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Power consumption increasing on O'ahu

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By [Jan TenBruggencate](#)
Advertiser Science Writer

O'ahu residents paid slightly more in June for the same amount of electricity compared with last June.

The increase added to electric rates that are among the highest in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Energy — nearly double the national average on O'ahu and triple the national average on some Neighbor Islands.

The power bill for an O'ahu customer using Hawaiian Electric Co's average 2003 residential use of 685 kilowatt hours was \$104.66 in June 2003 and \$105.23 in June 2004, according to HECO's Lynn Unemori. The effective rate per kilowatt hour for O'ahu is \$0.1536 per kilowatt hour.

The recent increase is due to the rising cost of



Big Island resident Bob Jacobson has a bank of 20 batteries that store power harvested from solar panels at his home in Hawaiian Acres. He installed a \$20,000 home power system, which includes photovoltaic cells on the roof, propane water heating and a diesel generator backup.

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oil, which the electric companies are allowed by the state Public Utilities Commission to pass on to consumers.

But a lot of folks have also been increasing their use of power, increasing their bills even more. Average power consumption for O'ahu residences is up 7.4 percent in the past five years.

Blame that on the demand for comfort, and perhaps not fully understanding how appliances use power — some even when they're turned off.

Those rising power bills are cutting into what consumers have available to spend on everything else.

Even though many residents are careful about their power use — and some have invested in solar water heating and other measures to reduce costs — rising fuel prices and an increasing use of electric-powered gadgets are undercutting conservation measures.

"I don't think there's any question that in today's world, we're more of a plug-load type of community. We're using more electricity than in the past, with laptops, air conditioning, landscape lighting and all the rest," said Darren Kimura, whose firm Energy Conservation Hawai'i conducts energy audits and helps businesses and residents reduce their electric loads.

Residents are concerned, and trying to balance conveniences such as air conditioning against the rising costs.

'Pay for comfort'

'Ewa Beach resident William Gonsalves said his power bill is about \$350 a month, most of it represented by the drain of a central air-conditioning system that's on 24 hours a day. "You gotta pay for comfort," Gonsalves said. But he said he is interested in ways to cut the bill.

Denise and Troy Yamamoto of Mililani Mauka reduced a power bill that was even below the island average. They have installed a solar water heater and put in an attic fan to suck the sun-heated air out of the house. Their power bill is about \$70 a month.

"As far as our climate, it's very comfortable," Denise Yamamoto said. "We're not sacrificing anything at all."

Maui residents Paul and Mary Akiona of Waiehu Terrace have recently seen their power bills increase from \$125 to \$155 a month — some of that because of oil price increases and some of it seasonal as they use air conditioning more in the warm months. The bill is near the average for Maui residents.

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They have a solar water heater to reduce electric bills. Mary Akiona is conscious of power use and cuts down where she can. She looks for energy-efficient appliances, turns off lights and TV when no one is in the room, uses cold water for laundry and uses fluorescent bulbs.

But the Akionas have their cell phone chargers, cable TV boxes and an upright freezer that is kept outdoors. Mary said unplugging cable boxes would be inconvenient because plugs and wiring are behind furniture.

Kaua'i resident Charlie Cowden fixed that problem by having wall switches installed that turn off each of the power plugs in his North Shore home. Cowden installs solar power systems, so he is conscious of power demand.

Home power systems

Big Island resident Bob Jacobson, a Green Party member who sits on the Hawai'i County Council, lives in the Puna subdivision called Hawaiian Acres, where he installed a \$20,000 home power system rather than pay an estimated \$60,000 to hook up to commercial power. The core of his system is 24 photovoltaic cells on the roof, with propane water heating and a diesel generator backup.

He has the appliances most households have — a large television set, microwave, refrigerator and washing machine. His home office has two computers, printers, a fax and a copier. Jacobson said he needs to run the diesel about once a week.

An independent power system may not be for everyone. Jacobson describes himself as a "nerd" who is comfortable tinkering with electronics and diesel generators.

A household looking for a road map to reduced power consumption can start with the water heater, Kaua'i's Cowden said.

"The single best thing people can do is install solar water heating," he said. "For a lot of people (electric hot water) is half the power bill."

Mililani Mauka's Yamamoto family spent \$3,000 on theirs. "It was definitely worth it. We're saving every month ... so we're really happy with it," said Denise Yamamoto, 32, an architect who works from home.

Small things count

Electric clothes drying is another huge load. Minimizing the dryer's use, switching to gas and air-drying clothes can create significant savings. The theory is simple, Cowden said: "Converting energy into electricity, and then converting it back to heat is not very efficient."

Energy consultant Kimura said insulating walls and ceilings, putting in attic venting fans and tinting windows with materials that reduce heat transfer will keep a home cooler. After water heating, "air conditioning is probably the biggest consumer of energy for a home," he said.

Kaua'i Electric energy expert Ray Mierta said that most electrical equipment sold today is energy-efficient and that because 1992's Hurricane 'Iniki destroyed so many appliances, most Kaua'i residents have fairly up-to-date equipment. But if you have a 20-year-old refrigerator or freezer in the garage, its power demand may be costing more than the stuff it's keeping cold.

After that, it's the small things that count. Replace incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescents — especially for lights that stay on a long time daily, such as the light at your front door. Turn computers and monitors off when they're not in use. Unplug "phantom loads" from your plugs.

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Electricity cost calculator

Think electricity cost is high where you live? Find out what people are paying elsewhere in the state, using the calculator below. Costs are based on June 2004 numbers.

Enter your kilowatt-hours: and

Sources: Hawaiian Electric Co., Kaua'i Island Utility Co-op.

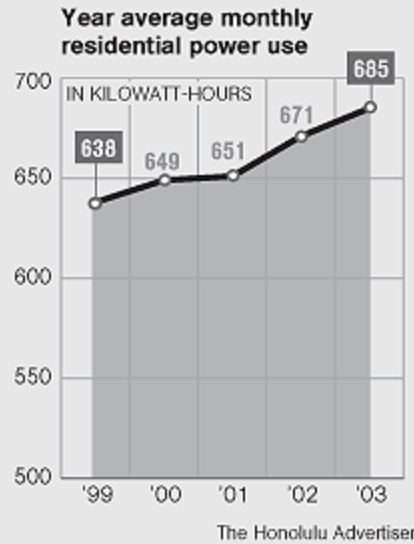
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RISING RESIDENTIAL POWER USE ON O'AHU

The amount of electricity used by the average O'ahu home has increased in each of the past five years, and "all indications are that it will also be up in 2004," said Dave Waller, Hawaiian Electric's vice president for customer solutions.

The company believes the primary cause of the increased power demand is installation of air conditioning in new-home construction on the hot 'Ewa plain.

Source: Hawaiian Electric Co



Correction: A previous version of this story used an incorrect figure for the average O'ahu residential electric bill in June 2004. The Advertiser will run a follow-up story on electric utility rates next Sunday.

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