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New report finds US hybrid heating could cut national heating costs by $13.6 billion

WASHINGTON, DC – A new report from CLASP and the Regulatory Assistance Project (RAP) finds that the US could reduce national heating bills by $13.6 billion and cut annual CO_2 emissions by 67 MT, the equivalent of removing 14.4 million passenger cars for an entire year, by swapping air conditioners for heat pumps.

The report, "Combating High Fuel Prices with Hybrid Heating: The Case for Swapping Air Conditioners for Heat Pumps", advocates for households to replace existing air conditioning units at the end of their useful life with look-alike electric heat pumps - a technology that can both heat and cool indoor spaces. In this proposal, households would keep their legacy heat systems in place, using them to supplement the heat pump at lower temperatures.

"AC retirements are a low-cost opportunity to bring super-efficient heat pumps into US homes," said Matt Malinowski, report author and Director of Climate Research at CLASP. "Our report offers a robust argument in favor of making the swap, including huge cost savings for households and meaningful mitigation impacts."

Every six seconds a new residential furnace or air conditioner starts up in the US, meaning these households miss out on the opportunity to begin home decarbonization until that equipment is retired in 2035-2040. In contrast, 1.7 million oil, 3.1 million propane, 16 million electric resistance, and 33 million methane gas households across the country can benefit right now from swapping one-way ACs for hybrid heat pumps. Households will also reduce their heating bills by $77-$555 per year, while reducing CO_2 emissions by 11%-20%, depending on fuel.

"The transition away from fossil heating in the US requires millions of new electric heat pumps to be installed in the next few decades," said Steve Pantano, Chief of Research at Rewiring America. "But the opportunity is clear. We can tackle a big part of this challenge at a very low cost, save consumers money on their energy bills, and accelerate progress toward our nation's climate goals."

The report, which extends the research in CLASP's 2021 3H report, offers an analysis of the feasibility and benefits of household transition from oil, propane, methane gas,

and electric resistance heating to hybrid heating systems in light of rising fuel costs and a desire to reduce fossil fuel dependence. The authors also recommend proven state and local policy tools to accelerate the adoption and overall availability of heat pumps.

“Rerunning the numbers, the Hybrid Heat Homes idea makes even more sense this year than last,” said Nate Adams, founder of HVAC 2.0 and co-author of the 3H paper. “All fuel prices are up substantially, so savings amounts got higher. Particularly for rural areas with expensive fuels and lower income, it’s a boon for equity. And, of course, being able to run on renewables helps deliver true energy independence so we’re less prone to price shocks like those caused by events like Russia invading Ukraine.”

Pushing for a swap from air conditioners to heat pumps over the next 5-10 years will smooth the way for full-building electrification and advance the United States towards its ambitious goal of achieving net zero by 2050.

“Electrification of the existing housing stock is a big mountain to climb,” said Max Dupuy, coauthor of the report and Principal at RAP. “Every home is different. Our proposal to swap AC to heat pumps opens a clear path to get rolling.”

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About CLASP: CLASP serves at the epicenter of collaborative, ambitious efforts to mitigate climate change and in the global movement for clean energy access, through appliance efficiency. CLASP works hand-in-hand with governments, experts, industry, consumers, donor organizations and others to propel policies and markets toward the highest-quality, lowest resource-intensive products possible.

About Regulatory Assistance Project: The Regulatory Assistance Project (RAP) is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental organization dedicated to accelerating the transition to a clean, reliable, and efficient energy future.