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## **Fuel delivery heats up: State allows drivers to increase hours**

*By ALBERT McKEON Staff Writer*

Fuel delivery drivers can finally take a break from resting.

The state has temporarily suspended its limit on the number of hours home heating fuel delivery drivers can be on the road to meet the high demand for oil and propane.

Safety regulations prohibit commercial drivers from spending too much time behind the wheel. They need to stop driving after a set number of hours so their reflexes can stay sharp.

But with an increased demand for oil and propane because of cold weather and snow, fuel companies haven't been able to keep pace with orders because their drivers have to stop trucking when they reach their hour limits.

Starting today and ending Saturday, Feb. 5, drivers can spend more hours on the road, as long as they use common sense, the state Department of Safety said.

"There's been a crazy amount of snow," safety department spokesman Jim Van Dongen said.

Safety Commissioner John Barthelmes decided it was more important to ensure prompt delivery of oil and propane considering it will continue to be cold and more snow is in the forecast, Van Dongen said.

Oil is the most used source for home heating in New Hampshire, Van Dongen said. As a result, oil companies have been particularly hampered by the regulation and need to catch up on orders, he said.

Two local oil companies couldn't agree more, and were happy to hear about the safety department's ruling.

"Whenever you have more (below-freezing) days and snow on the ground, it slows everything down. You need to deliver more oil," said Lou Berube, owner of

Shattuck Oil in Pepperell, Mass.

"We've had a lot of snow this winter. You find yourself working seven days a week."

When in place, the safety regulation prohibits driving seven days a week.

A commercial motor vehicle driver is forbidden to drive more than 10 hours in one stretch, according to state law.

Also, a driver can't drive after being on duty 60 hours during seven consecutive days if the company isn't open for the full week.

And a driver can't drive for more than 70 hours in an eight-day stretch if the company is delivering every day of the week.

There are a lot of stipulations in the law, but safety officials say they prevent drivers from being fatigued and causing accidents on the road.

"The regulation is very complicated, but we try to maintain it," Berube said. "As a result, we've had to park some vehicles because drivers are over their hours."

Berube said safety won't be an issue in the upcoming week.

"It's not really a concern," he said. "The trucks are safe, and the drivers are well-trained. It's not so much longer hours in a day but working extra days."

Heather Ciardelli said her family's company, Ciardelli Fuel in Milford, will take the same approach this week: not extending drivers' daily routines, but having them work an extra day.

The spate of snowstorms has made it tough to deliver fuel, she said. Drivers have had to contend with snow on the roads, and then have had to shovel at customers' homes, she said.

"The boys can work Sunday if we need them to," Ciardelli said. "If they get tired, we'll call them in."

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