

Find the winter energy thieves lurking on your property

As winter sets in, members often contact St. Croix Electric Cooperative with questions regarding how their energy use can increase from one month to the next when they think nothing has changed to warrant the increase.

SCEC Manager, Member Services and Products, Jerry Van Someren has worked at SCEC since 1991 and shares his list of top winter energy thieves. He points out, any time any of these items are plugged in and turned on, they are using electricity above and beyond a member's expectations.

"Number one and two: stock tank heaters and space heaters," Van Someren said. "Any plug-in heater, for that matter."

Van Someren recommends livestock owners install an insulated waterer, such as a Ritchie (or similar) livestock waterer. He also noted, the number of animals drinking out of the waterer will affect electrical use. The fewer number of animals drinking, the greater the electric consumption. Why? When a more animals are drinking, water entering the tank is refreshed with ground-temperature water (52 degrees). When only a few animals use the waterer, water has a chance to cool, which requires more electricity to keep the water from freezing.

Space heaters, while they are 100 percent efficient, still use extra electricity - to the tune of 1.5 kilowatts (kW), or nearly 15 cents, per hour.

"Do not use your oven or stove as a space heater. Not only is it unsafe, but electric ovens, obviously, use electricity while gas stoves give off carbon monoxide," Van Someren said. "If you have a space heater to warm up your bedroom, you might want to, instead, consider buying an electric blanket. Turn it on one hour before going to bed and then shut it off when you get into the bed. If necessary, add an extra blanket."

The third culprit on Van Someren's list is heat tape. Members should inspect their heat tape to ensure the thermostat is operating properly. Then, turn it off when it is no longer needed.

Van Someren also said engine heaters are the culprits behind some members' high-use calls. These heaters may lack thermostatic controls, therefore running the risk of operating 24 hours a day.

"Put engine heaters on a timer," he said. "The engine doesn't need to be heated all night long. Set the timer to have the heater turn on four to five hours prior to use."

Holiday Use

Speaking of timers: Members who do not already have their holiday lights on timers should plan to install one next year. Timers on lights - both indoor and outdoor - will ensure beautiful holiday displays while family and friends are awake, but reduce unnecessary energy consumption. If you use a timer to shut off holiday lights at midnight instead of leaving them on overnight and shutting them off before you go to work in the morning, you'll save a significant number of kilowatt-hours (not to mention extending the number of years the light strands are used).

Winter Use

Some members may not have stock tanks, space heaters, heat tape or engine heaters. But there are other things that can cause increased energy use.

"Check your furnace," Van Someren said. "If the fan is set to run continuously, it will use more electricity. Try using the 'auto' setting on the thermostat."

Did you know?

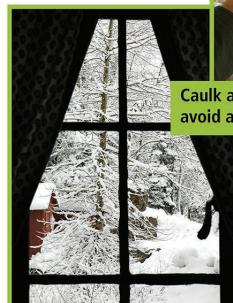
Heating your home accounts for up to 48 percent of your utility bill.

A few tips to help you save:

Clean or replace your furnace filter once a month (or as recommended).



Caulk and seal windows to avoid air leaks.



Keep draperies and shades open during the day and closed at night.



Visit www.energy.gov for more ways to save!

Space heaters are responsible for 32 percent of house fires, according to the National Fire Protection Association.



- * Place your space heater on a level, non-flammable surface.
- * Make sure your space heater has an auto shutoff function.
- * Never pair your space heater with an extension cord.
- * Never leave a space heater unattended when in use.
- * Purchase space heaters that are cool to the touch.



Members with programmable thermostats should program them to turn on to a comfortable setting about 30 minutes before everyone is scheduled to get home or wake up in the morning. A recommended winter setting is 68 degrees. At night and when the house is vacant, the thermostat can be programmed to a lower temperature.

Finally, Van Someren recommends members check their lighting and entertainment use. Shorter days mean lights are on longer. Also, the cold weather and school year may mean families are spending more time inside watching TV, playing games, or using computers, laptops or tablets. By making sure everything in a room is turned off or unplugged when no one is around, electrical use can be reduced.

Members with additional questions regarding their electricity use can contact Detective Van Someren at 715-796-7000.