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Aspen vacation homes: Energy hogs

Sprawling, little-used second homes sock it to Aspen by generating most of its residential greenhouse gases

By Steve Lipsher Denver Post Staff Writer

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With their heated driveways, outdoor hot tubs and 24-hour surveillance systems, Aspen's vacation homes each use more electricity than a block of average American homes, a new study reports.

As a result, the luxurious second homes generate most of the town's residential greenhouse gases, even though many of them are occupied only a few weeks each year.

They emit more carbon than Aspen's fully occupied homes, according to the study by the Sopris Foundation.

"I suppose if you make a million dollars or more, and there are several people in Aspen who do - many, actually - you can afford the utility bills," said Richard Heede of Climate Mitigation Services, who conducted the study.

Still, Heede was surprised to find that second homes generate 61 percent of the town's residential carbon dioxide emissions - the main



Construction continues on a 15,000-square-foot home on Red Mountain, overlooking Aspen and the town's ski hill. The average single-family home in Aspen measures 3,272 square feet. (Special to The Post / Zach Ornitz)

man-made greenhouse gas - even though they are unoccupied an average of 277 days a year.

Aspen vacation homes each generate 43.8 tons of carbon dioxide a year compared with 32.4 tons by each full-time, single-family residence, the report calculates.

The average U.S. household with four people

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generates between 30 and 40 tons of carbon dioxide a year, depending on elements such as its type of heating fuel, according to the federal Environmental Protection Agency's carbon calculator.

Aspen's vacation homes are often much larger than locally owned homes and use, even when empty, as much energy as full-time residences, Heede said.

"Many energy demands are unnecessary and egregious, such as driveway heating, roof-melt systems, hot tubs (and) towel-bar heaters," he said.

Then there are the whirring motors of cigar humidors and wine cellars, and the flicking on and off of 24/7 floodlights, the report says.

While disproportionate energy use in second homes exists in every mountain-resort community, it is most pronounced in Aspen, where conspicuous consumption is a status symbol and there are 150 homes exceeding 10,000 square feet.

The average single-family home in Aspen is 3,272 square feet, according to the report.

"Rich people just don't care," said Howard Geller of the Southwest Energy Efficiency Program. "Financially, it just doesn't matter to them."

Linda Venturoni, who conducted a study of the economic and social impacts of second homes for

the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments, said monstrous manses continue to sprout from Telluride to Winter Park.

"A lot of those resort communities are starting to catch up," she said.

Environmental consciousness, however, appears to be growing even among the ultra- rich, who



A massive Aspen home is going up near Buttermilk Mountain's half-pipe feature, where Winter X Games ski competitions have been held. Disproportionate energy use in second homes exists in every mountain-resort community, but it is most pronounced in Aspen, where conspicuous consumption is a status symbol and there are 150 homes exceeding 10,000 square feet. (Special to The Post / Zach Ornitz)

increasingly seek energy-efficient, green-built homes.

"We're seeing it across the country. People want that quality," said John Beldock, chief executive of EcoBroker International, which trains real-estate agents in identifying and seeking environmentally friendly features.

"Nobody wants their vacation home to idle

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inefficiently when they're not there," he said. "They didn't get rich by flushing 10 months' worth of energy costs down the toilet."

Officials in Aspen now require renewable-energy fees for new houses bigger than 5,000 square feet or those that exceed their "energy budgets" under the building code, and they are considering mandatory energy audits for existing homes when they are sold.

"We are definitely aware of the fact that Aspen residential- energy use is higher than the national average," said Calla Ostrander, a staff member with the Canary Initiative, the ski town's pioneering broad-scale effort to reduce greenhouse gases. "This just helps raise awareness," Ostrander said.

Worried that global warming is leading to major climate changes that could dramatically curtail the ski season over the next 50 years, Aspen has taken aggressive steps to set a good example and raise environmental awareness.

The city now generates more than 70 percent of its power from renewable energy, and this week officials began selling carbon credits that allow residents to fund renewable-energy projects to offset the carbon generated through consumption of fuel and other goods.

While transportation - particularly air travel - is the single greatest generator of greenhouse gases in town, second homes are perhaps the most visible and vilified contributors, and are

viewed by critics as a symbol of gluttony and decadence.

Even "green" second homes, they argue, are excessive and consume natural resources in construction and energy requirements.

Heede was cautious to point out that nearly every resident in Aspen could cut down on greenhouse-gas emissions and make his or her home more energy-efficient.

"We're not just singling out the second home owner living in the most monstrous homes and here only at Christmas and in June," Heede said. "We're just saying maybe we should look under our feet and do what we can to help."

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By the numbers

43.8

Tons of carbon dioxide produced yearly by an Aspen vacation home

32.4

Tons of carbon dioxide produced yearly by an Aspen primary home

150

Aspen homes larger than 10,000 square feet

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