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My Turn: Idling cars are the price of comfort

By Wayne Michaud

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Winter's encroaching and I'm noticing the increased idling of vehicles at the general store where I get my morning coffee. In dawn's light, the pickup sits there unattended with its parking lights on. Through the steady muffled rumbling of the engine, odor-laden steam puffs emanate from the exhaust. Same for the sedan nearby. Mind you, this is not extreme cold, but the hovering-above-or-below-freezing variety. Let it idle for a few minutes. It'll keep nice and warm for the occupant. It's good for the engine. It's always been the customary thing to do. And how much gas can possibly be wasted in that time? For many drivers collectively all over Vermont and across our nation, no thought or awareness is given to the harm caused by this practice.

Here is the price we are paying for unnecessary idling:

Air quality: While the trend in emissions tends to point to the global warming issue, it's our health for which idling is most detrimental. Even with today's modern vehicles, more than half a dozen heavy-duty chemicals are spewed into the air around us. This causes respiratory illness and affects our hearts and lungs. Children, the elderly and asthmatics are particularly vulnerable.

Global warming: Carbon dioxide, a component of vehicle exhaust, is the main manmade contributor to global warming. While Vermont overall is a low carbon producing state, note that our transportation greenhouse gas emissions, on a per-capita basis, are nearly double the national average.

Fuel waste: Oil is flirting with the \$100-a-barrel mark. Gas is over \$3 a gallon and headed upward. Idling yields zero miles per gallon. Idling for more than 10 seconds uses more fuel than it takes to restart. For a typical vehicle, idling for 10 minutes uses the same amount of fuel it takes to go about five miles. Think about that.

Engine damage: It's hard to convince folks that idling is not good for the engine. The fact is an idling engine is not operating at peak temperature, resulting in incomplete fuel combustion. Fuel residues can condense on cylinder walls, contaminate oil and damage engine components. The best way to warm up the engine and all mechanical parts in cold weather, even in subfreezing temperatures, is to idle for no more than 30 seconds. Then, as long as window defrosting is adequate, you're good to go. Just drive slowly to moderately to get lubricants flowing.

The law: In Vermont, under certain circumstances and in certain locales, it's illegal to idle. A vehicle idling while unattended in public is breaking the law. A vehicle idling on school property (not just school buses) is breaking the law. A vehicle idling in Burlington between April and November is breaking the law.

Is all this worth the price of some short-lived comfort? With few exceptions, we really can give up a few moments of ideal temperature in a parked vehicle. And the unattended, shut-off vehicle will keep its warmth during a foray into the general store for that cup of coffee. We'll save fuel and engine wear. We'll all breathe fresh air and do a good deed for Mother Earth, too. To break the idling habit, it's pretty simple and basic: Shut off the engine when parked.

Wayne Michaud of Bristol is director of the statewide Idle-Free VT campaign.