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Your oil burner might thrive on a change in diet; Biodiesel fuel mix becoming available in area communities

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Heating oil customers throughout much of Greater Boston can now burn a greener fuel.

The Boston-based Massachusetts Energy Consumers Alliance is launching a program that will allow members to buy heating fuel that is 90 percent low-sulfur heating oil and 10 percent biodiesel.

Biodiesel is a fuel refined from virgin soybean oil or used vegetable oils that can be substituted for regular diesel in many engines. Unlike regular diesel, biodiesel comes from renewable sources and produces less emissions when it burns.

Mass Energy contends the blend being offered through its new "Bio-Heat" program generates about one-quarter of a typical heating oil's sulfur emissions.

Larry Chretien, executive director of Mass Energy, said his organization was able to launch the "Bio-Heat" program thanks to a \$50,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Energy. The organization will use the grant primarily for marketing and education.

For now, only one of the heating oil dealers Mass Energy works with delivers the biodiesel blend: Fisher-Churchill Co. of Dedham. The company will pick up the fuel at the terminals of World Energy, a Chelsea company that sells biofuel blends throughout the country.

On the South Shore, residents of Braintree, Canton, Cohasset, Dedham, Canton, Hingham, Milton, Quincy, Randolph, Sharon and Stoughton will be able to buy the fuel through Mass Energy right away.

Chretien said he hopes his organization can generate enough demand for the cleaner-burning fuel that more terminals will begin carrying it, more heating oil dealers will have access and more towns can be added to that list. He said Mass Energy is already working with other heating oil delivery companies to get them to sign on with the program.

"We're trying to prime the pump," Chretien said. "We'd like to have biodiesel as ubiquitous as heating oil."

Mass Energy has 15 customers using the fuel, but it hopes its public launch of the program tomorrow will introduce the product to more heating oil users.

One early customer of the program, Richard Grady of Westwood, said he began using biodiesel in November. He said adjustments to his burner and the use of the fuel has contributed to a significant improvement in his furnace's efficiency.

The blended fuel will be slightly more expensive, Chretien said, than the price his organization's members typically pay for heating oil. Still, at \$1.97 a gallon now, it is running just below the state's average price for a gallon of heating oil.

Grady says paying a few extra cents a gallon is worth it to lessen the country's dependence on foreign oil.

"It's very interesting and I think if we all work together we can harness all the money ...that we're sending to the Middle East," Grady said.

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