Prepare for a warm and energy-efficient winter

This time last year, Americans in two dozen states from the Midwest to the Southeast and Northeast experienced bone-chilling temperatures courtesy of a distorted polar vortex. Much of the United States plunged into a deep freeze from record low temperatures.

Like me, I'm sure you had to pay higher energy bills due to this unwelcome visitor. All of us felt the “sticker shock” with our January 2014 energy bills.

November 2014 also brought some unusual cold temperatures our way. We quickly went from summer to winter in a short time.

The choices we make about how we use energy — turning machines off when we’re not using them or choosing to buy energy efficient appliances — impact our environment and our lives. There are many things we can do to use less energy and use it more wisely. These things involve energy conservation and energy efficiency.

What you do now can have a huge impact on your electricity bill and how well your home will be overall prepared to face the season challenges. The more you do about energy efficiency, the better.

The Alabama Municipal Electric Authority (AMEA) is not only committed to providing for our Member communities a reliable and economical source of electric power, we are also committed to helping our Members’ customers with low-cost strategies that can reduce your home energy bill year round. In fact, we provide many energy-efficiency tips and resources for you on our web site, www.amea.com, Energy Efficiency.

Here are some general tips on how to make your home energy efficient for the cold months to come. Think about what your home can use and go for it.

- Reduce heating and cooling needs by investing in insulation and weatherization products. Warm air leaking into your home in summer and out of your home in winter can waste a lot of energy. Insulation wraps your house in a nice warm blanket, but air can still leak in or out through small cracks. Often the effect of small leaks is the same as keeping a door wide open. One of the easiest money-saving measures you can do is caulk, seal, and weather-strip all the cracks to the outside. You can save 10 percent or more on your energy bill by stopping the air leaks in your home.
- About one-third of a typical home’s heat loss occurs through the doors and windows. Energy-efficient doors are insulated and seal tightly to prevent air from leaking through or around them. If your doors are in good shape and you don’t want to replace them, make sure they seal tightly and have door sweeps at the bottom to prevent air leaks. Installing insulated storm doors provides an additional barrier to leaking air. Most homes have many more windows than doors. Replacing older windows with new energy-efficient ones can reduce air leaks and utility bills. The best windows shut tightly and are constructed of two or more pieces of glass separated by a gas that does not conduct heat well. If you cannot replace older windows, there are several things you can do to make them more energy efficient. First, caulk any cracks around the windows and make sure they seal tightly. Add storm windows or sheets of clear plastic to the outside to create additional air barriers. You can also hang insulated drapes on the inside — during the winter, open them on sunny days and close them at night. During the summer, close them during the day to keep out the sun.
- Appliances account for about 20 percent of a typical household’s energy use, with refrigerators, clothes washers and dryers at the top of the list. When shopping for new appliances, you should think of two price tags. The first one is the purchase price. The second price tag is the cost of operating the appliance during its lifetime. You’ll be paying that second price tag on your utility bill every month for the next 10 to 20 years, depending on the appliance. Many energy-efficient appliances cost more to buy, but save money in lower energy costs. Over the life of an appliance, an energy-efficient model is always a better deal. When you shop for a new appliance, look for the ENERGY STAR label — your assurance that the product saves energy. ENERGY STAR appliances have been identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Energy as the most energy-efficient products in their classes.
- Water heating is the third largest energy expense in your home. It typically accounts for about 14 percent of your utility bill. Heated water is used for showers, baths, laundry, dishwashing and general cleaning. There are four ways to cut your water heating bills—use less hot water, turn down the thermostat on your water heater, insulate your water heater and pipes, and buy a new, more efficient water heater. You have the power to control your energy bill. By consuming electricity wisely in your home or business, you become part of the solution to cope with higher energy costs. I wish you a very happy 2015!

Fred Clark
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