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YOUR HOME

Batteries Take Over When the Power Fails

By JAY ROMANO

WITH summer storms here in earnest, prudent homeowners are thinking about what to do if the electricity goes off. And while gasoline-powered generators are a common solution, they are not a realistic option for those who live in apartments and crowded neighborhoods and for those who do not want to store gasoline.

Advances in battery technology have made it possible for homeowners to have clean, quiet and virtually instantaneous emergency backup power without firing up gas generators in their backyards, with the accompanying noise and carbon monoxide.

Two types of battery-powered systems are available: those that will run a specific appliance or two and those that will take care of numerous appliances, even a whole house or apartment.

The Alta Power Corporation in Trumbull, Conn., sells the 1,500-watt Sumpro backup system, which can be used to run critical equipment like sump and well pumps, furnaces and refrigerators.

“These systems do not have to be hard-wired into the electrical panel,” said Norm Cotrona, the company’s president. Instead, the appliance being protected is plugged into the Sumpro unit, about the size of a breadbox, and it in turn is plugged into an outlet. When the power goes out, the battery pack takes over.

“Depending on what you’re backing up,” Mr. Cotrona said, “you’re looking at anywhere from 28 to 85 hours of run time.” The Sumpro costs about \$1,400, including shipping.

Larger systems are also available. Bige Doruk, the chief executive and president of Gaia Power Technologies in Manhattan, sells one called the PowerTower.

“It’s a completely silent, emission-free backup system,” she said, adding that depending on the number of modular batteries installed, it can produce anywhere from 2.5 to 16.5 kilowatts of continuous power.

“We typically use either a 5.5- or 11-kilowatt system to power a house,” Ms. Doruk said. The 5.5-kilowatt unit will run the heating system, some lights, a well pump and a refrigerator for a day or two, she said. It costs about \$10,000 installed.

The 11-kilowatt unit can run almost the entire house for the same amount of time and costs about \$12,500 installed.

“We custom-design the system for the home,” hard-wiring it into the main circuit panel, she explained. If there is an interruption in power, the system automatically switches on in just fractions of a second.

A PowerTower unit is about the size of a four-drawer filing cabinet and uses rechargeable sealed lead-acid

batteries that last about 10 years.

Ms. Doruk says the PowerTower can help protect sensitive electronic equipment because it acts like a big surge protector.

Another company that markets whole-house battery backup systems is GridPoint in Washington. Peter L. Corsell, its president, says his GridPoint Protect system is about the size of a small refrigerator and is connected directly to the main circuit panel. The system produces 3.5 kilowatts and can provide backup power for up to 10 hours, depending on what is connected.

The system is also connected, via a telephone line or a broadband Internet connection, to computers at the company. “Besides getting instantaneous, high-quality backup power,” Mr. Corsell said, “you also get online energy management.”

The company’s computers monitor power usage and can control when certain appliances are switched on or off. This can save money if the local utility company bills customers according to time of use — typically charging less for electricity at night, when demand is lower. The cost of the GridPoint system ranges from \$7,000 to \$10,000.

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