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SWP, Pictured Rocks look at Alger County energy use

December 14, 2010 - By JOHANNA BOYLE, Journal Ishpeming Bureau

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MUNISING - More than 700 Alger County residents recently participated in a survey on energy use and climate change, providing information that will help the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and Superior Watershed Partnership help county residents learn more about being energy-conscious.

"We wanted to take the pulse of the community prior to doing a public education and technical assistance program," said Carl Lindquist, executive director of the SWP.

Financed through a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency's Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the survey was mailed to Alger County residents between June and September, asking them to give input on everything from use of compact fluorescent lights to their opinion on global warming.

In January, the two organizations will begin a community energy conservation assistance program that will provide free home energy visits and free weatherization and energy conservation materials.

But the program all starts with learning about Alger County residents' attitudes toward energy.

Already, many of the survey respondents reported taking steps to cut down on their energy use. Ninety-eight percent reported turning off lights when they weren't needed, 66 percent use as little water as possible and 56 percent wash laundry in cold water.

"I think it was reassuring to find a lot of people are already doing a fair amount to conserve energy," Lindquist said.

However, the survey found that only 10 percent of Alger County residents have CFL bulbs in all home light fixtures. About half of those who took the survey have only a few or no CFL bulbs.

Residents also reported seeing no need to upgrade to more energy-efficient water heaters and home heating systems, even though the EPA's Energy Star program suggests looking at replacing heating or cooling systems older than 10 years, citing the cost of new systems as a barrier. Having financial assistance, though, would make residents more likely to make those energy-saving improvements, 73 percent said. Eighty percent of households also said they would be more likely to recycle if better recycling facilities existed.

In addition to asking about energy use and conservation, the survey also asked residents about their attitudes toward global warming, a particular point of concern for officials at Pictured Rocks.

"National parks are to some degree the canaries in the coal mine," said Gregg Bruff, chief of heritage education at the park. "The park service's approach is that climate change will continue to have an impact on natural resources, cultural resources and, to some degree, visitor health experience."

More Alger County residents reported being alarmed (16 percent) or concerned (30 percent) about global warming, nearly twice the number who reported being dismissive (11 percent) or doubtful (12 percent).

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According to the National Park Service, global warming is predicted to or already has impacted the Great Lakes region through declining winter lake ice, lower lake levels, higher summer temperatures, loss of cold water fish populations, shifts in vegetation and habitat and changes in distribution of wildlife.

And that's bad news for the Upper Peninsula, as those impacts will be felt by the tourism industry, hunters and other outdoors enthusiasts.

"This is a long-term change which is one of the reasons people have difficulty getting their heads around it," Bruff said. "Basically we want to just create a dialogue and talk to people in the county about the impact on their lives and their kids' lives."

Alger County residents interested in learning more about the program or scheduling a home energy visit can contact the SWP at 228-8095. To read the full survey report, visit climatechangecommunication.org/AlgerCountySurvey.cfm.

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