

TALES FROM THE LOCKDOWN

Putting sustainable development principles to the test



Where do you go to find tips to save on increasing home energy costs owing to the fact that everyone is working from home?

If you are in the shoes of Gail Haarsma, Acting Director General of the Sustainability Directorate, your first reflex is to turn to the document that is at the core of your professional life: the [Federal Sustainable Development Strategy \(FSDS\)](#).

As the owner of a 150-year-old farmhouse surrounded by open fields buffeted by icy winds in the winter, Gail knew she had to do something to reduce her home heating oil costs as working from home continued and the weather was due to turn cold. She consulted the [Take Action](#) sections of the strategy, intended to give Canadians sustainable development tips and came up with an idea.

She started her quest for energy savings by draping her home office with thermal curtains and adding an energy efficient space heater, turning the space into a cozy nook for both her workday and her downtime activities in the evening like watching TV and reading.

The thermal curtain solution worked so well that she moved on to drape thermal curtains all over the house using spring-loaded curtain rods to fit inside the windows in each room. She also sealed the doors with garage door sealer to keep the icy winds out.

The result? The fixes enable Gail to keep her home office at a toasty 20 degrees, while the temperature in the rest of the house stays at 16 degrees. Her electricity costs have gone up \$40 a month but Gail is saving \$300 a month on home heating oil!

“If I had to heat the entire house with me sitting in one spot all day, it would have used an amazing amount of energy. The solution was a simple fix. Necessity is the mother of creation,” she says.

“I have never lived in my house all day, every day for a year,” she adds. “I have come to appreciate what you can do at home with a little creativity.”

This was an interesting way to make the best of her professional commitment. The Sustainability Directorate in the Strategic Policy Branch is a small group with a big job. The Directorate leads the Government of Canada’s implementation of the [Federal Sustainable Development Act](#) and the development of progress reports to Parliament every three years, which involves coordinating the work of 100 departments and agencies. The group also produces the [Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators \(CESI\)](#), keeping Canadians informed about the state of our air, water and wildlife.

Aside from putting sustainable development to the test, Gail’s lockdown adventures include an unexpected visit from cherished guests, a foray into publishing, and giving back to the community where she lives.

Within days of the lockdown, Gail’s pregnant daughter came to stay with her mother over the summer. Following the birth of her granddaughter, Gail’s work-from-home experience began with a newborn in the house, helping with 5 a.m. feedings, and rocking a baby to sleep on her lunch break.

Gail explored the world of publishing as members of the Sustainability Directorate put together the *Working from*



Home Cookbook to raise funds for the Government of Canada Workplace Charitable Campaign (GCWCC), supporting people's desire to use their time at home to learn how to cook.

The book has recipes for sumptuous dishes and features this humorous disclaimer: "The Sustainability Directorate, Strategic Policy Branch of Environment and Climate Change Canada cannot guarantee that you will become a master chef because of this cookbook, but it can guarantee that the WFH 2020 Cookbook contains tried and true, yummy recipes."

Gail turned her attention to doing the layout and taking pictures for the book, including a shot of her mother's Mix Master – a staple in kitchens in the 1960s that she continues to use. "It still works!" she chuckles.

The book sales were brisk in the fall, raising \$1,000 for the GCWCC.

Gail has also found joy in giving to others. Over the Christmas period, she got out of the house and hit the road delivering treats to elderly neighbours in her community.

"The work from home situation is not easy. I live in the country and I don't see many people except on screen," she admits. "The lockdown has taught me how resilient I am."

She replaced the 45-minute commute to the office – which she doesn't miss – with long hours spent onscreen. In between virtual meetings on MS Teams for work and "Zooming" with family and friends or doing online volunteer work, like many others, she can be "screened out" at the end of the work week.

Her pandemic experience has taught her a few lessons that she gladly shares:



- Have a dedicated workspace – a spot that you don't have to tidy up at the end of the workday – even if it's the end of a table.
- Work in a sunny spot.
- Take regular breaks, get fresh air, chat with friends and colleagues – it's too easy to stay stationary and focused on work and screens all day.
- Have a really good chair.
- Volunteer in your community and reap the benefits of showing kindness to others.

"There is no dividing line between work and home at the moment. You need to take the time to look after yourself and know your limits," she says.

One thing Gail knows for sure. Once the pandemic is over, there will be travel in her future. After a physically-distanced Christmas in 2020, one of her first acts in a pandemic-free, vaccinated world will be getting on a plane and seeing children and grandchildren for the first time in a long time.

Because the other thing she knows for sure: "This too shall pass," she concludes.

Got a COVID-related story that you think we should feature?
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