



National Energy
Board

Office national
de l'énergie

ENERGY BRIEF

DECEMBER 2009

BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDES SHAPE ENERGY USE

Energy use, its associated costs and its impacts on the environment are all areas of great interest to Canadian consumers. As a result of an increased demand for a “greener” and more sustainable lifestyle, Canadians are starting to adapt their behaviour patterns accordingly.

Statistics indicate that in times of growth, consumers are still drawn to purchasing energy-using devices and taking part in more energy intensive activities.



These actions are at odds with the goals of energy conservation.

In the past decade, as Canada’s economy grew, so did the demand for energy. At the same time, the voices of environmentally conscious Canadians were being heard more loudly than ever before.

A mounting movement toward a greener economy has been noticed in every sector – from residential and commercial buildings to industry and transportation.

ENERGY CONSERVATION – THE POTENTIAL VERSUS THE REASONABLE

When asked, Canadians generally say they consider environmental protection to be a high priority. Surveys by Statistics Canada also suggest consumers do consider the impact of their purchasing decision on the environment.

This shift in attitude, along with growing economic concerns, could be behind the trend in 2008 towards the sale of fewer SUV/light trucks and more fuel efficient small cars.

Much of our existing infrastructure and equipment were built years or decades ago when energy use was not a design priority.

As a result, the demand for energy consumption is locked-in for years, if not decades. This does not mean that major opportunities don’t exist. For instance, energy service providers such as gas and utility companies are promoting new incentives to encourage energy conservation.

In recent years, following studies showing substantial potential for energy savings, several provinces launched conservation programs as a strategy for meeting the expected growth in demand.

Ontario’s four point plan includes a combination of energy demand management

and energy conservation, energy efficiency, fuel switching to more environmentally friendly sources, and on-site self-generation of electrical power.

The provinces’ push for a “culture of conservation” is supported by widespread public information. This ensures that every individual, institution and company is aware of the value, purpose, and goals of energy conservation.

In British Columbia’s 2007 Energy Plan, conservation measures will be used to meet 50 per cent of the province’s incremental electricity growth expected in the next 10 years.

Canada

MOTIVATION FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Statistics indicate that behaviour change toward energy has been more closely linked to our economic climate than to the price of energy.

The cost of gasoline over the last several years provides an interesting example of the price effect. Despite a 45 per cent price jump between 2002 and 2007, gasoline consumption actually increased.

However, when the recession became more severe, consumers showed that there is a limit as to how much they were willing to pay.

Given the rising price of gasoline and the belief that it is not likely to come down, consumers started to consider other forms of transportation, like public transit, carpooling and smaller vehicles.

New technology will open up new and cleaner options of energy supply. It will also reduce the impact of energy use.

One of the most accessible, effective, and lowest cost options for energy savings and lower environmental impact is simply an adjustment in individual attitude to energy use.

On a go forward basis, there is a lot of room left for behavioural changes in all sectors. Change is often motivated by energy prices; however, changing society values is also a powerful motivator for changing old habits.

BEHAVIOUR IS A FACTOR IN ALL SECTORS

The residential sector holds significant potential for individuals to change their energy consumption habits.

The Statistics Canada “Household and Environment” survey shows that Canadians already support the most basic energy conservation actions. For example, over 50 per cent of Canadians surveyed conserve energy by using low-flow shower heads and compact fluorescent light bulbs, and by recycling and lowering the thermostat.

In a business or an industrial environment, changing behaviour is more complicated.

Improved efficiency often starts through the endorsement of an energy conservation plan by management. The next steps include a proper set of measurements and monitoring of ongoing energy use, along with the development of manageable targets.

The growing popularity of green buildings is another area where priorities have shifted. Being able to offer living or working space in a green building could be an incentive to attract and retain employees and tenants. It can also be a way to improve productivity while reducing absenteeism caused by environment related illnesses.

The increasing participation of companies in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting is an indication of a shift in society.

Although not fully related to energy use, CSR has a broad sustainability mandate that includes energy efficiency, energy conservation, and renewable energy. CSR allows for a credible, transparent process for monitoring and reporting sustainability.

Business and industry have been incorporating into their day to day activities the attitudes which are normally associated with individual behaviour – a shift which has been driven by stakeholder and public expectations.

