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Utilities Champion Conservation to Blunt Growing Demand

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RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

The heat wave that's been baking the Midwest may soon descend upon the East Coast, and that could mean residents trying to stay cool will use more power. Electric utilities from throughout the country are looking for ways to reduce demand for power. Over the long term, they're hoping to cut costs and the production of greenhouse gases.

NPR's Scott Horsley reports.

SCOTT HORSLEY reporting:

Cooler temperatures west of the Rockies have kept the nation's overall electric meter from spinning towards the all-time record set a couple of weeks ago. But air conditioners are still working hard in the nation's midsection, where temperatures reached the century mark yesterday.

Deborah Sundin, of Minnesota-based Xcel Energy, urged customers to draw the blinds and put off running the dishwasher in anticipation of record electric demand.

Ms. DEBORAH SUNDIN (Xcel Energy): We have been talking to the media all day asking customers to voluntarily look at their use and conserve.

HORSLEY: Xcel and other utilities are also looking at ways to encourage more long-term energy savings. At a regulators conference in San Francisco yesterday, some two-dozen electric utilities signed on to what they call a national action plan for energy efficiency.

The plan was developed in cooperation with state regulators, the energy department, and the EPA. It's supposed to promote energy efficiency as a cheaper alternative to building new coal, gas, or nuclear power plants. Utilities' interest in that alternative have increased as fuel costs have gone up, and as power-saving technologies have gotten better.

Kateri Callahan of the Alliance to Save Energy says pilot programs in places like California show it's possible to reduce energy consumption without lowering people's standard of living.

Ms. KATERI CALLAHAN (Alliance to Save Energy): We're not asking people to sacrifice. We're not asking people to be uncomfortable. We're asking here is to stop the waste, if you will, and then employing new technologies. Switching incandescent bulbs to compact fluorescent light bulbs, for example. Those kinds of things will make a big difference in this country, and it can be done in way where our lifestyles are not impacted negatively.

HORSLEY: Still, many consumers need a push from their local utility to adopt energy saving practices. And until now, many utilities have been reluctant to push very hard. After all, as Xcel's Deborah Sundin says, that's like asking restaurants to tell dieting customers no dessert.

Ms. SUNDIN: Utilities - you know, we make money by selling power. You know, it's just a fact of life. And what the plan is trying to do is figure out how the utilities can win by encouraging their customers to conserve energy.

HORSLEY: That might mean changing the way utilities are regulated, so they could sell less power without having to worry about making less money.

The Alliance to Save Energy says if it works, the plan could save as much electricity as 40 new power plants would produce, and cut greenhouse gases by the equivalent by 35 million cars. The idea is to promote energy saving as year-round goal, not just something to do on the hottest days of the summer.

Scott Horsley, NPR News.

MONTAGNE: This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Renee Montagne.

DON GONYEA, host:

And I'm Don Gonyea.

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