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Home-heating forecast Relief is on the way for some winter heating bills

Although the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) recently announced a cut in oil production of 1.2 million barrels per day, the November report from the federal Energy Information Administration (EIA) contains encouraging news for many U.S. consumers. For the 2006-2007 winter, the cost of heating a home with natural gas is expected to decrease almost 9 percent from 2005-2006. The nationwide outlook for other fuels is not as upbeat. The costs of electricity (about 9 percent), heating oil (approximately 6 percent), and propane (at least 1 percent) are all expected to rise this winter over last.

How much you'll actually spend to heat your home will be influenced by the weather in your area, and the fuel you use and its cost. Here's what to expect as winter approaches.

Weather. For the continental U.S., this winter is expected to be 6 percent colder than last year. Don't panic—that's still warmer than the average winter.

Natural gas. Fifty-eight percent of all households use natural gas as their primary heating fuel. Despite an expected increase in natural-gas consumption this winter, households in all regions will pay less for natural gas due to lower market prices. The average household using natural gas can expect to pay about \$85 less this winter, with an overall heating bill of \$860, down almost 9 percent from last year's average \$945.

Electricity. Thirty percent of U.S. households rely on electricity as their primary heating fuel. All regions can expect higher electricity bills due to increased consumption and prices. Nationwide, homeowners who heat with electricity can expect at least a 9 percent increase, paying an average \$853 compared with last year's \$781.

Heating oil. Only 7 percent of U.S. households depend on heating oil. In the Northeast, the location of the majority of oil-heating homes, the cost of heating will rise about 7 percent over last winter (\$1,554 vs. \$1,454). In the Midwest, prices will climb more than 8 percent (\$1,211 compared with \$1,116). "The OPEC cut [was] a little more than we predicted," says EIA senior economist Tancred Lidderdale.

Propane. Five percent of U.S. households use propane as their primary heating fuel. While households in the West and South can expect somewhat lower bills, the colder winter will bring a moderate increase for propane-using households in the Northeast and Midwest. Northeast households using propane will pay an average \$1,841 compared with last year's \$1,774. Those in the Midwest will pay an average \$1,340 this year compared with last year's \$1,275.

ENERGY-SAVING TIPS

You can cut your energy bill year-round by following these simple steps. An energy audit will reveal other ways to save. If your utility company does not offer free audits, try the do-it-yourself tool at www.homeenergysaver.fbi.gov.

Seal and insulate the duct system in your home. Leaks in supply and return ducts as well as in ducts running through unconditioned spaces can waste up to 40 percent of your heating and cooling dollars.

Check the thermostat. Lowering your thermostat 5° F. at night and 10° F. during the day when heating (or raising it an equal amount when cooling) can cut costs as much as 20 percent. Better yet, install a programmable thermostat that does this for you automatically.

If you're ready to replace your old thermostat, read "[Installing a Programmable Thermostat](#)" (available to [subscribers](#)). This illustrated story walks you through all the steps of this DIY project and provides a link to our energy-savings calculator.

Also, set your water heater at 120° F. minimum (or the low setting), which is hot enough for most needs. If the tank feels warm to the touch, consider wrapping it with conventional insulation or a blanket made for that purpose. To help maintain the temperature of heated water, insulate plumbing lines with pipe sleeves. With them, you can retain water temperature longer so that you don't have to let the faucet run for the hot water to arrive. (Another wise move: Replace a showerhead that's at least 10 years old with a low-flow fixture. You can slash the amount of hot water you use during a shower by half.)

Put out the fire. A conventional fireplace draws a small gale of heated air out of your home and sends it up the chimney—along with your energy dollars. When you use a conventional wood-burning fireplace, closing its glass doors can help to reduce the airflow up the chimney while still allowing you to see the fire. Many factory-built fireplace boxes have a combustion air-inlet assembly. If your fireplace doesn't have this feature, open a nearby window to minimize the loss of heated air from the rest of the home. When remodeling or building new, consider installing a direct-vent, sealed-combustion gas fireplace, particularly if you don't want to deal with firewood and ashes. It will also save on energy because some of these units have an energy efficiency of about 70 percent; look for one with an AFUE (annual fuel-utilization efficiency) rating.

Read the label. When you shop for a new appliance, look for the bright yellow EnergyGuide label. It provides an estimate of annual energy consumption and states the highest and lowest consumption figures for similar models.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more energy-saving advice, see "[20 free ways to save energy](#)," excerpted from "Complete Guide to

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