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Vermont considers boiler buyback program

By Candace Page, Free Press Staff Writer

Cliff Gross of Bradford says the smoke from a neighbor's outdoor wood furnace seeps into his house, making him cough, causing sore throats and subjecting him and his wife to sleepless nights.

Help may be on the way for the Grosses and other residents who object to the emissions from older outdoor boilers.

Vermont lawmakers and the administration of Gov. Jim Douglas are considering creation of a buyback program to help the owners of the polluting furnaces to replace them with cleaner, more efficient units.

"The first time I saw one, I thought some Vermonter was smoking ham," said Dick Valentinetti, chief of the state Air Pollution Control Division. "It was creating a pall that went across the entire highway."

The New York Department of Environmental Conservation says one outdoor wood boiler creates as much air pollution as 1,000 oil furnaces. The emissions can trigger asthma attacks and, over a longer period, may contribute to heart and lung diseases.

A freestanding outdoor wood boiler consists of a firebox that heats water in a reservoir. The heated water is piped into the owner's house to provide heat and domestic hot water. When the first models appeared in the 1990s, they were notorious for inefficiency, incomplete burning and emissions of smoke and soot that carry toxic substances.

"They are pretty ghastly things," said Harold Garabedian, who until recently was Valentinetti's deputy. "They're not only dirty, they're inefficient — some of them burn 10 cords of wood where five would do."

Vermont toughened emissions standards for new boilers, to take effect in March. New models of the stoves reduce emissions 80-90 percent, Valentinetti said.

Trouble is, "All the old boilers were grandfathered in, and the technology is so simple they will last forever," said Rebecca Ryan of the American Lung Association's Vermont office, which is pushing for a buyback program.

Sen. Ginny Lyons, D-Chittenden, has introduced a buyback bill. Valentinetti's office is working on a similar proposal. Both would use some of the money Vermont receives each year as part of a settlement of lawsuit against American Electric Power, a Midwestern power producer whose plants create air pollution that blows into the state.

Vermont will receive three more annual payments of \$360,000.

Valentinetti said the challenge is to figure out how far that money will go in buying back the old furnaces. No one is sure how many are operating in the state; estimates run from 2,500 to 4,000.

While the old models might have cost \$5,000, “for the new ones we sell, you’re looking at \$11,000 to \$12,000,” said Gary Hale of Appalachian Supply in St. Johnsbury.

Valentinetti said he has been having some “fairly intense conversations” with outdoor furnace manufacturers, in hopes of setting up a program that would provide discounts on new units to owners who get rid of their old one. He is also seeking additional sources of money for the buyback.

“I think this is something we will pursue, regardless of what the Legislature does,” he said.

Lyons, whose bill would require all old furnaces to be phased out by 2016, said the state should not have to cover the full cost of new units for wood-burning homeowners. It’s in their own interest to upgrade, since the new furnaces burn so much less wood.

“Ideally, the program would continue until every single old outdoor wood boiler is ended,” she said.

Gross, the Bradford homeowner, said he appreciates the state’s new attention to the problem. His wife is a cancer survivor particularly worried about the health effects of breathing heavy wood smoke. Their house, he said, appears impossible to sell because of the air pollution from the neighbor’s furnace.

“It would be an improvement” if the neighbor gets a modern boiler, he said, “but there still will be emissions and the wind blows in our direction.”

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