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Unsafe Wood Stoves Routinely Overlooked During Energy Audits

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Energy audits have two primary goals: 1. Identify how a family can conserve energy and save money and 2. Identify important health and safety issues in the home. Often, the wood stove is overlooked in audits, even though it may be the primary heating appliance in the house and can be a major source of carbon monoxide and a leading cause of house fires.

“The Alliance for Green Heat believes it is scandalous that energy audits, particularly in rural, northern areas, do not address wood stoves like they address furnaces and boilers,” said John Ackerly, the group’s President. “Its time for energy auditors to expand their audits to address these health and safety issues in rural, low-income homes,” Ackerly said.

The Alliance for Green Heat is calling on the Building Performance Institute (BPI), NYSERDA and a number of state agencies to improve their energy audits. Most energy audits check for carbon monoxide leakage, but since blower door tests are also routinely done, auditors instruct homeowners not to have a fire in a wood stove or fireplace. This prevents the auditor from checking for elevated carbon monoxide leakage from the wood stove. Moreover, energy audit standards, such as those set by BPI, do not include checking whether a wood stove is EPA certified or whether gaskets are missing. And, there is no accepted criterion for auditors that would signal when a wood stove is a “health and safety issue” and should be replaced.

The result is that wood stoves far past their lifespan are not being replaced at nearly the same rate as old and unsafe furnaces and boilers, even when they are the primary or a substantial secondary heat source.

In response to requests from energy auditing companies who wanted to better market themselves in rural areas, the Alliance for Green Heat developed an Energy Auditor Checklist for Wood Stoves. Now the Alliance is using that Checklist as a practical tool to show federal and state officials how and why assessing wood stoves should be a vital part of an energy audit. The Energy Auditor Checklist for Wood Stoves is still being improved, and input is welcome. [Click here for a copy.](#)

In many states, low-income families are eligible to have their current heating appliance replaced if it’s inoperable or a danger to health and safety. Families on low-income heating assistance (LIHEAP) in all states are also eligible to have their heating appliance replaced if it’s inoperable or a danger to health and safety, but only if it’s their primary heating appliance. However, many if not most families whose primary heat is a wood stove, claim their low income heat assistance for their secondary heater, such as oil, propane or kerosene. They do this because the benefit amount is often larger and they cannot obtain those fuels for free, as they can with wood. And, many energy auditors and state officials consider wood stoves to be a

de facto secondary, space heater, even when most of the home's heat comes from it. This has contributed to programs overlooking the wood stove and potentially dangerous conditions.

The surge in primary heating with wood stoves that occurred between 2000 and 2010, leading to a more than 100% rise in primary wood heat, was achieved not just by consumers buying new EPA certified stoves, but often by consumers dusting off old, uncertified stoves. Compared to new, certified stoves, old stoves produce far more smoke and creosote and are more likely to have cracks and metal fatigue. This rapid rise in wood heating is one of the major reasons that the federal government and states need to ensure that standards for energy audits and related programs are not biased against those who have taken up wood heat or returned to wood heat.

Another reason energy audits should better include inspections of wood stoves is that installing old stoves, which are neither EPA certified nor UL listed, is still legal in most places outside Washington State. Many homeowners try to install these old stoves themselves without the owner's manual, resulting in them being installed too close to combustible surfaces or not vented according to code. And, the EPA still allows the sale of stoves that are exempt from emissions standards. Although they are UL listed, these exempt stoves are likely to have health and safety issues far sooner than EPA certified units.

If your state is overseeing standards for energy audits and/or subsidizing them, we urge you to contact the relevant state office and urge them to ensure that wood stoves are assessed during energy audits.

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The Alliance for Green Heat promotes wood and pellet heat as a low-carbon, sustainable and affordable energy solution. The Alliance works toward cleaner and more efficient wood heating appliances, particularly for low and middle-income families. The Alliance is a 510c3 non-profit organization based in Maryland.