices fluctuate widely throughout the day. With real-time pricing, the rate the consumer pays varies from hour to hour according to the actual price of electricity on the wholesale market at the time the power is used.

Most of the time, the hourly prices are lower than the standard, fixed-price residential rate (roughly seven cents/kWh, not including distribution and other charges). But during summer months, especially on steamy weekday afternoons, prices can soar.

RRTP participants can save money by changing their usage habits. During peak periods when the price is high, they can shift the use of high-demand appliances (e.g., dishwashers, laundry machines) to times when prices are low and cut back on other high-energy appliances like air conditioners. By shifting and curtailing their electrical consumption, consumers help reduce demand during peak periods so less electricity has to be generated.

Customers enrolling in the program receive a new meter, which records usage in 30-minute intervals. A $2.25 monthly fee is assessed for the more sophisticated meter. Program participants are notified in advance (via email, text message, or automated phone message) when prices are expected to be higher than a pre-determined threshold level (e.g., 13 cents/kWh). They can also check the current real-time price and get day-ahead projections online anytime at www.theWattSpot.com.

Central Air Conditioning Cycling

Homeowners with central air conditioning can earn credits on their summer electrical bills by enrolling in Central AC Cycling. This program allows ComEd to cycle air conditioning compressors on and off during heavy-demand summer days—an estimated 10 to 15 weekdays/year. The air conditioner fan will stay on to circulate already cooled air and help keep the home comfortable.

There are two program options for AC Cycling participants, both of which can take effect weekdays from 11:00 am to 8:00 pm, excluding holidays.

- With the 50% option, the compressor unit will cycle off a maximum of 15 minutes every half hour during the hours of the program. In return, the homeowner earns a guaranteed credit of $5/month from June 1 through September 30, for a total annual credit of $20.

- With the 100% option, the unit will cycle off for one continuous three-hour period during the hours of the program. The homeowner earns a credit of $10/month from June 1 through September 30, for a total annual credit of $40.

For more information and to sign up for the Real Time Pricing Program, visit www.theWattSpot.com. For information about AC Cycling—and other energy-saving ComEd programs—visit the Smart Ideas website, www.comed.com/smartideas/.

More Ways to Cut Electric Bills

The single most effective method for reducing electric bills—all year round—is to use less electricity. Here are several ways to realize significant savings.

Lighting. Heed the many articles touting the benefits of switching to compact fluorescent lights. A typical CFL uses about one-quarter of the electricity used by an incandescent bulb. And, since incandescent bulbs waste 90 percent of their energy as heat, switching to CFLs will help keep the house cooler, too.

Cooling. Raise the A/C thermostat setting a few degrees and use fans to increase comfort. Turn off the fan when no one is in the room! (A fan doesn't cool a room; it moves the air, making people *in the room* feel more comfortable.) Use a programmable thermostat to adjust the setting when no one is home during the day. Close window shades during the day. Open windows when it cools off at night.

Vampires. Use a power strip to shut off electrical devices with "instant on" features—TVs, VCRs, and DVD players that consume electricity even when not actively being used.

Insulation. Seal leaks and add insulation to keep hot, humid air from seeping into the house during summer months.

Appliances. Replace any older (pre-1993) refrigerator. (And don't just move it to the basement!) Use a microwave or toaster oven when cooking small amounts.

Online Resources for Additional Information

The Rocky Mountain Institute (www.rmi.org/) has put together a series of nine practical guides (nc.rmi.org/Page.aspx?pid=217&srcid=217) describing what homeowners can do to save energy. Topics include lighting (No. 2), cleaning appliances (No. 6), and kitchen appliances (No. 8).

The Energy Star program identifies and promotes energy-efficient products and appliances. Its website (www.energystar.gov/index.cfm?fuseaction=find_a_product.) provides information about more than 50 categories of products and appliances eligible for the ENERGY STAR label.