



# POWERLINES

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## Making Dollars and Sense of Energy Efficiency

**T**he term energy efficiency can cause confusion. Some see it as a way to a cleaner environment. Others see extra expense and inconvenience.

Sorting out those views gets even more complicated as technology gives us a dizzying array of choices for using electricity, from smart thermostats to varieties of lightbulbs.

The basic idea of energy efficiency is simple—use less energy to do the same amount of work, which can save you money on your electric bills.

Here's where it starts getting confusing. Sometimes you have to pay more for something that's considered energy-efficient. It costs more up front but actually saves money in the long run. That may sound illogical at first. Like the old phrase, "You have to spend money to make money." But it makes sense after you think about it for a minute—most money-making projects require an initial upfront investment, whether it's a factory or lemonade stand.

### Pay a little now, save a lot later.

From computers to major appliances, manufacturers are increasing the energy efficiency of their products. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Star-rated appliances can save you 10-50% of the energy required for standard models that don't receive the Energy Star sticker. Considering most major appliances last 10 years, those savings can stack up over time.

There's even more savings in store by replacing older appliances that weren't built with today's efficiency standards in mind. Improvements in refrigerators are cutting their energy use in half about every 15 years. So, if your fridge is more than 20 years old, replacing it with a new high-efficiency model



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could save you \$300 in operating costs over the next five years.

Smart power strips also show how spending now on efficiency can make money in the future. Keeping your phone charger and other electronic devices plugged in can consume electricity even after they're fully charged or not in use. A smart power strip cuts off the electricity once charging is complete. It costs about \$40, and depending on your electric rates and how much charging you do, it could save as much as \$40 a year on your electric bills, recovering your initial investment almost right away.

Another example of returns on energy-efficiency investments comes from the world of real estate. Realtors will be the first to tell you that energy efficiency sells houses. If you're in the market to sell, spending a little extra on insulation and energy-efficient appliances increases resale value.

### Save \$200 a year on lightbulbs.

Lightbulbs offer the most dramatic story of efficiency technology improvements. By spending \$5-\$10 on an LED lightbulb (compared to about \$1 for an old incandescent

lightbulb), you get a product that uses 75% less electricity and, incidentally, can last 20 years compared to about a year for an incandescent lightbulb. The U.S. Department of Energy estimates the average home could save more than \$200 a year by replacing incandescent lightbulbs with LEDs.

Maybe the best news of all is that as efficient products improve and gain popularity, they're not always more expensive. Many cheaper appliance models have similar annual operating costs compared with the pricier versions.

Two key tips for turning energy efficiency into dollars are to know what you want from your energy use and to do your homework. Products come with a wide range of features that cost extra and may actually be less efficient. Do you want a refrigerator that offers the best efficiency? Or do you want to pay more for a less-efficient model that has an ice dispenser in the door?

And ask for help. Your local electric co-op has energy experts who can tell you how to make the best use of electricity. To compare efficiency among appliances, look for the yellow Energy Guide label, which shows information like estimated annual operating costs. Explore the energy.gov website for online calculators and additional resources that can help you turn efficiency data into real savings on your energy bills.

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*Paul Wesslund writes on consumer and cooperative affairs for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, the national trade association representing more than 900 local electric cooperatives. From growing suburbs to remote farming communities, electric co-ops serve as engines of economic development for 42 million Americans across 56% of the nation's landscape.*

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# February Challenge: Save Energy This Month

Spring is just a month or so away. While you're waiting for warmer weather, challenge yourself and your family to spend the last month of winter saving energy, even though it might still be frosty outdoors.

Make February frugal by making a game out of saving energy. Challenge your children to compete with each other to form energy-saving habits and "catch" each other wasting energy.

Create a checklist for the contest and come up with a great prize for the winner. Some challenges include:

- Turning off the light every single time you leave a room.
- Unplugging appliances like the TV and computers at bedtime.
- Not leaving phone chargers plugged in when there's no phone attached.
- Switching off bathroom fans once the steam has cleared after a shower.
- Wearing sweaters and socks around the house so your family can set the thermostat a bit lower.
- Opening exterior doors only to enter and exit the building; not holding them open if you're not ready to walk through.

Games involving energy savings are a great way to teach children the value of energy and the senselessness of wasting it.



*First load of laundry after you clean the tub, wash whites only.*

## Wash Your Washer This Month

Staying home more often than usual means you're probably using your appliances nonstop. And that means you need to clean them more often.

Don't overlook the appliances that aren't in the kitchen.

It seems like your clothes washer would be a self-cleaning machine because it's used for cleaning. But the more you use it, the more it needs a good scrubbing to get rid of built-up detergent and ward off mold.

Here are a few pre-spring cleaning tips for the laundry room:

**Top-loading washers:** Built-up detergent and fabric softeners can clog the machine if you don't remove it regularly. To do that, remove the dispensers for those liquids and scrub them with soap, water and a non-scratch sponge. Then, fill the washer with hot water and add a cup of bleach. Let it sit for an hour before running a full wash cycle—with an empty tub. Then, fill it again, and this time add a cup of white vinegar and run a full wash cycle again. Finally, run a wash cycle with nothing but hot water.

For your first load of laundry after you clean the tub, wash whites only in case any residual bleach is still in the washer.

**Front-loading washers:** Get rid of mold and grime that get trapped in the door seal. Use a toothbrush and a solution of eight or nine cups of water and one cup of bleach to scrub the seal. Then, clean the tub the same way you would sanitize a top-loader, above.