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King Coal makes a comeback in Vermont

*By Dan McLean
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EAST MONTPELIER — Greg and Rose Pelchuck aren't selling as much colored stone this year. But coal orders have more than made up for it.

So much so, their company, <http://blackrockcoal.com/> target="_blank">**Black Rock Coal Inc.**, which also sells 11 different shades of landscaping stone, is about to add two weekly truck runs to Wilkes-Barre, Pa., enabling the Pelchucks to haul 88 tons of coal each week to their 10-acre plot in East Montpelier.

"Right now, we are more than 20 trips behind," Rose Pelchuck said, gesturing to the depleted anthracite coal bins.

With energy prices drastically higher than a year ago, some Vermonters are taking another look at <http://energy.usgs.gov/coal.html> target="_blank">**coal**, dusting off older units or installing new ones. The return to coal, however, is discouraged by environmental advocates.

A gallon of heating oil in Vermont cost \$4.65 in July — 82 percent more than the \$2.55 it cost a year earlier, according to state data.

The Pelchucks charge \$340 for a ton of coal, less for bulk orders. In heat output, that converts to buying heating oil for about \$1.89 a gallon, Greg Pelchuck said. One ton of coal generates as much heat as 180 gallons of heating oil, he said.

"It's the best deal going," he said. "We're like the little hidden diamond in the rough."

Burning wood is a touch cheaper than coal, according to the Vermont Department of Public Service, but Pelchuck says tending a coal-fired furnace requires less work than loading logs in a wood-fueled system..

Sam Mazza's Farm Market, Bakery & Greenhouses in Colchester is switching from heating oil to anthracite coal in four of the farm's 18 greenhouses.

The decision to use coal-fired hot air furnaces was reached after three years of research, said Gary Bombard, a partner at Sam Mazza's Farm Market.

Bombard said he's aware of "carbon footprint" concerns associated with coal. But finances were the overriding factor: "If we don't do something, we are going to be out of business," he said. "That's the bottom line right there."

"We wanted to be environmentally conscious. And we wanted to stay in business," Bombard said. There is a limit to the costs that can be passed along to the consumer, he said.

Bombard estimates the coal system should pay for itself in two years.

Matt Cota, executive director of the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association, has noticed a renewed interest in coal.

“There is definitely interest among consumers in firing them up,” Cota said, particularly from Vermonters in older homes which already have coal stoves.

Cota urged cautioned, however. Residents converting to coal are gambling prices will remain the same. Waves of people converted from coal to heating oil in the 1940s and 1950s, he said, because it was simpler and more efficient.

Price considerations are compelling Vermonters to give coal another look.

At current prices, heating with coal will save a typical Vermont home upward of \$2,000, compared to oil heat, according to estimates provided by Pelchuck and Cota.

“I mean heating it, too... You can keep it up at 75 degrees,” Pelchuck said.

A three-bedroom home needs about five to six tons of coal to heat it throughout the winter, costing \$1,700 to \$2,040 at Pelchucks’ current rate. That same home would need about 800 gallons of heating oil, costing \$3,720 at July’s prices.

“When you really consider the differential in cost, it’s staggering,” said Gary Wright of Black Diamond Coal in Georgia, who is advertising coal as a “heating alternative.” Wright said he expects to sell at least three times the coal he sold last year.

Environmental advocates say coal is not the answer.

“Most Vermonters are looking for cleaner, healthier and cheaper solutions to meet their heating needs. Coal is not one of those.,” said James Moore, a clean energy advocate for the Vermont Public Interest Research Group in Montpelier.

The notion anthracite is substantially cleaner than other types of coal, as the coal dealers state, is wrong, he said.

“It’s like comparing a filthy lawnmower to an almost filthy lawnmower,” Moore said.

Vermonters struggling with heating costs should look to “responsible solutions” such as sustainably harvested wood, wood pellets, solar hot water and efficiency efforts, he said.

“Our job is to keep Vermonters warm in the most affordable, responsible way we can. And coal is not a solution,” Moore said.

Jake Brown, spokesman for the Vermont Natural Resources Council, said he was surprised to learn some were moving toward coal. “Coal doesn’t seem to be part of the culture of the Vermont,” he said.

Better insulation and Vermont-grown wood is a better solution, he said. “Wood regenerates itself. Coal does not regenerate itself,” he said.

Greg Pelchuck has heard the critics’ laments before.

Coal is a crucial part of the country’s energy mix, he said. And solid fuels — such as coal and wood — should be used to heat homes. Liquid fuels, he said, should be saved for vehicles.

“We should be keeping our oil for our cars and trucks and planes and tugs and trains,” Pelchuck said.

Coal has its drawbacks, though.

"I'm not going to lie to you. Coal is dusty. It's not sparkling clean. But this is the way I look at it... if you are dusty or dirty, you are going to be warm," he said.

Rose Pelchuck is aware of environmentalists' concerns.

"I worry about the carbon footprint, but what are we going to do?" she said. "We have to burn solid fuel."

Natural gas and propane are the cleanest fuels, followed by heating oil, said Harold Garabedian, who runs the state's air pollution control program at the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Less than 1 percent of Vermonters use coal for heat; 52 percent use heating oil, Garabedian said. There is "no question" anthracite coal is dirtier than heating oil, he said. Coal versus wood emissions, is a complicated question, he said.

Robert McConnell of the Environmental Protection Agency in Boston said a coal is "not a great choice." Outdoor wood boilers, however, are more of a problem. "Outdoor wood boilers are becoming an increasing concern because they are not that well controlled," he said.

Coal dealers say anthracite gets a bad rap.

"One of the things about coal, it has a myth about being dirty. That has been dealt with very, very effectively," Wright said, explaining furnace technology improved greatly.

Boon to Eastern Pa.

Black Rock Coal gets its coal from Centralia Coal Co. in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

The central Vermont firm sold 780 tons of coal last year. This year, Greg Pelchuck expects to sell at least 1,200 to 1,500 tons.

Centralia Coal Co. is glad to have the boost in business.

Jeff Frank, a field manager for Centralia Coal, said his family has been running the Wilkes-Barre company for three generations. Business is growing significantly, he said.

"I'm 41 years old and I have never seen people converting to coal like they are now," said Frank, who said his license plate reads: "BUY COAL."

Growth in domestic consumption and exports will contribute to a 2.9-percent increase in coal production this year, according to the U.S. Department of Energy's most recent "Short Term Energy Outlook."

It's produced domestically and more affordable, but there are fuels that create fewer emissions than coal, Frank said.

"There is no two ways about it: the AI Gores of the world are never going to convert to coal," he said.

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