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Wood-heat trend raises concerns of air quality

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Winter is coming and the smell of wood smoke is in the air, and likely to grow stronger. As homeowners turn to wood heat to try to save money, some observers are watching carefully to see whether the trend will affect air quality.

State officials encourage consumers who opt for wood to buy new model wood stoves with cleaner burning technology to reduce the potential for wood-smoke pollution.

Some Vermont towns had problems with wood smoke during the energy crisis in the 1970s, and they could see those problems again now, said Dick Valentinetti, director of the Vermont Agency of Natural Resources Air Pollution Control Division.

"A lot depends on how much wood is being used for heat in an area, and if it's a valley situation," he said. "The smaller the valley, the more the emissions will build up during the night."

The tiny particles in wood smoke can contribute to a range of health problems, from asthma to heart disease. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, even a federally certified wood stove produces more emissions of fine particles than an oil or gas furnace.

Wood has growing appeal, though, both as a cheaper alternative to fuel oil and as a renewable Vermont resource that allows consumers who are worried about global warming to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels.

Wood "has a potential to have a role in many areas in addressing climate change, but it has the potential of shooting itself in the foot if the potential downsides are not addressed early on," said Paul Miller, deputy director of the Northeast States for Coordinated Air Use Management, a non-profit in Boston.

States need to promote new, clean-stove technology and remind people to not burn trash in stoves or outdoor wood boilers, he said.

Last week Vermont state environmental officials joined with the EPA and private industry to promote new, cleaner outdoor wood boiler technology at an event in Waterbury. All agree that the appetite for wood is growing.

At The Chimney Sweep Fireplace Shop in Shelburne, owner Roy L'Esperance has hired six new employees and purchased three new trucks. Sales of wood stoves this year are way up at his store.

"The phone is just dancing off the wall," L'Esperance said.

The rush came as fuel-oil prices spiked in midsummer and consumers began looking for ways to reduce fuel-oil use. Now oil prices have come down significantly, but demand for wood and wood

heating systems is still strong.

Robert Ostermeyer, an artist who lives in Grand Isle, bought a wood pellet stove earlier this year and estimates he'll save several thousand dollars in propane costs this winter.

Many of his neighbors heat with wood, and while Ostermeyer's new pellet stove is much cleaner than a fireplace or old wood stove, it's not emissions-free.

He thinks wood smoke could become an issue as more consumers choose to heat with wood. Still, given the options for fuel sources, he feels it's a reasonably good choice. "We're at a place right now where there's no good solution and so you feel kind of compromised no matter what you do," Ostermeyer said.

It's not just rural dwellers who heat with wood. Ellen Kirschner bought a new wood stove for her renovated home in South Burlington's Queen City Park. The stove produces about half the heat she uses in the winter, with the rest coming from fuel oil.

She's been heating with wood for years and finds the new stove to be much more efficient and cleaner than the older models. That's a good thing in her neighborhood, where houses sit close together and wood smoke has been a source of debate. At least a third of the neighborhood burns wood, and some neighbors are unhappy with all the smoke.

"People talk about it and I don't know what there is to do about it," said Kirschner.

Is burning wood good or bad for the environment? "It's a hard call," said Kirschner. "I think it's probably not wonderful for the environment."

Wood accounted for 10 percent or less of Vermont home-heating fuel in 2000, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Fuel oil represented 59 percent and natural gas 12 percent.

Over the years, various Vermont towns -- mostly in valleys -- have debated a wood smoke problem. But Vermont has not experienced the problems of some Western states that limit wood burning on high pollution days or ban it all together.

Matt Cota, executive director of the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association in Montpelier, said the wood-burning trend could lead to more air pollution. Go on a ridge above Montpelier and just watch the emissions, he urged. "On a cold day, you can see which chimneys have wood coming out and which have oil because you can see the black smoke coming out of the wood chimneys."

But environmentalists such as James Moore, a clean-energy advocate at VPIRG, think wood fuel makes sense for the Earth and the Vermont economy.

"It's crazy that we spend hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars every year to buy oil from Saudi Arabia to heat our homes in Vermont when we have local resources that could meet the need for less money."

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