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## America's Untapped Energy Resource: Boosting Efficiency

By MICHAEL GRUNWALD Wednesday, Dec. 31, 2008



Lightbulbs in integrating spheres at the Electric Power Research Institute are tested for energy consumption and longevity  
Jeff Jacobson / Redux for TIME

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Change does seem to be coming. Obama was widely mocked for his tire-inflation comments, but he's still a true believer, calling efficiency "the cheapest, cleanest, fastest energy source." He is also surrounding himself with true believers, including primary rivals Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton and Bill Richardson, as well as his National Security Adviser, James Jones, whose last job was running the Chamber of Commerce's energy institute. Carol Browner, who will be Obama's White House climate czar, promoted aggressive efficiency standards for appliances when she ran the Environmental Protection Agency; Steven Chu, his nominee for energy secretary, hailed them in a recent speech, declaring that "I cannot impress upon you how important energy efficiency is." And Obama has pledged to cut 15% of all energy use by the Federal Government, the world's largest consumer; in December, he specifically promised to make public buildings more efficient and modernize the energy grid. "The stars are really aligned for efficiency," says Kateri Callahan, president of the Alliance to Save Energy. "I want to tamp down expectations, but I can't."

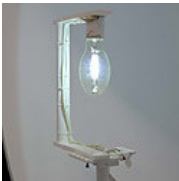
Something clearly is changing when companies like IBM, GM, Wal-Mart and Chevron run ads touting their energy-saving commitments, when cities, universities, supermarkets and hospitals race to reduce their carbon footprints. But the national debate has still focused on "drill, baby, drill," a fledgling renewables industry and a

much ballyhooed resurrection of nuclear power. So the near magical potential of efficiency raises an obvious question: If the experts consider it such a win-win no-brainer, why don't we already do more of it?

Part of the answer involves marketing; even superefficient motors, boilers, routers and compressors lack a wow factor, and politicians don't get to cut ribbons for efficiency tweaks. But most of the answer involves money.

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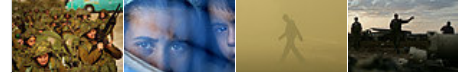
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Efficiency's growth has been stunted by perverse financial disincentives that we need to understand and untangle if we want to avoid a future of unaffordable new plants, catastrophic new emissions and dangerous dependence on dictatorial oil merchants. The recent collapse in oil prices has eroded the sense of emergency, but our economy, our security and our planet still need the ambulance. "A lot of simple answers are just sitting around waiting for us to execute," says Tom Reddoch, an efficiency expert at the Electric Power Research Institute (EPRI). "But the execution part isn't so simple."

### Wasting Our Energy

We complain about the cost of our energy, but we still throw away most of it. Our power plants, for example, waste enough energy to power Japan. Only 4% of the energy used to run a typical incandescent bulb produces light; the rest is frittered away as heat at the plant, over transmission lines or in the bulb itself, which is why you burn your fingers when you touch it. Our cars, water heaters and industrial motors are still embarrassingly inefficient compared with Japanese and European models.

Our new fridges, dryers and air conditioners are quite efficient, but most of us still use old ones, and even our new consumer electronics — the fastest-growing segment of power demand — slurp alarming quantities of juice. On a tour of EPRI's energy-efficiency lab in Knoxville, Tenn., Reddoch showed me how those inconspicuous set-top boxes on our televisions use half as much energy as refrigerators whether they're on or off. And video-game consoles devour two fridges' worth of electricity when your kids leave them on, which they probably do, because manufacturers ship them with the auto power-down disabled. "We're throwing money down the toilet," Reddoch says.

Experts have identified dozens of attractive targets for eliminating waste, from streetlights to servers. And with the Department of Energy predicting a 30% increase in power demand in America by 2030, the utilities that will supply the extra wattage are keenly aware that the cheapest new plant is the one they don't have to build. Duke Energy has proclaimed efficiency its "fifth fuel," unveiling ambitious plans to help its customers retrofit their homes and buildings and buy more efficient appliances and equipment. "We're really excited to get into this market," says Ted Schultz, Duke's vice president for energy efficiency. "We're ready to roll."

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