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Conservation bill targets utility companies

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Xcel Energy and other utilities would be required to save energy and expand conservation programs under a new bill in the Colorado legislature.

Backed by a consortium of environmental and energy-efficiency groups, the bill would direct utilities to reduce their customers' total energy use by 0.5 percent each year for 15 years.

The legislation calls for utilities to provide customers with free energy-saving kits containing items such as compact fluorescent light bulbs, low-flow shower heads and faucet aerators.

Supporters say the bill could save customers at least \$1 billion over 15 years.

"These types of programs are the fastest, cheapest way to take a big bite out of your energy bill," said state Rep. Betty Boyd, D-Lakewood, who is sponsoring the bill with Rep. Mark Larson, R-Cortez.

Utilities would be allowed to file for rate increases to cover costs they might incur under the legislation.

As a result, customer rates might go up by about 1 percent a year, backers said, although using less energy would more than offset the rate increase.

An Xcel spokesman said the utility hasn't taken a position on the bill but has some concerns.

"It doesn't seem the place for a utility company to be a big brother telling people to use less energy," Xcel's Mark Stutz said.

He noted that Xcel is in the middle of a five-year plan to spend about \$75 million to save 125 megawatts of electricity, mostly through efficiency and conservation measures targeted at business customers.

Mark Ruzzin of the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project said there is no assurance Xcel would continue the program without new legislation.