

Covering up to stay cool

Raley's cuts costs with refrigerator shields

KELLY JOHNSON / STAFF WRITER

When the energy crunch hit this country in the early '70s, most grocers replaced their energy-hogging open freezers with freezers enclosed by glass doors.

Today, as you wander the aisles of a typical supermarket or warehouse food store, likely you'll still grab your cheese, eggs or beer from an open refrigerated display. Given that grocery stores operate on narrow profit margins, supermarkets don't want to create any barrier or hinder the view of products and reduce sales.

But as energy prices have risen in California and elsewhere, food stores are doing all they can to use energy more efficiently.

Along with a growing number of food retailers, Raley's Inc., based in West Sacramento, is reducing its energy costs by installing about 5,500 night aluminum covers for its open refrigerated display cases in 120 stores. Installation began in late June and is nearly complete.

"We do expect to save substantially," said Raley's spokeswoman Carolyn Konrad. "We really can't put a figure on it yet."

Neither Raley's nor its distributor, Frontline Inc. in Dublin, would disclose the cost. It was, however, a major contract for Barry Nauroth, Frontline's owner.

These Econo Frost covers, made in Canada, are the only thermal protective covers in the industry. They resemble the U.S. military's aluminum survival blankets.

A typical large grocery store would spend \$8,000 to \$10,000 for these nighttime covers for refrigerated displays. Raley's, which has 148 stores under four brands, received a bulk purchase discount from the distributor and a rebate from Pacific Gas & Electric Co. and Southern California Edison, so it spent less.

Raley's didn't buy covers for its stores in Las Vegas, which stay open 24 hours a day.

"In most cases, supermarkets are realizing a payback in the two-year range," said Jamie Orr, national sales manager for Market Group Ventures, the Canadian company that makes Econo Frost.

For 20 years, the company and its distributors were primarily selling outside of the United States. Overseas, businesses were paying 20 to 30 cents per kilowatt hour, making covers for refrigerated displays essential.

U.S. supermarkets didn't see the need when they were paying a fraction of that per kilowatt hour, Orr said.

Market Group Ventures has experienced a "four- or five-fold increase" in Econo Frost sales this year, Orr said, and it expects the same gain in the year to come.

"Our sales have skyrocketed on this product," Nauroth said. This year he'll do 30 to 40 times more business than the last two years combined.

This simple, low-tech product is the biggest seller for Frontline, which sells various equipment and safety supplies to retailers. Costco Wholesale Corp. was one of the big-name retailers to buy the shades this year.

Econo Frost has the stamp of approval from Southern California Edison's Refrigeration Technology and Test Center, which found in a 1997 test that the covers resulted in an energy savings of more than 9 percent if used six hours per night.

They also reduced the heat gain within the refrigerated system, and helped the products' shelf life by maintaining lower

temperatures, said Ramin Faramarzi, the test center's project manager.

The covers are in place at Raley's supermarkets from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. Workers in each department release a catch, allowing the shade to slowly roll up. At night, clerks can pull them down in minutes, Nauroth said.

"We are serious about conserving energy, and we are serious about being good corporate citizens," Konrad said. "Using night covers constitutes a significant part of our energy conservation program."



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Raley's rolls down the refrigerator covers at most stores from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.

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