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Beware of devices that “save energy”

As energy costs increase, so does the availability of energy saving devices of all types. While many products do save energy, an alarming number of items of little or no value are flooding the market and legitimate products are being sold with grossly exaggerated claims.

We can only assume that, in a severe energy shortage, claims will become more exaggerated, even more worthless devices will be readied for the marketplace, and illegal sales practices will increase sharply.



It pays to be sensitive to these problems when you're buying. Some things to watch for:

► In the world of energy saving devices, probably the best area to find worthless products is in “gas-savers.” Many of these devices and additives have been tested by the Environmental Protection Agency, yet at this writing only two have been shown to increase mileage.

If you're not a garage tinkerer, you'd be wise to stick to tried and true gas economy measures — regular tune-ups, adequate tire pressure, alternative transportation, and sometimes, car replacement. (For a fact sheet on EPA test results and guidelines for assessing “gas-savers,” write FTC Consumer Education Off., Washington, D.C. 20580.)

► Watch for exaggerated claims among home conservation devices. For instance, furnace flue dampers can be of some value, but one company claims a 27% reduction in heating bills. Their literature also implies a DOE Endorsement!

Federal agencies do not endorse any brand product.

► Make sure conservation devices

you buy conform to local codes. An indoor clothes dryer vent, for instance, can certainly save some heating costs by venting the dryer into a heated laundry room, but many vent manufacturers do not warn that the devices violate building codes in many areas.

► Insulation is a good investment, but be aware of some potential pitfalls. Urea formaldehyde foam has been under scrutiny by various federal and state consumer protection and health departments. Not only are there discouraging health problems associated with it, but after shrinkage (which can occur even when it's properly mixed and installed) and the resulting loss of efficiency, the product becomes a very expensive conservation measure. Experts are still hammering out just how much effectiveness is lost through shrinkage.

Perlite (ceramic) insulation is also under study. One company claims an R-value of 70 for three inches of the product — much higher than cheaper products at this depth. Many companies that inflate claims this much say that standard insulation test methods do not apply. In other words, a “special test” is required to substantiate high R-value claims. Under the Federal Trade Commission's new insulation rule, this company's R-70 claim would not be measurable by prescribed test methods.



► Though there are many effective products in the solar retrofit market, study carefully before you buy. Two things make the solar area ripe for fraud — large tax credits (up to 70% in Colorado, for example), and simple lack of knowledge on the part of consumers. State energy offices and extension services can be a good source of unbiased solar information, as is the National Solar Heating and Cooling Information Center (call toll free 800/462-4983; in Alaska and Hawaii 800/5234700).

► Several fuel oil “rip-offs” have come to light. One is ticket switching, in which the consumer is given a bill for more fuel than he actually receives. Another is overcharging consumers with a dual pipe. Unscrupulous dealers insert an extra tube into the main pipe, enabling the fuel to be registered on the meter, but the second pipe diverts 7-8% of the fuel back to the truck.

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