

Home Heating Will Wear Out Wallets

by Broderick Perkins

As sure as year-end holiday decorations hit the stores before Halloween, the annual home heating fuel cost forecast will put a damper on season's greetings.

The U.S. Energy Department's (DOE) 2007-2008 "Short Term Energy and Winter Fuels Outlook is bleak thanks to both colder weather, than last year and record high fuel costs.

Without the cooperation of Mother Nature and oil barons, conservation, weatherization and other fuel saving techniques will be key to saving on heating costs this heating season.

Overall, when the four most common types of central heating were considered -- oil, natural gas, propane and electricity -- the DOE said the average cost of heating homes during the heating season will rise nearly \$90 or 10 percent this winter compared with last year.

Households warmed with heating oil will really get burned. The average heating oil bill is expected to rise by a whopping \$319 this heating season, compared to last year. That's an increase of nearly 22 percent and a lot of holiday cheer going up the flue.

US sweet crude reached a record high of \$84.05 a barrel last week and later fell back a bit, but remained above \$80 a barrel. Low surplus production, weak inventories, and strong worldwide demand are contributing to recent high crude oil prices, which are expected to fall to the \$70 a barrel range later in the heating season.

According to the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) most recent projection of heating degree days, winter in the Lower 48 is forecast to be 4 percent colder compared with last winter, even though it will also be 2 percent warmer than the 30-year average (1971 to 2000).

The average propane heating bill will rise by \$221, a 16.3 percent increase. For those heating with natural gas, the average heating bill will expand by \$78 or 9.5 percent. The average electric heat bill will rise only \$32 this season, an increase of 3.9 percent, according to the DOE.

Nationwide, most homes are heated with natural gas, followed by electricity, heating oil and then propane. The data does not account for wood-burning, pellet-fired or other bio-fueled heating or other alternatives, which, when properly installed and used can provide some savings over more traditional fuels.

Regionally, the South will see the greatest spike in heating oil expenditures -- up 26.2 percent. Natural gas spending will be up most in the Midwest where bills will swell by an average 11.4 percent. The Northeast gets the largest increase in electric heat bills, 7.1 percent as well as extra propane heating costs, up 21.0 percent, according to the DOE.

So poor a hot steaming mug of mulled cider and ward off the chill with these home heating tips from the Comfort Institute and DOE.

- Seal duct leaks. The DOE says the typical duct system loses 25 to 40 percent of the energy put out by the central furnace, heat pump or air conditioner. That puts a strain on your wallet as well as comfort levels in your home. Heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) contractors can diagnose and pinpoint duct leak locations and check the static pressure in your ducts and ventilation system. The exam is often part of an energy audit used to also examine insulation, air leaks and other energy inefficiencies in your home.

- Consider a new furnace or HVAC system. If you are rethinking that move due to the soft housing market, plow some of your equity into an HVAC improvement. Newer more efficient systems coupled with sealed ducts, better home insulation, weatherized windows and doors, programmable thermostats and other steps to tighten your home, can remove uneven heating and cooling patterns and cost less to operate. A new unit and overhauled duct and ventilation system may shock your budget over the short term but provide a payback in energy cost savings and increased home value over the long run.

More and more home buyers are energy conscious and want homes that are energy efficient. And don't forget, your upfront costs may not be as much as you think. There are some federal energy tax credits available for certain work that improves your home's energy efficiency. Check your local utility and government for other incentives to improve energy efficiency.

- Consider using a humidifier. The additional moisture will increase the heat index inside your home making 68 degrees Fahrenheit feel like 76 degrees. Place a portable unit in frequently used areas such as the bedroom or living room. The relative humidity in your home should be between 20 to 40 percent.
- Don't neglect maintenance on your furnace or HVAC. Get a checkup of your heating system to make sure it's performing efficiently and safely. Clean or replace your system's air filter regularly as instructed by your manual.
- Insulate to the max. Missing insulation can also cause discomfoting cold spots in your home. Especially add insulation in attics, rooms adjacent to attics, and next to or over garages. Your contractor can perform an infra-red camera scan to find cold spots and inspect insulation levels. Hollow wall cavities behind sheet rock also need internal attention. Forget external insulation.
- Manually close off rooms, closets and shut doors to unused spaces or consider installing a thermostat-controlled damper system to automatically open and close dampers.
- Turn down the thermostat. Don't freeze yourself out of your home, but the lower the thermostat, the lower your bill. Install an automatic thermostat that will keep itself lowered to a preprogrammed level.
- Do the math, check your zoning regulations, and fuel availability, but consider alternative fuel and energy sources including solar and new bio fuel heating appliances. Saving energy and reducing your carbon footprint is a good deal for you and the planet.
- Let the sun shine in. You don't need solar panels to take advantage of the sun's heat radiation. Raise the blinds and open the shades on south- and west-facing windows to fill your home with warmth during the day.

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