

Heating Fuel Prices Force Change for Vermonters

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Vermont is already expecting its first frost Thursday night -- a chilling thought as so many worry about staying warm this winter.

A poll conducted for Channel 3 News confirmed what so many of us have feared -- that the rising price of fuel will force changes in our household budgets. Forty-two percent said the rising cost of fuel has forced them to cut back on other expenses.

Bob Poczabut's family has lived in his Burlington home for 31 years. He knew his house had some insulation problems, but never did anything about it until he got an estimate for this year's heating oil.

"I was shocked," he said, "but my wife was worse because she's the one who pays the bills. She knows what we paid last year and doesn't like writing out that \$700 or 800 check for delivery."

So Poczabut decided it was time to make a change to save some money. He called in contractor **Scott Gardner** to do an energy assessment and was surprised to find the wall was empty.



"There's no insulation," he said, pointed a tiny lighted camera through a small hole he had drilled in a bedroom wall. "If there was insulation I'd see pink or yellow fiberglass."

A Channel 3 News poll found 39 percent of people are taking steps to weatherize their homes like Poczabut is.

"I think that's good news, I think that's excellent news," said Richard Watts, research director of the UVM Transportation Research Center and a specialist in energy issues. "Many of those steps, the money you pay for weatherization, will pay for themselves, so it's a really important first step to reduce how much they need to heat their homes."

While that could save some money, Watts said the poll underscores how dependent the state is on oil -- 57 percent use it as their primary source for heat.

"On the home heating oil front, we're spending about \$300 million more to buy the same amount of home heating oil we bought three or four years ago. So this is a tremendous hit

we're taking as a state because of our dependence on oil sources and lack of options."

But only 33 percent of poll respondents said the rising price of fuel has forced them to change the way they heat their homes. Watts said he was not surprised.

"No, and I think some of this, like with cars, people have limited options," he said. "In Chittenden County, you can think about switching from heating oil to natural gas, but in most places in the state that's not available."

Bob Poczabut is considering replacing his home's 40-year-old furnace next year. "It's the original, as you can see by the size of it," he said.

He's also thinking of switching from heating oil to natural gas. So far he said he's investing about \$5,500 in insulation and other improvements this year. An investment he hopes will pay off this winter and winters to come.

"We'll find out next spring how much we're going to save."

The state announced a program that will provide \$2 million in low-interest loans to help homeowners cut their fuel costs by making their homes more energy-efficient, doing things such as adding insulation or replacing old, inefficient heating equipment. Five-year loans of \$2,500 to \$5,000 dollars will be available from TD Banknorth starting on October 1. The interest rate on that right now would be about 3.75 percent.

