

Sounds Like a Good Idea, But...

John McClaughry is full of criticisms of the Affordable Heat Act — and of preparing Vermont for the looming economic impacts of climate change generally — but empty-handed when it comes to better suggestions.

His latest screed (Letter to Editor, Saturday, April 29) takes me to task for opposing an ill-considered amendment that would have limited potential oil and propane price increases, after implementation of a clean heat standard, to "20 cents."

Wouldn't we all like to limit fossil-fuel price increases to 20 cents? Especially a year ago, when fuel oil prices more than doubled from the year before, an increase of more than \$2.75.

Obviously Vermont is at the mercy of global oil prices. Admittedly the amendment, offered by Rep. Jim Harrison, would have limited not overall increases, but increases relative to the New England average price. What's not to like?

Well, the regional volatility of fuel oil and propane prices, like global price volatility, is also outside of Vermont's control. About 7% of the time in the last 16 heating seasons (defined as the coldest 21 weeks of the year) Vermont fuel oil prices were 20 cents or more than the New England average (Energy Information Agency data). And propane prices were 20 cents or more higher 50% of the time.

How would the Harrison amendment cope with this natural volatility in the regional petroleum market? Clearly it wouldn't. So this 20-cent limit sounds like a good idea in theory, but it's half-baked at best and completely unworkable in reality.

The old saw comes to mind: To every complex problem, there is a solution that is obvious, simple, and wrong.

In fact, the Public Utility Commission is explicitly charged with limiting negative cost impacts in designing the clean heat credit market.

That design will need to be affirmatively approved by the next Legislature in the 2025 session, through introduction of a bill, testimony in committees, passage by House and Senate, and referral to the Governor.

The Harrison amendment, and Mr. McClaughry, are grasping at straws to undermine the AHA. That suits the petroleum industry just fine. But it leaves regular Vermonters exposed to more years of vulnerability to their drive for profits — which were outrageous last year, by the way.

Maybe Mr. McClaughry thinks Vermont has no choice but to stay hitched to Big Oil. But the world, national and regional economies are already beginning the shift away from fossil fuels. I think the sooner Vermont faces that reality, the easier it will be, especially on the most vulnerable.

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