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Report: Fairbanks' emissions higher than national average

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FAIRBANKS — Add up the heating fuel burned, electricity used, car trips taken and other sources of power, and Fairbanks released 64 percent more greenhouse gases per resident last year than the national average, according to new estimates from an energy center.

Cold temperatures and long, dark winters, which increase home-heating needs, drive lighting and electricity costs, have much to do with the high figures, according to energy specialists who compiled the estimates.

The report, an energy-and-emissions audit, ordered by the Fairbanks North Star Borough, will serve as a baseline document for Fairbanks, where business and government leaders have responded to skyrocketing energy costs the same way many homeowners have — by looking for ways to calculate, and if possible, curb, energy use.

Amy Shatzkin, a Seattle-based program manager for the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, added that the report is “a first step” toward addressing the level of emissions coming from Fairbanks.

“It basically tells you in a very broad sense, where you go when looking (at) saving money and saving energy and, thus, saving emissions,” she said.

Three-fifths of the greenhouse gas emissions from homes in Fairbanks last year came from the roughly 49 million gallons of heating fuel burned by renters and homeowners, according to the report. Businesses and industrial firms, on the other hand, emitted more from the use of electricity than from heating fuel.

The figures are included in the “Greenhouse Gas Emissions Inventory” released Tuesday by the Fairbanks-based Alaska Center for Energy and Power. The center worked with other agencies this summer to estimate and catalogue the level of emissions coming from different sources — homes, business, industry, agriculture, transportation and the military — and nail down how much electricity, diesel-based heating fuel, coal, wood or natural gas each sector depends upon through the

year.

Those and other sectors of Fairbanks, the assessment's report states, combined last year to emit the equivalent of 3.8 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in greenhouse gases from within the borough's boundaries.

That pencils out to an average of around 39 tons for each of the estimated 97,484 people who lived here, a number that increases when including emissions coming from planes that take on fuel in Fairbanks.

A new focus on emissions

The energy center conducted the study using a \$20,000 grant from the borough following the Borough Assembly's approval earlier this year of an Emergency Energy Program. The program looked in part to advance a coal-and-biomass-to-energy plant, and borough officials have said Tuesday's greenhouse gas report is needed to responsibly advance the proposed project.

Public officials had previously voted to join the environmental council, an international group that looks to help communities develop sustainably. That vote committed the administration to work with the council to address emissions of carbon dioxide — linked by scientists to increasing global temperatures — and other greenhouse compounds coming from fuel combustion, waste management and other sources.

Gwen Holdmann, the energy center's organizational director, said her team wrestled with the question of whether to include in its calculations emissions from planes that fuel in Fairbanks. The team eventually relied partly on guidance from outside groups — the center relied on methods publicized by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — and left airplane fuel use out of its primary estimates while still including it in backup figures in the larger report.

“A lot of that fuel is burned over the Pacific” and along flight lanes well outside the community, Holdmann said.

Shatzkin said a number of her organization's member-communities have taken steps similar to Fairbanks' energy-and-emissions audit since the early 1990s to inventory the emission sources. But she said the Fairbanks inventory project is somewhat broader than others' and could wind up serving as a template for other local governments.

“They're one of the first governments we've worked with that is looking to move ahead with both adaptation and mitigation” related to climate change, Shatzkin said. The proposed coal-and-biomass-fed energy project is being courted by the Air Force, and Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, recently placed \$10 million in a draft defense-spending bill in a Senate subcommittee, saying it would

help the military meet its goal of reducing dependence on foreign oil. Steve Wackowski, a spokesman for Stevens, said Tuesday that the money currently remains in the bill, one that, including the coal-to-liquids provision, is part of larger budget negotiation process ongoing in Congress.