

How a 'turn it off' approach to energy conservation could benefit Canada, and the planet

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The challenge for climate change communicators a couple of decades ago was conveying what the research was showing: that the burning of

fossil fuels was altering the planet's climate. That communication played a vital role in facilitating the current widespread understanding that the climate is changing and it is a crisis.

There remains, however, a fundamental communication challenge in moving the focus from consuming different kinds of energy to facilitating a revolution of consuming less. Recent electrical grid events in Alberta offer a compelling case study.

[On Jan. 13, 2024, extreme cold hit Alberta—the coldest in half a century](#) . As people turned up their thermostats to stay warm, Alberta's power grid was put under immense strain. To avoid taking pressure off the electrical grid with rolling blackouts (rotating half an hour power outages throughout Alberta), the [Alberta Emergency Management Agency sent an alert to all Albertans](#).

This unprecedented use of the emergency system, the first of what would be four alerts, asked Albertans [to turn off unnecessary electricity—lights, electrical appliances and devices—and use "essentials only."](#)

Albertans responded. [Within minutes of the initial emergency alert being issued, demand on Alberta's power grid decreased by 150 megawatts and continued to fall. Alberta produces around 16,330 megawatts of electricity annually.](#)

Because many people and some businesses voluntarily switched off appliances and other electrical devices that were not needed, there was no need for the rolling blackouts.

Switching off

The brief experience of turning off highlighted a couple of things. First,

that people are willing to change behaviors when asked. Second, the [behavior change](#), for some, was positive. As one Albertan [posted on Reddit](#)

"Our kids made a game out of it. Showered with a candle in the bathroom, we had one small light to read books, ALL the lights off in and outside the house, no TV obviously."

Another poster on the same Reddit thread offered that their 10-year-old excitedly asked that all the lights and TV be turned off and added, "It looks like the alert does work."

In the aftermath, [the news has focused on critiques of Alberta's current energy generation and how to facilitate growing energy output in the future as fossil-fuels continue to be phased out](#). Politicians and experts wondered how the grid could be more robust and fail-safe so that there is no need to ask people to turn things off.

[Critiques of solar and wind were also quickly offered](#) as were the benefits of new power generation such as [Alberta's Cascade Power Project—a 900 megawatt natural gas-fired plant](#)—and [increased energy generation flexibility](#).

But what if the opportunity in Alberta's power grid struggles is not about producing different kinds of energy but consuming less?

Looking beyond supply

The January cold wave is a critical moment to reflect upon the status quo and reimagine a system that values consuming less, not producing more.

Alberta's [electrical grid](#) alerts gave us a glimpse, for a few hours, of a topic largely absent from climate communication: we are consuming too

much of everything. We must use and consume less. Less energy, less stuff. We [cannot consume our way out of this crisis](#).

We must consume less, and Albertans proved that this is not only possible but can even be a positive experience.

It is also important, in the depths of an unprecedented cold-weather event, to not lose sight of the fact that globally 2023 was the warmest year on record "by far"—[beating 2016 \(the previous record-setting year\) by 0.15 degrees Celsius \(also a record\)](#).

The 10 warmest years on record—since 1850—have been in the past 10 years and this changing climate is causing extreme wildfires, tornadoes, cyclones, drought, flooding, heat and cold. Here and around the world lives and habitats are indiscriminately being destroyed. This is our [emergency alert](#).

A new normal

Shifting to turning off and reducing consumption patterns for individuals, businesses and industry will be incredibly hard. The [global economy](#), and related jobs, are built on consuming more. But the climate crisis, as well as growing inequality and ecosystem destruction, will make status quo levels of consumption increasingly untenable.

The Alberta Emergency Management Agency sent emergency alerts asking people to turn off because the alternative would have been mandatory rolling blackouts. Asking people to turn off voluntarily allowed Albertans to respond with thoughtfulness, dignity and agency.

We, collectively across Canada and around the world, are in an emergency. The climate crisis is upon us and we have a choice. We can delay structural change and await the extreme [climate](#) crisis

consequences. Or we can demand that government and industry implement the systemic changes required to avert (or at least mitigate) this catastrophe.

Regardless, the lessons from Alberta are clear. We could all try "turning off" from time to time—saving money, [helping the planet](#) and perhaps reconnecting with friends and family. That, if nothing else, could be a benefit worth championing.

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