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The Right to Dry

Right now throughout North America many upstanding citizens, who are not prone to breaking the law, are performing acts of civil disobedience – they are drying their clothes on an outdoor clothesline!

In many jurisdictions legal line drying is often impossible because developments have banned clotheslines under longstanding ‘restrictive covenants’. Restrictive covenants were originally intended to protect homeowners by, for example, forbidding satellite dishes of a certain size, fixing cars on the street or keeping farm animals in the yard. Living in the middle of Fredericton, I’m very thankful for the latter! However, often the covenants date back decades when the people moving into these neighborhoods wanted convenience and a suburban lifestyle, during a time when hanging sheets and clothes out to dry was thought to be less affluent.

Now consumers and homeowners, motivated by environmental concerns and rising energy costs, are re-evaluating their drying habits. Clothes dryers, like sport utility vehicles, are grappling with an image problem. Once symbols of economic success, they are now morphing into icons of environmental disregard. And while we need them in our varied climate, dryers are the gas-guzzlers of household appliances. They are the third largest energy-consuming appliance in our house, after refrigerators and stoves, and consume more than six percent of household energy.

Clothes dryers work by heating the air and spinning the clothes within it. They cannot be made much more efficient, or at least no one has figured out how to do it yet. In fact, the United States Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) energy star system, intended to direct consumers to more efficient models, does not rate clothes dryers because they all use ‘similar’ amounts of energy. For more energy efficient clothes drying, the EPA recommends choosing a model that detects when clothes are dry and shuts off, or “air drying clothes on clotheslines or racks.” In Canada, the Natural Resources Canada - Office of Energy Efficiency’s EnerGuide rates dryers on a scale of most efficient (898 KWh/year) to least efficient (950 KWh/year). Evidence that energy efficiency is still eluding technology is evident in this very small gap in KWh per year between the most and least efficient dryers.

Many believe that amid growing concern about global warming, governments have a responsibility to protect citizens’ right to voluntarily conserve energy. Evidence of this came in April when the Premier of Ontario lifted the ban on outdoor clotheslines saying that they are environmentally irresponsible. In Ontario, like many provinces, outdoor clotheslines were banned under some municipal bylaws and contracts with homebuilders. The Ontario Energy Minister said using outdoor clotheslines instead of electric dryers can:

- Save consumers \$30 a year as dryer use would be reduced by 25 per cent;

- Cut greenhouse gas emissions, as five dryers produces about the same amount of emissions as an average-sized car; and
- Reduce demand on the power grid, as dryers use about 900 kilowatt hours of electricity a year.

Quickly thereafter, as part of Toronto Hydro's effort to cut peak demand, their 'Take a Load Off Toronto' campaign gave away 75,000 clotheslines to Toronto residents!

The revolution is spreading. The Mayor of Aurora, Ontario - who is a vocal supporter of citizens' 'right to dry' - said she is hearing from people in New Brunswick, Calgary, and Vancouver. "People feel that if you need legislation in order to hang a string and two hooks in your backyard, something is wrong."

So it seems the times they are a changin', and clotheslines are making a comeback. High-income or low-income, everyone can help reduce energy consumption by drying clothes outside. And as the energy conservation movement acquires momentum, the common clothesline is fast becoming a new kind of status symbol for the environmentally conscious!

Sonya Hull is project manager for Fredericton's Green Matters greenhouse gas reduction campaign. Check out www.greenmattersfredericton.ca for helpful household tips to reduce your energy and water consumption this summer!