

Abandoning expensive oil

Heating oil sales fall by 26 percent nationally as Americans turn to wood, natural gas, conservation

By **CLARKE CANFIELD**
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PORTLAND, Maine — No longer are Tom Wright's heating costs tied to events a world away over which he has no control. Faced with a \$10,000 heating bill, he got rid of his oil furnace and brought in a wood pellet stove to heat his home and office.

Oil and gasoline prices are sky-high, and heating oil use is tumbling as people find alternative ways to stay warm — evidence that Americans' efforts to wean themselves off oil can bear fruit.

"It's more than just watching the price of oil," said Wright, a former construction company executive who now heads a non-profit that works with at-risk children. "It's watching what's going on in the world and how much is affected by the need for oil."

Millions of U.S. households use oil to heat their homes, but the Northeast has a higher proportion of people who use it as their primary heating source

than any other region. Nowhere is the dependence greater than in Maine, where oil heats three out of four homes.

Heating oil prices have shot up 32 percent over the past four months in Maine. But consumption has fallen by more than a third in the past five years, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration. Nationally, sales of residential heating oil have fallen 26 percent.

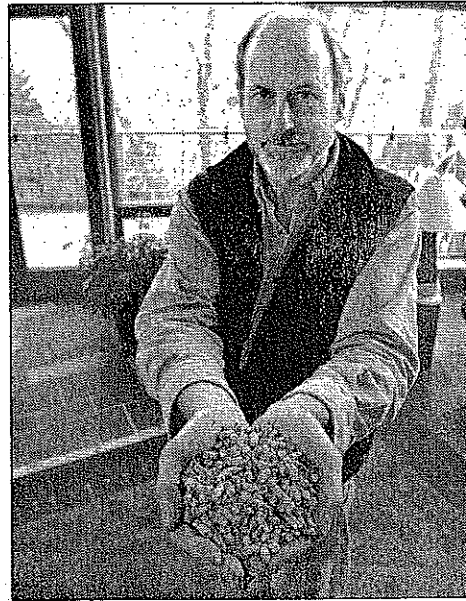
Frustrated with such prices, people are making their homes more energy-efficient, supplementing with space heaters, buying more efficient oil furnaces, or simply switching to natural gas, wood pellets or some other fuel.

Some consumers have simply decided they're going to wean themselves off oil after living through wild price swings and uncertainty, said Jamie Py, executive director of the Maine Energy Marketers Association.

The price volatility takes a toll on oil dealers, who are seeing their oil sales drop and have to gamble on when to buy oil, Py said.

"The market is driving people to do what makes sense for them," Py said. "We've been successful in telling people to conserve."

ECONOMY



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Tom Wright holds wood pellets, which he has used to heat his home and office in Freeport, Maine, since getting rid of his oil furnace. He made the switch after getting hit with a \$10,000 heating bill.