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Most shiver while Xcel profits sizzle

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The secret is fleece. Around our house, it's de rigueur. We have fleece vests, fleece sweaters, fleece robes. The dog even has a fleece bed.

If guests fail to dress appropriately for the harsh indoor environment at our house, we provide fleece clothing in a variety of colors and sizes.

You see, in an effort to protest high natural-gas prices, stick it to the utility industry and save money, we decided to refrain from turning on the furnace at our house until at least Nov. 1.

It's fleece or get fleeced this year, we figure, so through early-morning frosts, an October blizzard, cloudy afternoons and cold autumn rains, we've been steadfast. Instead of reaching for the thermostat, we put on another layer. We wear thicker socks. We drink hot toddies.

We have become the cheapest of cheapskates about energy, and given the kind of parents we had, that's saying something.

Our fathers would be so proud.

I know, I know, the weather has been mercifully warm this fall. But it's still no day at the beach without the furnace. Fleece can only get you so far.

For those of us boycotting central heat, the real challenge comes when you step out of the shower in a 53-degree bathroom. It's, well, bracing.

It's not quite the thrill I had some years ago when I took a frosty, late-night sponge bath outside my tent at a campground in the Tetons. With my teeth chattering, I even sacrificed comfort for vanity with a shampoo under the icy water from the tap. That was cold.

But 53 degrees is chilly enough that you can see the steam rising off your skin in the bathroom mirror. I challenge anybody to go from dripping wet to fully clothed faster than I can right now.

By January, however, the competition could be steep.

Sue Cobb, spokeswoman for Denver Human Services, expects this year's applications for the Low Income Energy Assistance Program to break all records.

More than 96,000 Coloradans received help with their home energy bills through LEAP last year, and that was before the series of rate hikes that have gone into effect in recent months.

Xcel Energy estimates typical residential gas and electric bills will be about \$235 a month this

winter. At the same time, funding restrictions for LEAP are expected to reduce annual assistance payments to \$300 compared with last year's maximum of \$366, according to Glenn Cooper, LEAP manager for the Colorado Department of Human Services. For people on fixed incomes, that means lots of cold mornings ahead.

Meanwhile, industry execs and shareholders are luxuriating in the comfort of a seriously overheated energy market.

Last week, Xcel Energy Inc., Colorado's largest electricity and natural-gas utility, reported its third-quarter profits had more than quadrupled, thanks to an exceptionally hot summer and high electricity rates.

The company also crowed about \$32 million in tax cuts and the forecast for a wicked-good fourth quarter with cold weather coming just as combined gas and electricity rates have increased by more than 30 percent.

Profits are expected to sizzle.

Also, while ratepayers are hunkering down against the chills - and the bills - former Xcel chief executive Wayne Brunetti is making \$24,107 a day ensuring "an orderly transition" for the company to management under its new president, Richard Kelly. (Kelly, by the way, is being paid \$920,000 a year plus incentives of up to another \$920,000 a year during this transition period.)

The \$4.05 million in pay for Brunetti's consulting services between July 1 and Dec. 15 is in addition to his retirement package of approximately \$1 million a year, plus full medical insurance coverage, plus financial planning and tax advice - all generously provided by shivering ratepayers.

It's enough to make your blood boil.

Which any middle-aged woman will tell you can provide moments of unexpected warmth in a cold house. But trust me, you're still gonna need the fleece.

Diane Carman's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. She can be reached at 303-820-1489 or dcarman@denverpost.com.