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Area oil dealers ask Bush to tap energy aid dollars

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NORTHFIELD – With the rising price of oil, a coalition of area home heating oil dealers has appealed to President Bush to release more \$500 million in federal funding set aside to help low-income and elderly Americans stay warm this winter.

“Now more than ever, it is vital that you exercise your authority to act to keep low-income Americans warm,” Shane Sweet, of the New England Fuel Institute, wrote in a Jan. 9 letter to President Bush. “Just last month, record breaking cold weather and snow accumulation rocked several regions of the country. And as heating degree days accumulate, winter weather forces millions of Americans indoors, and speculative trading on commodity prices artificially inflate the price of fuel to unprecedented levels, state and private energy assistance dollars are stretched beyond their limit.”

The Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, (LIHEAP) is a federal program that provides funding to low-income and elderly Americans who need help meeting their energy expenses. The LIHEAP program currently has \$586 million in reserve funding available. Matt Cota, Executive Director of the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association says President Bush has decided not to release the money, despite a growing chorus of opposition to that decision.

The extra money is necessary, according to Cota, because in some cases, LIHEAP recipients have already exhausted the basic benefits – and winter still has a long way to go.

Vermont’s home heating oil companies have begun to help their customers by partnering with state and local agencies, as well as making direct donations of fuel to homeless shelters, soup kitchens, low-income and faith-based groups, said Cota. Vermont has more than one hundred fuel dealers, mostly small family owned businesses.

Cota said he hoped that the President would make the right choice and release the dollars that could help millions of people across the country.

“We hope that President Bush will join us in our efforts to ensure that not a single American is left out in the cold this winter. We are asking that he act quickly to release the \$586 million in federal LIHEAP reserves, as doing so will protect low-income families and avoid potential hardships as peak cold presents itself. Winter has just begun and already millions of Americans are in need.”