

As heating prices rise, coal makes comeback  
By CHRIS GAROFALO, Reformer Staff

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BRATTLEBORO -- Although the cost of heating fuel has significantly dropped since reaching an all-time high this summer, regional coal dealers say they have seen an increase in interest for the fossil fuel.

"There has been a lot of interest, a lot of new accounts and a lot of orders," said Tom Chabott, owner of Chabott Coal and Oil Inc. based in Keene, N.H. The company is one of the major coal retailers in the region, providing services across New Hampshire, southern Vermont and into Massachusetts.

Within Windham County, he said many of his biggest clients are businesses that have installed newer versions of coal-fired furnaces to save on heating costs during the winter. Chabott said there were about 35 tickets on his desk, with about 18-20 of those new customers.

Terry Moran, owner of Hugh Duffy Coal and Oil in Rutland said his business has also seen an increase in people making inquiries about coal and the necessary installation equipment. It has not been a tidal wave of new clients, but there is definitively more interest than there used to be, he said.

When using the standard measurement of British thermal units to compare costs, coal advocates say one ton of coal is worth about 180 gallons in oil, equaling a net savings of several hundred dollars.

With more residents looking toward coal, Chabott said the Pennsylvania-based Harman Stove Company -- where he orders his equipment -- saw orders  
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come in five times faster than the annual rate, causing the business to add 120 new employees to keep up with the demand.

There has been an interest in coal, especially in older New England homes which may still have the equipment, said Matt Cota, executive director of the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association. Even with this slight revival, Cota said many residents will continue to heat with oil as the price continues to fall after the historic run-up earlier this year.

Roughly 75 percent of Vermonters depend on deliverable fuels, such as heating oil, kerosene or propane, to heat their homes. About 59 percent of residents rely only on heating oil delivered to their homes.

"At the end of the day, we need a safe, reliable, dependable fuel source and that is deliverable liquid fuels," said Cota.

While there may be a renewed interest in heating with coal, environmental groups say there are cleaner and cheaper alternatives that have less of an impact on atmospheric pollution.

According to information acquired from the Vermont Public Interest Research Group, the state now produces almost a quarter more global warming pollution than in 1990. The natural climate in the Green Mountain State could change if residents continue to consume coal, oil, gas and diesel at the current rate, notes the group.

"By just about every measure there is out there, coal is as dirty as it gets," said James Moore, clean energy advocate with VPIRG. "It's just about the dirtiest across the board."

To state that coal is cleaner than other types of fuels is wrong, he said. When coal dealers claim the product is clean, they tend to look at only one type of emission but do not consider data from the Environmental Protection Agency noting it is a dirty way to produce heat or electricity, Moore added.

Instead, Vermonters can take more environmentally-friendly steps toward energy efficiency such as investing in weatherizing projects to cut fuel use and look for renewable, sustainable fuel sources.

But coal dealers challenge the environmental concerns, noting that while coal may be dirty, it is not the worst to burn.

"Wood smoke is the highest pollutant of any fuel burnt," said Chabott.

Moran said wood pellet stoves have caused environmental and health problems, as well.

Coal does not produce the carcinogens that wood does, he said.

"That's the kind of thing you don't hear anything about."

Coal often gets a bad reputation for its environmental effects, but coal is as cheap, if not cheaper, than wood pellets, said Moran. Coal also does not have the storage issues related with wood pellets -- it takes up half as much space to store the same amount of British thermal units as pellets do -- and does not grow mold, which is a problem with heating with wood sources, he added.

Chabott said he gets his coal from the Pottsville region of Pennsylvania. With the increased cost of diesel fuel, steel, dynamite and other mining supplies, the freight cost has jumped about \$30 a ton to get the coal to New Hampshire. Nevertheless, Chabott is optimistic the mines can keep up with the rising demand, which could more than double last year's need.

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