

Everybody agrees that lowering the monthly electric bill is a good thing but many restaurateurs hesitate to go after energy savings because it often requires an equipment change and the spending of some cash – two pastimes that most folks don't enjoy. Here's some good news, this month's Green sheet will focus on a simple energy saving tip that doesn't cost anything to implement and is as easy as flicking a switch.

RIGHT UNDER YOUR NOSE

Actually, it's a little above your nose. Almost every commercial reach-in refrigerator and freezer has a switch that controls a door heater. This switch is usually right on the front of the unit at about head height - it's so obvious that no one pays attention to it. This switch is almost always turned on. In most instances, the door heater is not needed in California's dry climate and turning it off saves you about \$75 a year per door. That's not a huge amount of money but it is significant if you take into account that a dollar saved on energy is a dollar of pure profit. For example, if you run on a 5% profit margin, that's \$1,500 worth of food, you didn't have to sell.

WHAT DOES IT DO?

Manufacturers include the door heater to battle condensation that forms around the door in humid conditions. Most cars have a similar heater that you can turn on to "defog" the rear window on winter mornings. The difference is that you usually turn off the rear window heater when the window clears but the reach-in door heater gets left on all the time – 24/7. Part of the problem with the door heater switches is that they are labeled in a variety of ways and their purpose is not always clear. Operators, unsure of what the switch does, by default will leave them on. One manufacturer does include a label that states "To conserve energy, operate the door heater(s) only when condensation appears around the perimeter of the door opening(s)." Unfortunately, this label and the door heater switch are out of site on top of the reach-in.

POWER IN NUMBERS

Finding all the heater switches in your kitchen and turning them off is an easy way to help your bottom line, but you're also helping California meet it's energy needs because there are a lot of door heaters out there! It's estimated that there are about 400,000 reach-in refrigerators in our state. If half of those units could turn off their door heaters it would reduce California's peak electrical load by over 10 million watts – enough to power 10,000 homes, reduce CO2 emissions by 16,000 tons and save California restaurateurs a total of about 15 million dollars a year. Talk about the mouse that roared!

THINKING AHEAD

Here's an idea to help you continue down the energy savings path. Use the money that you're saving on the door heaters to fund other simple energy efficiency projects – like lighting upgrades, refrigeration maintenance, or fixing hot water leaks. Those projects will save you even more money, which you can use towards buying bigger items like efficient Energy Star appliances. Your energy savings will snowball and your energy bill will shrink, you'll help out your state and the environment, and you'll end up with a better performing kitchen. It all starts with the flick of a switch.

These energy saving tips are offered by the Food Service Technology Center (FSTC), an unbiased food service resource center located in San Ramon, CA and funded by California utility ratepayers under the auspices of the California Public Utilities Commission. For more information on the FSTC and for our schedule of free energy efficiency seminars, please visit our website at www.Fishnick.com.