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# Your home's hidden environmental horrors

Many appliances and materials in your home drain resources in ways that are hidden in plain sight.

By Jonathan Fahey of [Forbes](#)



There's not a wind, breeze or draft that can get past Tedd Benson, a New Hampshire-based builder who specializes in energy-efficient homes.

Until recently, one way he would keep out the chilly New England air was by wrapping houses with 4-inch-thick extruded polystyrene, an insulation sold under brand names such as Dow Chemical Styrofoam and Owens Corning Foamular.

It turns out, though, that these materials contain a particular type of hydrofluorocarbon that is 1,430 times more potent a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

It would take 65 years of greenhouse gases saved by this insulation to offset the damage this hydrofluorocarbon does, says Alex Wilson, author of the book "Your Green Home" and founder of BuildingGreen, an organization that provides green design information.

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"A lot of people that care a lot about the environment are using a lot of insulation in their buildings, for the right reasons," Wilson says. "But by using a couple of types of insulation, they are defeating their efforts."

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Benson, who no longer uses the insulation, says: "It's very frustrating. We're trying to save energy."

Owens Corning says its own analysis of extruded polystyrene insulation, which outside experts reviewed, shows that its global-warming impact is "an order of magnitude" less than what Wilson's study concludes. Dow says that its newest technology uses fewer hydrofluorocarbons than Wilson assumed and that an outside sustainability firm rated its insulation highly. Neither company makes its exact formulations public.

If the Obama administration has its way, the "Cash for Caulkers" bill the House passed will put \$5.7 billion into the hands of homeowners and contractors to improve home energy efficiency. And if even builders like Benson get tripped up trying to shrink carbon footprints, that doesn't bode well for the rest of us.

### What's your home worth?

There are all kinds of appliances and materials used to power, entertain, heat, cool, build and beautify our homes that use up resources in ways that may not be obvious.

For example: You thought your gas range was just using gas to bake your cookies? Not so.

Most gas ranges use electricity to power what's called a "glow bar," which helps govern the gas valves. These can draw 500 watts of power, almost as much as the microwave oven you were proud of yourself for not using.

*Article continues below*

Many things in your home, from your plasma television to your simple little toaster, draw power all day and night just by being plugged in. According to researchers at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, a typical U.S. home has 40 appliances drawing power around the clock. Together, they consume 10% of residential electricity nationwide.

That 700-pound granite countertop? Even if it is mined locally, it is often shipped elsewhere to be cut and polished. Then it's shipped back — burning fuel going to and fro.



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Nate Kredich, vice president for residential market development at the U.S. Green Building Council, says what is needed, but difficult to get, are life-cycle analyses of products that factor in production, transportation, the sources of the raw materials and how long the products last.

This last question, longevity, makes the calculation especially tricky. For all the energy it takes to produce granite, it can last a long time.

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"If something lasts for 100 years and doesn't have to be replaced, that can be very green," Kredich says. "The whole thing is a trade-off. There are no easy answers."

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Thankfully, though, BuildingGreen's Wilson says, there are often clearly preferable options. Substituting extruded polystyrene with insulation made with polyisocyanurate reduces the greenhouse-gas payback from 65 years to just 2.7 years. Now that's green.

[View a list of 10 environmental horrors in your home on Forbes.com.](#)

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