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Avoid summertime idling; it's the law

By Wayne Michaud

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Summertime has arrived in Vermont and we are savoring the fleeting but delightful warmer weather -- usually delightful except for those hotter, more humid days. For the folks in their vehicles, that means air conditioning. And it also means the tendency for us to leave our vehicles running when we're parked. After all, we can keep our cocoon on wheels cool and comfortable. But there is a price to be paid for this comfort - a huge price.

- Fuel waste. Let's face it, an idling vehicle is getting zero miles to the gallon. Do we want to let it idle for five, ten minutes, or more with today's ever increasing gas prices?
- Engine wear. An engine at idle is not running at peak temperature. This results in incomplete fuel combustion. Fuel residues can condense on cylinder walls, contaminate oil and damage engine components. These residues cause spark plugs to form deposits and foul, and idling leads to condensation that can shorten the life of the exhaust system.
- Noise. In our town centers and suburbs, there's already enough noise without having to hear the constant idling of a stationary vehicle.
- The law. For those who leave their vehicles running and unattended, that is a violation of Vermont's unattended motor vehicle law, a law that is enforced.
- Our health. Even today's modern vehicles contain carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxide, sulfur dioxide, benzene and several other toxic chemicals that impair our lungs and heart. Children, the elderly, and individuals with asthma are especially vulnerable.
- Global climate change. Although Vermont is one of the lowest carbon producing states, on a per capita basis, our transportation greenhouse gas emissions are nearly double the national average. Idling is a major contributor to this equation.

Those are some pretty persuasive reasons to consider shutting off the engine when not in traffic. On those hot days, consider parking in the shade, opening the windows for air or going inside a building to keep cool. And please avoid drive-throughs, which allow a caravan of idling vehicles to potentiate exhaust emissions. Shut off the engine and go inside to get that cold soda. Would we be sacrificing a little comfort? Yes. But look at what is gained by us all avoiding unnecessary idling. We save money, we reduce noise, we improve our air quality and we reduce our carbon emissions. That's priceless.

Wayne Michaud of Bristol is director of the Idle-Free VT campaign. For more ways to reduce idling, visit www.idlefreevt.org.