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My Turn: As weather cools, watch the idling

By Wayne Michaud

Here in Vermont, there's already a smattering of color in the trees. Soon, there will be frost on the fields. This also marks the time typically when vehicles are warming up in the mornings unoccupied with heaters cranked in driveways or nearby convenience store lots while motorists remain indoors with a cup of coffee. Or, sitting in already warmed-up vehicles letting them idle while chatting on cell phones or waiting to pick up someone. After all, we want to let our engines warm up gradually against freezing or subfreezing temperatures, or keep ourselves as comfortable as possible. No problem, right? The truth is, this archaic, harmful and wasteful practice still occurs all over Vermont.

So what's the problem about idling? What's the harm and waste?

Idling impacts air quality and health: Exhaust emissions contain harmful chemicals including carbon monoxide, benzene and nitrogen oxide. They cause respiratory illness including asthma and lung disease. These emissions are worse during idling and intensify below freezing. Children and the elderly are especially vulnerable.

Idling wastes money: The simple truth is an idling vehicle gets 0 mpg.

Idling puts our planet at peril: Vehicle carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions are the main man-made component in greenhouse gases that cause climate change and are currently melting polar ice caps at the fastest rate ever.

Idling threatens our security while wasting energy: Excessive idling makes us more reliant on Middle East oil at a time when America is striving to be more energy independent.

Idling can violate Vermont's laws: Vermont has an idling restriction law for school buses. And for anyone allowing a vehicle to idle while unattended in public, be aware that is in violation of Vermont's unattended motor vehicles law.

These are compelling reasons not to idle. OK, so how can idling be limited?

Starting today, begin limiting your car, SUV or diesel pickup idling to 30 seconds when parked. The EPA and U.S. Department of Energy tell us to do so, even below 32 degrees (there are a few exceptions such as when below 0 degrees, inadequate defrosting, very elderly or infant occupants). The best way to warm up not only the engine, but wheel bearings, steering, suspension, transmission and tires, is to drive at a slow to moderate pace. Also, when sitting in a parked, warmed vehicle, 30 seconds of idling uses more fuel than shutting off and restarting.

Avoid being part of a line of idlers in drive-throughs. Park, shut the engine off and walk into the place of business.

Avoid purchase and use of remote vehicle starters, which encourage excessive idling.

Surely you've witnessed excessive idling. Write a letter to your local paper telling us about it.

Support legislation in Vermont for a heavy-duty diesel idling reduction law. Vermont remains the only state in the Northeast not to have this type of law.

When discussing idling, not to be overlooked is heavy-duty diesel truck and bus idling. Excessive idling of these vehicles, too, can be eliminated. As cited by the EPA, the American Trucking Association and at least four diesel engine manufacturers, the general heavy-duty idling limit is 3 to 5 minutes. They also advocate shutting down and restarting up to several times a day to save fuel and engine wear. Fleet operators and drivers can realize a bundle of savings taking these measures.

Companies with idling reduction policies, such as Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, UPS, Hannaford Trucking Co., Burlington FoodService and others, save thousands of dollars annually in fuel costs just by avoiding idling when parked. They also avoid costs in increased engine maintenance and shortened engine life associated with excessive idling. And when the most toxic transportation emissions are kept out of the environment, these companies become green in a second sense: as socially responsible members of the community.

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