

THE DENVER POST

Tuesday, July 22, 2003

Group pushing conservation to soften energy-price shock

By [Steve Raabe](#), Denver Post Business Writer

A Colorado energy-efficiency group Monday asked state officials to adopt aggressive conservation measures to help offset a "natural gas price shock" this winter.

The Boulder-based Southwest Energy Efficiency Project, or SWEEP, is asking Xcel Energy and two energy-related offices in the Colorado government to fund at least \$20 million a year for energy improvements that would save natural gas.

Prices for natural gas are running about three times higher than last year's level because of low storage levels and sluggish production. Energy analysts and utility officials are predicting that heating bills for Colorado residents could rise this winter by at least 60 percent and possibly double because of higher gas prices.

"Conservation is the most cost-efficient and intelligent way to save energy," said Larry Kinney, senior researcher for SWEEP. The advocacy group is a nonprofit organization funded by entities that include the U.S. Department of Energy, Hewlett Foundation and E-Star Colorado.

SWEEP's proposals, which it says could reduce natural gas use by 20 percent or more, include:

- Offering households and small businesses discounted energy audits that would show ways to save heat.
- Increasing funding for weatherizing low-income households.
- Offering low-interest loans to finance major energy retrofit projects in homes and businesses.
- Providing rebates for the purchase of high-efficiency furnaces, boilers, water heaters, clothes washers, dishwashers and programmable thermostats.
- Giving away low-cost conservation tools such as low-flow shower heads, faucet aerators and water-heater insulation wraps.

SWEEP said Xcel Energy, Colorado's largest utility, could develop and implement some of the programs, and recover the costs through a utility bill surcharge. Howard Geller, executive director of SWEEP, said he is attempting to encourage the Colorado Public Utilities Commission and the Governor's Office of Energy Management and Conservation to support the programs. The governor's energy office already conducts several conservation programs, including some proposed by SWEEP, a spokeswoman for the office said.

SWEEP's proposal got a cool response from Xcel Energy.

Fred Stoffel, Xcel's Denver-based vice president for policy development, said the utility is against a financing proposal that would spread conservation costs among all customers. "We think (conservation measures) are decisions that are best left to the customers who would benefit from them," Stoffel said.

He noted that under a regulatory agreement, Xcel is funding \$2.6 million a year in low-income weatherization improvements.

However, Stoffel noted that in Minnesota, Xcel designates a portion of its sales to fund both natural gas and electric conservation programs. "We are looking at trying to offer similar services and provide consistent policies (in Colorado and Minnesota)," Stoffel said.