



## Contributors

### Julie A. Gill: National Grid's bait-and-switch

01:00 AM EDT on Friday, July 11, 2008

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FEW ARE THEY who have not known the personal experience of being bullied — by people who can do or say anything they want simply because they are bigger than you are. That is exactly what is happening to your neighborhood heating-oil dealers. While the oil dealers and their customers are experiencing ever-increasing energy prices, National Grid has put out an aggressive ad campaign to get oil-heating customers to convert to natural gas. I would like to challenge them to provide proof of their allegations against heating oil to the consuming public.

National Grid knows that it will soon have to go before the Rhode Island Public Utilities Commission to request an enormous rate increase. Natural gas is trading on the market at almost double what it was in August 2007, an 80-percent increase in just the past six months.

National Grid will have to pass that increase on to the consumer. It has recently asked the PUC for a 10-percent increase to cover a \$9 million deficit and an additional 4.6 percent on the distribution charge to pay for improvements to its infrastructure. Is it trying to keep it quiet so the company can lure unsuspecting oil-heat customers to a product that they are led to believe is less expensive and cleaner so that once they switch, it's too late?

Heating oil in Rhode Island has been less expensive than natural gas for 19 out of the past 22 years. For many years, the oil industry has been developing new technologies to increase efficiency, reduce our carbon footprint and decrease consumption before it ever became popular to do so. In 1973, the average oil-heated home burned 1,294 gallons a year; today it is 833 gallons, a 35-percent reduction.

Energy Star oil-fired furnaces are available that are 95-percent efficient and boilers that are 93-percent efficient. Upgrading an older system can save up to 40 percent on fuel costs. By taking small steps with bio-heat, a blend of heating oil with vegetable oil or animal fats, oil-heated systems will run even cleaner and reduce our dependence on foreign oil. Just a 5-percent blend of bio-heat is as clean as natural gas for carbon-dioxide emissions. The oil industry is taking it slowly because it is sensitive to increases in prices for agricultural products, but bio-heat is coming.

Residential heating-oil equipment creates such a negligible amount of emissions that heating oil is not even regulated by the Federal Clean Air Act. If natural gas isn't a significant contributor to carbon-dioxide emissions, why were the natural-gas lobbyists fighting to change the way carbon-dioxide emissions would have been counted under the recently defeated climate-change bill in the U.S. Senate?

Unlike natural gas, heating oil is not explosive, and carbon-monoxide poisoning from an oil-heated system is so rare that we do not know of a single instance of it anywhere in Rhode Island as far back as we can remember. Carbon monoxide is toxic; heating-oil fumes are not. What natural gas does emit is

methane, one of the most harmful greenhouse gases. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, methane emits 23 times the greenhouse gases that carbon dioxide does.

In fact, Quincy, Mass., and other communities are concerned that natural-gas (methane) leaks are killing 60- or 70-year-old shade trees. Before the introduction of modern leak-detection equipment, natural-gas workers were told to look for dying vegetation as a sign of a low-level gas leak. ("Are gas leaks killing trees?" Robert Knox, Boston Globe, Dec. 13, 2007).

When the weather gets bitterly cold, the gas company cannot keep up with demand. It tells large users who heat with natural gas that they are being shut off and should switch to their alternative fuel — oil. If National Grid does not have enough infrastructure and product to supply the customers it has now, how will it supply more? Is this the reason it is pushing for new liquefied natural-gas terminals in our area?

Finally, most heating-oil dealers are owned by families — some of them second or third generation. They know and care about their customers. They live in the same neighborhoods and give back to the community they share together. When you need them, a full-service oil dealer is available 24 hours a day. National Grid cannot say the same.

Is converting to natural gas a smart decision, or do consumers need to do a little research before throwing good money away?

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