

NOTJUST FOR CARS: BIOFUEL HEATS HOMES

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More and more cars on the road are sporting “biodiesel” bumper stickers, touting the “green” sensibilities of their owners. But these days even some houses qualify for that eco-friendly label.

That’s because biodiesel — a mixture of diesel and fuel made of vegetable material such as soy or grass — is gaining cachet not only among homeowners who still use their old-style oil furnaces but also among some who choose the option when shopping for a new heating system.

There are compelling reasons to stick with oil heat, whether traditional diesel or biofuel, its supporters contend. Oil furnaces are said to last far longer than other types — 30 years or more, compared to about 15 years for some other options — and converting to another type of furnace can be expensive enough that the cost isn’t recouped during the life of the system. And the quality of the heat from an oil furnace, its partisans contend, is second to none.

Oil heat enthusiasts insist that their preferred product has gotten an undeserved bad rap in the past, starting with allegations of nose-wrinkling diesel odors, sooty residues, and unsightly — even dangerous — storage tanks.

Michael Schilling, general manager of Automatic Heat in Glenwood, sells and services all kinds of furnaces — straight electric and heat pump, natural gas, oil and geothermal — and he’s clearly an oil fan.

“Oil really gives you that nice, warm air, which comes out of the duct at 140 degrees,” Schilling said. “Gas heat’s only about 98 degrees, so lots of people convert from oil to gas and then think their new furnace isn’t working right. We especially caution older clients that they might not be happy with the change.”

Automatic Heat serves about 2,000 customers with oil furnaces, “and about 85 percent are using biodiesel — it’s pretty much clipping right along,” Schilling said. “We offer our customers a B20 blend of 20 percent biofuel and 80 percent low-sulfur (diesel). We don’t go higher because, like cars, some fuel systems can’t handle more than that without modifications.”

Even at that level, the blend “makes a huge impact on emissions,” he said. Eventually, when heating systems that can run 99 percent biofuel become readily available, “if customers are educated about biofuel, I think they’ll want to change,” he said.

Before Automatic Heat began offering biodiesel heating oil two years ago, “we polled our customers and told them we were considering it,” Schilling said. “At that time, about 70 percent of them said they wanted it, even at premium prices.”

The price of diesel heating oil fluctuates far more than electricity or natural gas, because it’s tied not only to crude oil prices determined largely by the world’s primary oil producers but also by the number of domestic refineries online at any one time and the amount of petroleum they process.

Even so, the cost of heating with oil “is kind of in the middle” of available options, with natural gas “probably cheaper — I hate to say that, but it’s true — and pellets and propane are higher,” said Bill Miller, who oversees heating oil operations for Marshall’s, a longtime heating and cooling company in Springfield.

“We do see some people changing from heating oil to other types of heat, but we are selling some new oil furnaces. They’re up there in efficiency — a higher grade of furnace oil like kerosene is 93 percent efficient,” Miller said. He agrees with Schilling that “it is the warmest heat you can get.”

Schilling estimates that over the long term, “for identical homes, heating with oil is probably less than 5 percent more expensive than natural gas.”

Heat pumps are the least expensive form of heating, “but their efficiency drops rapidly when the outdoor temperature goes down below 35 degrees,” he said. “And straight electric heat is definitely the most expensive way to heat a home.” According to data provided by Molly Brady, spokeswoman for the Oregon Petroleum Association, the average per gallon price this year for heating oil is \$2.39, up from \$1.17 in 2000 but down from \$2.47 a year ago.

The U.S. Department of Energy estimates that, nationally, home heating costs may increase this winter by 21 percent for customers with oil furnaces and 20 percent for households using natural gas. The energy department also projects price increases nationally for electric and propane heating.

Heating oil “is simply off-road diesel,” according to SeSequential Biofuels, one of the major suppliers of biodiesel in both the Eugene and Portland areas. “Any heating oil furnace can use a B20 biodiesel blend without modification,” the company’s Web site says. Blends of up to 99.9 percent biodiesel and 0.1 percent petro-diesel can be used if approved by a certified home heating technician, SeSequential says.

Both Oregon homeowners and drivers who use biodiesel with a rating of B20 or more for home heating or personal vehicles now qualify for tax credits of up to \$200 on their state tax returns, under a bill adopted by the 2007 state Legislature.

Brady says there are several reasons why people who have oil furnaces should keep them and those who are furnace shopping should consider them. Heating oil is not smelly, and well-maintained oil furnaces run clean and trouble-free, she said.

In fact, Schilling said, the “soot factor” of properly used oil furnaces is historically low, and even lower when burning newer, lower-sulfur diesel blended with biofuel.

“When we started with biodiesel, we were a little concerned about whether there would be problems with filters and nozzles, but it hasn’t been a problem,” he said. “In some cases, with boiler systems, we found that they were sparkling clean after a year of using biodiesel — it actually improved the systems.”

Nor is it true that people need to convert their heating systems from oil to something else — or get rid of no-longer-used storage tanks — before trying to sell their homes, Brady said.

“Some people think that having a tank full of heating oil is really dangerous, but the truth is that you can drop a match in a bucket of heating oil without any risk of explosion or fire,” Brady said. “Natural gas and propane are far more volatile than heating oil.”

While real estate agents often advise sellers to replace oil furnaces and buyers to beware of purchasing properties with them, according to heating specialists, both Brady and Schilling say neither should be a rule of thumb.

“I have issues with real estate agents who say you can’t sell a house with oil heat, because it is such a good, efficient heat source,” Schilling said. “But once people have that in their mind, convincing them otherwise is pretty difficult, although the biodiesel option has made a difference.”

Younger homeowners especially have become aware of the benefits of “going green” by using biodiesel in existing oil heat systems, Brady said. “Many of them also like being able to choose where they buy their fuel. With electric or natural gas furnaces, there’s usually only one supplier.”

Selling a home with oil heat is no problem if the storage tank has not leaked and the owner knows of no other, underground tanks on the property, according to the state Department of Environmental Quality. Sellers who have converted to another form of heat must certify that any unused tanks on the property are empty.

If the seller does not know whether the property ever had an oil furnace, looking for an oil fill pipe close to the ground or a vent pipe attached to the house may indicate the presence of an abandoned tank.

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