

Backfill

Heating With Dogs

by Dave Barry

Let's talk about a terrific new alternative-energy source that can save you up to \$4 billion a year on your home heating bills. (This estimate is based on a typical 700,000-square-foot roofless home on the planet Uranus; your actual savings may vary.)

Now, you probably think this is another one of those pie-in-the-sky articles about heating your home with molten lava or some other project so absurdly difficult that your only reaction is to pity the deranged fools who actually tried it. You know the articles I mean:

Vermont Couple Finds New Source of Energy: Both Expected to Recover

One day Jason and Fleur Partridge-Cardigan were sitting around in the rustic old Vermont barn that they had converted to a rustic old Vermont house by removing the cows, when an interesting thought occurred to them: They were going to freeze to death. It was then that Jason, who had quit a \$75,000-a-year job as a loan rejecter at a major New York bank to pursue a lifelong dream of moving to the country and lifting large objects by hand, had an idea. "Goat waste," Jason says. "It seems so obvious now that I can't understand why more people don't do it, unless maybe they don't like the threat of disease and the fact that your clothes always smell like the northern end of the New Jersey Turnpike."

So the Partridge-Cardigans got an old boiler and spent the summer filling it with goat waste they had collected from their neighbors. "They were very supportive," recalls Fleur. "Up to that point, I don't think they really accepted us, but they let us have all the goat waste we wanted. Sometimes they'd even come over at night in their pickup trucks and dump it in our foyer."

Then came the big moment, the first really cold day of winter, when Jason went out to fire up the boiler. The neighbors gathered around, smiling skeptically, but their smiles quickly faded as the boiler began giving off a delicious, relaxing heat, followed by shrapnel. "I figured it released around 65 million Btus," says Jason. "The only problem was that it released them all in two-tenths of a second." But even with this drawback, Jason and Fleur figure that, by 1992, their novel heating system will have saved them more than enough money to pay for their skin grafts.

This is not that kind of article. This article is about an alternative heat source that's practical, safe, and available everywhere: Dogs. Scientists don't know how they do it, but dogs eat only a few cupfuls of really pathetic food every day, yet produce thousands of cubic feet of warm, moist air per hour by means of panting. The best dogs for heating are your large breeds with good lung capacity, humid mouths, and extremely tiny brains that cause them to go into hour-long, high-Btu frenzies at the sound of their own parasites. Labrador retrievers are ideal. It is a little-known fact that the British royal family uses just two Labrador retrievers to heat all of Windsor Castle.

You can also use smaller breeds, like those snotty little yapping dogs often carried around by the elderly, but you'll need 50 or 60 of them to heat an average house. This can be an advantage, inasmuch as with one large dog your heat is either on or off, whereas with many small dogs you can make fine temperature adjustments by tossing maybe a half dozen out the window.

If you're desperate, I suppose you could use other animals, but they all have drawbacks. Cows, for example, don't pant. Horses do pant, but they'll trip over your end tables and break their legs and you'll have to shoot them. (The horses.) You can forget about cats, which actually remove heat from rooms. You can also forget about reptiles, which have a very low Btu content. For example, to heat a typical suburban split-level home, you would need 85,000 snakes or 330,000 toads, which would be impractical for anybody who plans to do any entertaining. So dogs are the way to go.

If you don't want to heat your home with dogs, you might be stupid enough to try an idea proposed by Dave Freed of Orrville, Ohio, who suggests using vinyl car seats as solar collectors. "Strap a couple of those to your roof," writes Dave, "and we can not only tell the Arabs to kiss off, but save Detroit in the process!"

Makes sense to me. If any of you other readers have any swell ideas like that, drop me a letter; maybe I can use it to ignite my goat waste.

Dave Barry wrote this article for the September 1983 issue of New England Builder. He is now running for president of the United States. If elected, his highest priority will be to seek the death penalty for whoever is responsible for making Americans install low-flow toilets.