

Energy Steps to Take for a Less Pricey Winter

Last winter's "Snowmageddon" is not expected to do a repeat performance on the East Coast this year. That's the good news for anyone who pays their own heating bills. But the bad news is that most fuel rates have risen.

The resulting bottom line is this: Most people will pay roughly the same amount for heat this winter as they did last winter, the Energy Department predicted on Tuesday. The average household heating costs between October 1 and March 31 will be \$962, the Department said. That's just \$11 more than last year's total.

As usual, people in the Northeast and who use oil or propane to heat their homes will pay the most. The average winter heating bill for oil customers there will be \$2,225 this year, up 14.5 percent from last year, the department said in its latest projections. Northeastern propane customers will pay the most: some \$2,685 between October 1 and March 31.

There are ways to minimize that, and here are a few:

Make Small Improvements

Homeowners have until December 31 to winterize their homes and get tax credits for it, the IRS has said. Items like high-efficiency heaters, water heaters and stoves all qualify for a 30 percent tax credit, up to \$1,500. The catch is that the \$1,500 ceiling is for 2009 and 2010 combined. If you used it up last year, you're done.

Make Big Improvements

There is a second tax credit that expires at the end of this year. You can also take a 30 percent tax credit if you install a solar electric system, hot water heater, geothermal pump, wind turbine or fuel-cell system. There's no cap on that credit, so it could be a good time to make a long-term investment in saving energy.

Call Your Utility

Many local utilities also offer deals that can cut heating bills. Some give away free programmable thermostats or offer home energy audits. Others offer discounts and rebates on efficient heaters and other appliances.

Get a Space Heater and Use It

Keep your house cool, and use the space heater in the room you're hanging out in. Annual savings? \$1,023 if you use electric heat, according to the energy-saving calculator at MichaelBlueJay.com, a website that offers electricity-savings advice.

Consider Switching Suppliers

Enter your zip code at WhiteFence.com to see if there is another energy supplier in your area that charges less, or would cost less overall.

Finally, Make All of Those Tried-and-True Little Moves

Use heavy curtains or shades, close them at night and open them in the morning. Keep the house cool and wear sweaters. Seal windows and doors. Close off rooms not being used. Program the thermostat, or remember to turn it down when you go to bed and when you leave the house in the morning.

Pay Your Heating Bill With a Cash-Back Credit Card

If you are going to spend \$1,000 this year, you might as well squeeze an extra \$10 out of it for yourself. That assumes your card offers a 1 percent bonus, and that you pay off your card every month. You can use that \$10 to buy some nice hot cocoa, sip it while you daydream about spring, and see if it warms you up.

By: Linda Stern, Yahoo Finance