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# Home energy audits flawed

Jul 21, 2007 04:30 AM

**CATHERINE PORTER**  
ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

The federal government's new program to evaluate the energy efficiency of Canadian homes and recommend upgrades has major flaws that will take months to fix, a *Star* investigation has learned.

After auditing the same Toronto house, four companies came up with four different energy ratings – ranging from 37 to 46 out of 100 – and called for renovations ranging from \$3,000 to \$25,000.

And while they all said replacing the old, wheezing furnace with a smaller high-efficiency model was a priority, as well as patching cracks that leak heat, other recommendations varied, from upgrading the fireplace to replacing three exterior doors. One auditor incorrectly stated the basement lacked insulation.

That means homeowners could spend big money on ill-advised retrofits and waste as much as \$10,000 in grant money from the federal and provincial governments.

A year after scrapping the national EnerGuide for Homes program, the federal government relaunched it under a new name as part of the climate change plan. Under the \$300 million ecoENERGY Retrofit program, run by Natural Resources Canada and due to end in 2011, homeowners can receive up to \$5,000 in grants for doing things such as insulating walls or installing a solar water heater. Last month, the province announced it would match the federal grants.

To keep up, the number of companies offering home energy audits across the country has more than doubled to 70 since April. Most are scrambling to hire more auditors.

In the push to get certified auditors into the field, the government hired experienced people, but Suzanne Deschênes, manager of the ecoENERGY program, said perhaps they needed more training. And the government hasn't had time to check their work.


"That's what we'll be doing over the next six to eight months," she said. The aim was for all advisers in the province to be tested at least once a year, but after the *Star* audits, she plans to bump that up.

"We do not want a buyer-beware situation," she said. "All the people are certified by Natural Resources Canada and we want to be sure that certification means something."

To be certified, auditors must take a week-long course from a trainer brought in by the company. They must score at least 75 per cent on a Natural Resources test and then do six to eight practice audits, which are reviewed.



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR  
Don Noble, an inspector with Greensaver, does an energy audit on a reporter's house. He seals the front door to check the home's airtightness.

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## One house, four ratings

**Greensaver**

Cost: \$225


EnerGuide rating: 37 out of 100

Potential rating: 71

Recommendations: Replace furnace; insulate attic, flat roof, main floor walls, basement walls and header; seal air leaks.

**EnWise Power Solutions**

Cost: free

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The *Star* hired Greensaver, a non-profit organization lauded by environmentalists, to do an energy audit of a reporter's home, a typical, detached two-storey brick house built 75 years ago, when bulky sweaters, not insulation, were in vogue. The report raised red flags. Most of the recommendations called for massive renovations – drilling holes in walls and the flat roof to inject insulation and gutting the basement, including removing the ducts. The auditor said there was no insulation down there.

For a second opinion, the *Star* called EnWise, a new company offering one-stop shopping for homeowners. It conducts the audit free, offers recommendations, and hires contractors for the homeowner.

Their auditor determined the basement was, in fact, insulated. And while insulating the other walls would make a big difference, it only made sense if the family planned to stay forever, he said.

While Greensaver gave the house a 37, EnWise pegged it a 46.

Peter Love, Ontario's chief energy conservation officer, said he'd never heard of such a big disparity. "That concerns me," he said.

"Holy kit, Batman!" Deschênes said when she heard the numbers. "We would expect a discrepancy of one or two points ..."

To get to bottom of it, she commissioned a third audit from Pro Home & Building Inspections Inc., which found an EnerGuide rating of 45. The *Star* hired HomePerformance Energy Advisors. Its rating? 43.

The energy adviser examines the house's innards, poking into the attic and unscrewing electrical outlets to look for insulation. A giant fan depressurizes the house so air will rush in from the outside and the auditor can search for leaks.

Two auditors recommended replacing the door that opens to the backyard. Another advised insulating the laundry room with Styrofoam. But one missed it entirely. He said the laundry wasn't officially part of the house's footprint.

That was just one of many discrepancies. Two auditors suggested the owner push a return-air duct up to the second floor. The others didn't mention it.

Only one advised replacing the toilets with low-flush models.

"To be honest with you, some mention of that should be made in all them," said Deschênes.

Deschênes was concerned that only two auditors mentioned that the fireplace opening be plugged when not in use. "That kind of thing, we'll need to pay attention to and do quality assurance on. When I look at the picture of your house, the fireplace and furnace are two things I know should be up there. I would have said to you, 'If you only do two things, these are them.'"

If all proposed improvements were made, the estimated energy ratings from the four companies was between 64 and 81 out of 100.

"Whoever gave you an 81 must have been living on another planet," said Deschênes, pegging it at 65.

The ecoENERGY program awards rebates for quantifiable improvements documented by certified auditors. Homeowners have 18 months to make changes.

A high-efficiency gas furnace nets a \$1,000 rebate. And increasing basement insulation can mean anything from \$200 to \$2,000, depending on how much is added.

Deschênes said her department regularly does quality assurance tests, ranging from customer satisfaction surveys to detailed report reviews. The department also sends a second energy adviser to watch some inspections.

If you've commissioned an audit and it concerns you, call the service provider to address specific issues. Then, call Natural Resources Canada at 1-800-387-2000, which will review the audit and, if necessary, send another auditor.

EnerGuide rating: 46

Potential rating: 69

Recommendations: Replace furnace, seal air leaks, insulate attic and main walls, buy low-flush toilets.

#### HomePerformance Energy Advisors

Cost: \$155

EnerGuide rating: 45

Potential rating: 81

Recommendations: Boost insulation in main walls, replace furnace, reduce air leakage, add insulation to basement walls, attic and flat roof and replace windows and water heater.

#### Pro Home & Building Inspections Inc.

Cost: \$300

EnerGuide rating: 43

Potential rating: 64

Recommendations: Replace furnace, retrofit fireplace, seal leaks, insulate attic and flat roof, replace three exterior doors and hot water heater, seal basement header area, install a drain water heat recovery, replace central air conditioner and 10 windows and skylight.

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