

Whole house fan needs an airtight cover

Dear Mr. Energy,

My husband and I are in an argument about something. I love my whole house fan! There's nothing like fresh air circulating through the house on a beautiful spring or fall day.

ASK Mr. Energy

But my husband says he read somewhere that a whole-house fan is a big source of energy loss when its not in use and he wants to board it up. Who is right?

—Wondering Wife

Dear Wondering,

Mr. Energy also enjoys fresh air. He, too, has a whole-house fan in his house and you're right, the feeling of fresh air on beautiful spring or fall days is wonderful. So he has to agree with you that it's a wonderful thing ... but he also agrees with your husband in that it's a huge source of air and energy leaks during the winter and summer months. Essentially, unless it has an air-tight cover, it's a huge whole that leaks air in or out of your house. The bottom line is that you can keep your fan, but you'll need some way of sealing it when it's not in use. Mr. Energy went the D.I.Y. route and built a



cover for his fan, but you can also buy commercially available fan covers that will serve a similar purpose.

Dear Mr. Energy,

What will give me the best return on my money: replacing my single-pane windows with double-pane low-e windows, replacing my traditional hot water heater with a solar hot water heater, or sealing my attic and adding more insulation?

—Perplexed in Pittsboro

Dear Perplexed,

Mr. Energy loves a no-brainer. For, neighbor friend, this is one of the easiest questions he's had in a long time. Of these three possible home improvements the answer is obvious: seal your attic and add insulation. The reason it's so obvious is in the math – sealing your attic and adding insulation is the cheapest fix of these three (even if you

add in the cost of a home energy audit to help you pinpoint your air leaks) and will garner you the most in energy savings over time. The return on your investment is high.

The other two options will absolutely save you money and energy in the long run, but they cost a lot more, which means a much longer pay-off. We're talking decades (even with tax credits and energy company rebates) as opposed to just a year or two for the attic sealing and insulation combo.

Your question has allowed me to get on my soapbox. Please indulge me for a moment. Here it is: companies that install windows or solar hot water heaters have done a marvelous job convincing the public that the best things homeowners can do is to buy their products. Marvelous.

It is absolutely true that new windows are more energy-efficient than old, and solar hot water heaters do save money when compared to the costs of heating water using traditional hot water heaters. But – dear readers – do not believe any company that promises a pay-off in a few short years for these two items. Do the math yourself. Base it on your own energy bills, energy use, and actual cost of installation. Once you do this you'll realize that if your goal is to save the most energy for the least cost, there are more immediate and cost-effective solutions.

Mr. Energy is the combined effort of Adrienne and Mark Bashista, co-owners of Home Performance NC. They can be reached at www.homeperformance.com or 919.360.1570.



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