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Efficiency: the Unloved Solution That Works

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In a way, the TV news producer was looking for the same thing we all are looking for. She was considering having me come on air to talk about our new cover story, "Why America Needs an Energy Diet." But she wanted to hear tips for the home that were unusual—something that people haven't heard before.

That's the thing about energy efficiency. We've heard before—time and again—that we could use a lot less electricity—but we keep using more.

If you want a measure of how unexcited the nation is about the idea of saving power, take a look at how we've spent our energy research and development budget over the past 30 years. An April 9 Congressional Research Service report (RS22858, not yet available online) says that from the U.S. Department of Energy's inception at the beginning of fiscal year 1978 through the current fiscal year, energy efficiency made up just 15 percent of the total energy R&D budget. The big spending was on nuclear, about 41 percent, and fossil fuels, about 25 percent, with about 16 percent for renewable energy. (Thanks to the office of GOP Rep. Roscoe Bartlett of Maryland for the numbers.)

Despite being on the short end of the funding stick, researchers at the national labs have done impressive work on energy efficiency. I talk about some of the work of the Oak Ridge team in the story, and the same can be said of the researchers at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, who are responsible for this home energy saver Web tool.

National laboratory researchers showed definitively, for example, that if ductwork is

constructed so that it's inside the "envelope" of a house—the living space instead of the attic or crawl space—the homeowner can save a quarter to a third on air conditioning or heating costs. And we all could save energy.

Now that's a research breakthrough, in a way, and one we have the technology to implement today. But it isn't being done, except by builders who are devoted to "green" construction. As the home builders association explains in my story, the industry would view any mandate as a burden.

This reminded me of the words of a leading energy efficiency scientist, Lee Schipper, who is now a visiting scholar working on transportation sector issues at the University of California-Berkeley. When I talked to him for my story, he said he remembers firsthand how contentious the notion of energy efficiency was in the 1970s, when he began his research. But what disturbs him the most is that he sees the same arguments replayed today—over compact fluorescent light bulbs, over appliance standards, over auto efficiency.

"To me, that's the story," he says. "We've been doing these scenarios and potentials for 35 years. The question is why are we still doing it?" Schipper has come to believe that the battle is ideological: "There is a fundamentally deep and disturbing opposition to the notion that things can change," he says.

I wonder also if it is just that Americans want, like that TV producer, to hear something we haven't heard before. Something that sounds a little bit more magical than turning off the lights we're not using or using bulbs that generate more light than heat. Something with a lot less upfront cost than insulation or new windows. Something that's a lot more fun and not heavy lifting.

Energy efficiency, conservation—they may work, but they don't make us feel we're solving the problem. Quite the contrary: They make us realize that we're part of the problem. And that's a painful reality that we've been avoiding for 30 years.

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