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As Demand Grows For Firewood, So Do Complaints

Monday, 03/07/11 6:34am

Diane Orson, WNPR

(Host) Record-setting snowfall and sub-zero temperatures in the Northeast have led to increased demand for firewood this heating season. There's also been an up-tick in complaints by consumers who say they're getting less firewood than they pay for.

As part of a collaboration with Northeast stations, WNPR's Diane Orson reports.

(Orson) By law, firewood is sold in cords. That's a unit of measure: 4 feet high by 4 feet wide by 8 feet long. That may not sound like much, but it's a lot. And for the uneducated, it can be hard to measure.

(Victor) "I didn't grow up with a fireplace, so it's not like I've seen what cords of wood look like growing up."

(Maka) "We were not educated until all of this happened to us."

(Orson) Victor and his wife Maka sit a few yards away from the wood stove that helps to heat their home in Newtown, Connecticut. They don't want to use their last name, because they're in the midst of a nasty legal battle with a local firewood dealer.

The couple paid \$540 in cash for three cords of firewood at the start of winter.

(Maka) "We realized that it was substantially less than what we estimated it should have been. And we measured the wood and it was very short. 50 percent less than we paid for."

(Orson) That's not unusual, says Frank Greene, director of the Division of Food and Standards at Connecticut's Department of Consumer Protection.

(Greene) "Usually we get maybe about 30 complaints a year. I think it's a little bit up this year. It just seems like this last month we've gotten a lot of complaints."

(Orson) When he begins investigating firewood complaints, Greene says his first question is: do you have a receipt?

(Greene) "You should have a written receipt. No. Did you pay him by cash or check? Well I gave him cash. Ok. How'd you get hold of him? It seems like a lot of them are saying they got 'em on Craig's List, and all they have is an e-mail address or a cell phone number and that's it."

(Orson) But is this just happening to suburbanites who don't know much about wood? In Vermont, Rhode Island and New Hampshire there are similar complaints.

(Young) "Basically anybody with a pickup truck and a chainsaw can sell firewood."

(Orson) Kevin Young works for the Department of Weights and Measures in New Hampshire.

Many of his cases lead to the arrest and prosecution of unscrupulous dealers, but he says firewood investigations are labor intensive.

(Young) "It's not like taking the amount of time it would to investigate whether a gas pump is inaccurate. These types of investigations take weeks and sometimes months to conclude."

(Orson) He suggests stacking and measuring firewood when it's delivered, or paying extra to have the seller stack it for you.

At the Open Hearth Woodyard in Hartford, Connecticut, manager Bob Kaczorowski is overseeing workers stacking wood. He says even well-meaning professionals may have trouble delivering exact cords.

(Kaczorowski) "If you have a tape measure or you hand load it and stack it in the truck you can be very precise, but with the volume that we have, it's impossible to hand stack it. It would take forever and we wouldn't be able to make the deliveries."

(Orson) So the Open Hearth devised a system to be sure their consumers get what they pay for.

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(Kaczorowski) "We've drawn lines on the interior bed of the truck to say this is a cord. We look at those lines and we go beyond those lines to deliver the cord."

(Orson) Authorities recommend that consumers purchase wood from local established sellers.

(Victor) "Its another source of fuel just like oil."

(Orson) Back in Newtown, Victor says he'd like more oversight of the firewood industry.

(Victor) "If my oil company came here...I just had a delivery last Friday. It's over \$700. If they delivered only half of what I paid for, can you imagine if there was nothing I could do? It's the same thing for people buying firewood."

(Orson) But state authorities say they're not apt to put a lot of time into investigating these complaints. Word to the wise when purchasing firewood: Its buyer beware.

For VPR News, I'm Diane Orson.

(Host) Northeast environmental reporting is made possible, in part, by a grant from United Technologies.



Tags

firewood winter heating business

VPR News

AARP Launches Campaign For Ratepayer Refund

Wednesday, 01/18/12 7:37am

A consumer organization representing older Vermonters is launching a media campaign that demands a refund for ratepayers if the state's largest utility is sold. AARP-Vermont says its goal is to win back money it says consumers are owed for bailing out the utility a decade ago.

Northfield Reinstates Permit Fees

Wednesday, 01/18/12 7:04am

Bellelevance Sentenced To 3 1/2 Years For Embezzlement

Wednesday, 01/18/12 6:06am

Wind Brings Scattered Power Outages

Wednesday, 01/18/12 6:06am

NPR News

Reports: Obama Will Reject Keystone Pipeline Proposal

Wednesday, 01/18/12 12:06pm

It will, however, let TransCanada resubmit a proposal that moves the pipeline away from the environmentally sensitive Sandhills area of Nebraska.

Homeless Teen Who's Up For Science Prize To Be At State Of The Union

Wednesday, 01/18/12 11:35am

Virtual Victuals: A Gamer Turns Video Game Food Into Real Food

Wednesday, 01/18/12 11:06am

Federal Authorities Charge 7 In Insider Trading Case

Wednesday, 01/18/12 10:11am

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