



Chasing Fuel Prices – An Illusion of Progress

If you take the long view of home heating in Vermont you find a sort of historic hop-scotching around, people modernizing their equipment and fuels in search of the next great thing. As the pioneer days receded behind us, the fireplace was out and the Franklin stove was in; then the open-front Franklin was out and the ornate, cylindrical Warm Morning was in; next, the Warm Morning was out and more utilitarian heating stoves like the Atlanta were the rage. Atlantas and their ilk gave way to Vermont Castings, Hearthstones, and other stoves with baffle systems for reigniting gases.

For most Vermonters wood and coal stoves and furnaces – used as a primary heating source – eventually yielded to other central-heating solutions. One step in this evolution was electric baseboard heat, which in the 1950s seemed like an ideal solution – clean, cheap, and unobtrusive. But when that became not-so-cheap, electric heat was out and fossil fuels were in.

Now the worm is turning again. Well, two worms, really. The more promising worm is renewable energy, primarily from home-based solar installations (although the majority of solar installations thus far are for hot water

and photovoltaic electricity, rather than space heating). The advent of net metering in Vermont, and its recent regulatory expansion to include hydropower and group net metering, points in a direction that an increasing number of Vermonters may choose. However, not everyone is attracted to the prospect of making their own energy.

In light of volatile fossil-fuel prices,

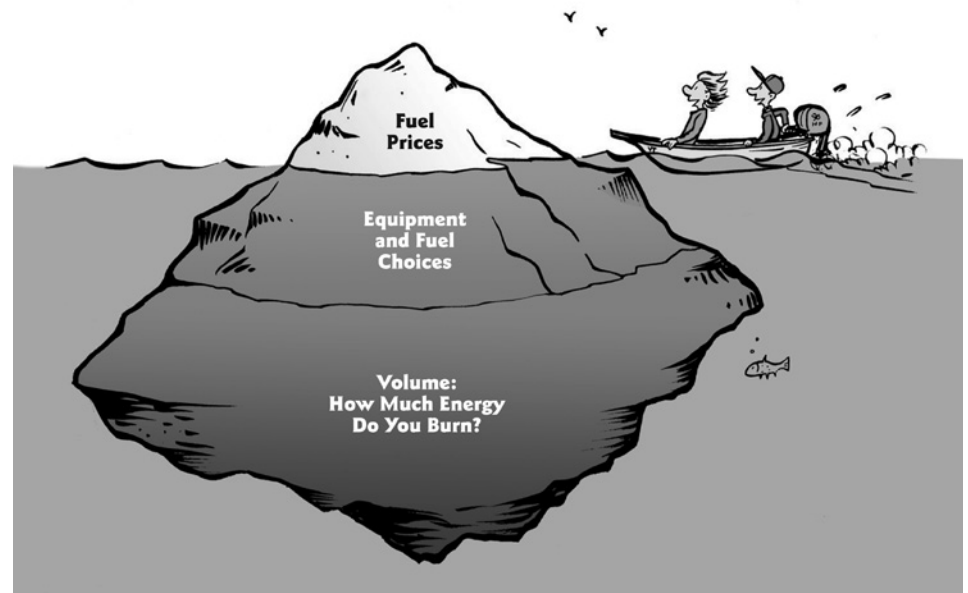
some people now are suggesting a worm we've seen before – returning to electric heat. It's not that electricity is cheap; it's that fossil fuel prices are wildly unpredictable, supplies to Vermont could be interrupted or diminished as global competition for finite supplies increases, and "peak oil" threatens an actual end to fossil fuel resources within the lifetimes of the younger folks among us. To some people, this makes electricity look good.

It shouldn't. Electricity is still an inappropriate, inefficient energy source

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The Energy Iceberg



for space heat heat: when we collectively use electric space heating, the aggregate impact of our individual heating decisions can lead to a higher peak demand, and potentially stress the transformers and distribution lines needed to deliver this “heat” along the 1,250 miles of Co-op lines.

WEC tries to moderate or avoid peak demands, both in winter or summer, by encouraging lower use year-round. Keeping our system from hitting new peaks is one of the best ways to keep your Co-op's costs down.

Home, sweet home

As this sketchy history suggests, we tend to concentrate on two considerations when making our home-heating decisions: the cost of the fuel we're using – our primary consideration – and other kinds of fuel (and equipment) that we could choose instead. And the second consideration is really only a variant on the first: we are most likely

to switch fuels based, again, on the consideration of cost.

Here's what the Energy Coach says: We, as energy consumers in little ol' Vermont (and the Washington Electric service territory), are unlikely to influence the price of fossil-fuel energy, nuclear-generated energy, or any other kind of energy. We can spend a lot of time and effort chasing the lowest energy dollar by changing our fuel source – from or to fuel oil, propane, or electricity. But the one way we can really control our destiny is by looking at a common denominator among all our choices, which is “How Much Energy Do We Consume?”

It's easy, and natural, to be distracted by fuel prices. But it's wiser to focus on consumption. If we reduce our consumption we'll reduce our costs, no matter what fuel choice we make.

Lowering our fuel consumption obviously means improving the efficiency of our homes and of the

equipment we're using. Here again, though, we encounter a common distraction: it's easier to focus on our equipment than on the energy-related condition of our homes. The equipment is important – vital, in fact. But buying a new boiler is not money well-spent unless we address the condition of our homes.

There are several expert resources in central Vermont to help people analyze and then change their home's energy performance. If you call us at the Co-op we'll help you find the resources that work best for you – starting with an analysis of your electric usage, and including a comprehensive home energy audit.

The Energy Coach says that Nirvana will not be found by fuel switching. It turns out that “the next great thing” is your house itself. Call Bill Powell at the Co-op and we'll talk about it.

