

A million ways to conserve energy? So why don't we?

11 May 2009 Lynn Jones

"There must be a million ways to save energy, but let's start with a hundred." So says a poster for the Second Annual Energy Conservation Week being held in Ontario May 17 to 23.

Ho hum. Haven't we been hearing about and promoting energy conservation on and off for years now? And while it is true that there are many ways to save energy (and reasons to do so) here in Ontario we seem to have been going in the opposite direction for the last few decades - acquiring new ways to "spend" electricity with electric garage door openers, rice cookers, wine coolers, patio heaters, leaf blowers, paper shredders, pencil sharpeners, cell phone and iPod chargers, large flat screen televisions, computers, printers and so on.

We've been getting better at spending electricity with appliances too. Shop for a new appliance and you will see mostly bigger and fancier refrigerators, washers, dryers and stoves with the occasional smaller, Energy Star model tucked away in the corner. Then there are air conditioners - one of the biggest electricity guzzlers of all. In recent years "central air" has been added to many homes, and truckloads of room-sized air conditioners are snapped up at the first onset of hot weather each spring.

Air conditioners use an enormous amount of electricity, so much that they have shifted the occurrence of peak electricity demand from winter to summer in Ontario. When I was a kid, nobody's home or car was air conditioned. We used fans, or rolled down the windows. Now we artificially cool our indoor environments and create large quantities of greenhouse gases and other pollutants in the process.

Per capita electricity consumption has been steadily rising all over the world in recent decades. Here in Canada, we are among the largest per capita electricity consumers in the world.

Swimming against this tide is possible. There are brave pioneers who have shown that it is possible to survive quite nicely on far less electricity than most households now use. But for the time being, serious energy conservation is practiced by a very small minority of Ontario households.

For anyone new to energy conservation, there are countless ways to do it. Just type "top 10 ways to save energy" into Google and you will come up with 15 million results (really). Or you can check out the Energy Conservation Week website (<http://www.energyconservationweek.ca/>) for 100 suggestions. This list includes a wide range of possible actions from the no-cost items like "hang my clothes outside to dry" and "turn off lights when not in use" all the way up to "Install a solar hot water heater," a big ticket item requiring a lot of effort and expense.

Solar hot water heaters are a good thing! Widespread use of solar domestic hot water heaters could save a lot of electricity in Ontario. Water heating accounts for one-fifth of the electricity bill in many households. Traditional hot water tank systems are wasteful and inefficient. Solar systems are readily available and can save about half of the energy used to heat water for a typical family of four each year.

Homeowners interested in finding out about solar hot water heating are invited to attend a free information session co-sponsored by the Ottawa River Institute in Renfrew on May 25th at 7pm. The venue is the Renfrew Public Library. Financial incentives for installing a solar hot water heater will be covered in the workshop and are also clearly explained on the website GoSolarOntario.ca.

So yes, there are lots of ways to save energy. And solar domestic hot water heating is worth a serious look for those with the time and financial resources to consider it. But the truth is, most people don't really get interested in energy conservation until electricity starts to cost a lot of money. That's what we observed in 2002 when electricity prices in Ontario spiked as a result of the short-lived deregulation experiment. Ottawa River Institute was just starting out back then and our first few energy conservation workshops were full to capacity. When price caps were brought back in, attendance rapidly dwindled.

Experience in the State of California also bears this out. According to the Washington Post (February 17, 2007), California has held its per capita energy consumption essentially constant since 1974, while energy use per person for the United States overall has jumped 50 percent. A combination of aggressive energy conservation measures and sound government policies are responsible. The high price of electricity in California is one of the main drivers for the widespread adoption of conservation measures there. The per kilowatt hour price in California is more than double the price in wasteful states such as Alabama that consume much more electricity per capita. The per kilowatt hour price in Ontario is comparable to that in the most wasteful states.

The price we pay for electricity in Ontario is low partly because we are not paying the full cost of our energy consumption choices. For example, health care costs resulting from power plant smog and other forms of pollution are not included, nor are the costs of looking after high level nuclear waste for generations to come.

It is too bad that despite some really urgent reasons to consume less energy, most of us in Ontario don't take it very seriously. Higher prices for electricity in the future will make us all a lot more interested in conservation. Until then, it's a hard sell.

Lynn Jones is a member of the Ottawa River Institute a non-profit charitable organization based in the Upper Ottawa Valley. ORI is supported by the Ontario Trillium Foundation, local donors and volunteers.