

Idling cars target of Stowe effort

03/27/08

By James Askew

This much is certain: If your car's shut off, it's not churning out greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change.

That simple maxim is behind a campaign to get drivers to turn off their cars outside the grocery store, outside school, anywhere they're not moving.

The campaign has popped up in Stowe in the form of little pink pieces of paper that say: "Thank you for not idling when parked."

A bunch of local residents are carrying the pink notices with them, ready to tuck them under the windshield wipers of any car that's just sitting there, idling.

"Idling does a number of things," said Janice St. Onge, one of the founders of the Stowe Energy and Climate Action Network, whose goal is to help the community take control of its energy and climate-change future.

Idling "wastes fuel, it puts emissions in the air that are unnecessary, it's bad for our health ... and it's greenhouse gases," St. Onge said.

"If you look around to most of the public places in Stowe, the library, the post office, the hockey rink, the grocery store, oftentimes you'll see people ... go in to grab something, to mail a letter, to drop their kids off at the rink, and they'll leave their cars running."

The Stowe group hopes people will understand how, by simply turning off their cars, they can individually improve the environmental future of their children and grandchildren, St. Onge said.

Idle-Free Vermont pushes the 10-30 rules:

- "Turn off your engine when you are parked or stopped (except in traffic) for more than 10 seconds. Idling your vehicle for more than 10 seconds uses more fuel than restarting your engine.
- "Reduce vehicle warm-up idling to 30 seconds or less, even in subfreezing temperatures. Excessive idling wastes fuel and causes engine component damage."

There are economic reasons to turn off the engines, too. The price of regular unleaded gasoline in Stowe in the \$3.30-a-gallon range, and pessimists predict it will hit \$4 a gallon this summer.

In the U.S., transportation is the second-largest contributor of man-made carbon dioxide, behind industry, and ahead of home heating and cooling.

In rural areas like Vermont, families consume 20 percent more gasoline than their urban counterparts, says the Consumer Federation of America, a nonprofit group.

In 2004, the latest figures available, a typical Vermont family of three consumed 1,635 gallons of gasoline for the year, says the International Energy Agency, an energy policy adviser to 27 nations. That's just transportation; it does not include heating oil or gas for heating and cooking.

Bristol resident Wayne Michaud started Idle-Free VT in 2006, a drive to reduce gasoline consumption and its harmful effects. The campaign aims to persuade people to turn off their cars, and persuade the Legislature to pass statewide idle-reduction laws.

Now, Vermont has anti-idling laws for school zones, and Burlington prohibits idling in residential areas for more than five minutes. But there is no statewide idle-reduction law.

Americans bought 134 billion gallons of gasoline in 2004, equal to the total gasoline consumption of 24 nations combined, including China, Japan, Canada, Mexico, Russia, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy, Australia, Brazil and 12 others.

Vermont, population 620,000, consumed about 339 million of those gallons.

In addition, the Consumer Federation of America found that wealthier families use significantly more gasoline, and many Stowe residents are in that category.

Idling a car for 10 minutes a day can waste up to 27 gallons of gasoline a year, says Idle-Free VT.

If idling were curbed for all 563,432 registered vehicles in Vermont, each saving 27 gallons a year, gasoline consumption would drop more than 15 million gallons a year — the equivalent of removing 2,100 cars from the road, Idle-Free VT says.

"In the end, this not just about savings, this is about ... reducing engine

wear, it's about your health, it's about climate change, it's about doing the right thing," St. Onge said.

"If every person in the Stowe community turned off their car when it didn't need to be running, we are making one small difference in providing a better place for our children."

The Stowe group of 15 to 20 people is working on other initiatives, too. It's encouraging people to use energy-efficient compact fluorescent light bulbs, and "we are also looking at how we can be involved in the town-plan update," St. Onge said. "What a great opportunity to get our municipal officials thinking about ways to incorporate energy efficiency and renewable energy."

For more information, e-mail the Stowe Climate Action Network at stowe-can@googlegroups.com or visit <http://groups.google.com/group/stowe-can?hl=en>.