

Wood Stove Popularity Fires Up As Heating Bills Rise

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Predictions about record-breaking heating costs this winter have sent customers running to retail stores with requests for wood stoves and inserts.

"It's almost like panic mode," said Rona Kelley, co-owner of Tri County Hearth and Patio Center in Waldorf.

Customers at Kelley's store have insisted on buying wood stoves despite her advice that the size of their fireplaces made them ill-equipped to handle the additions. She suggested gas logs, but the customers said no, they wanted wood.

This latest trend reverses that of recent years, when customers sought gas heat for its ease and efficiency. According to the Hearth, Patio and Barbeque Association, last year 498,124 fireplaces, wood stoves, and inserts were sold, a 1 percent drop from the previous year. In contrast, 2,094,341 gas appliances were sold last year, a 16 percent increase from 2003.

At Acme Stove Co. in Rockville, business "is hopping," said co-owner Mike Taylor, "or should I say hot?"

Wood stove prices at Acme range from \$700 to \$8,000 for a German-made stove, oven and storage model. The average customer spends about \$4,500 on a stove, including installation, Taylor said.

The reemergence of wood burning is not just about staying warm, Taylor said.

"I think it's a matter of security," Taylor said, citing the frequency of power outages in the area and increased fuel prices.

In its most recent winter outlook, the Energy Information Administration said on average, households that use natural gas could face a 41 percent spike in winter heating bills. People using heating oil and propane likely would see their bills increase by 27 and 21 percent, respectively.

Weather will play a significant role in whether those numbers are higher or lower. The National Weather Service has said it cannot predict with any certainty what kind of winter the Northeast could experience.

Manufacturers are having difficulty meeting demand. On average, there is a six-to-eight-week wait for October orders to be filled, Taylor said.

In Waldorf, Kelley's sold appliances are tagged in her warehouse. She said the staff double checks what is unmarked before telling customers which products are available.

Kelley is frustrated and so are customers.

"We're sold out. I have so few product left to sell, and I have no product coming until December," she said. The installation crew is also booked for four weeks in advance.

Usually November and December are Kelley's busiest months, but this winter, she said, she began seeing customers Labor Day weekend. She said sales in September and October exceeded previous years' sales.

The same is true at Acme. Although Taylor wouldn't compare his profits to previous years, he said, "I expect it to get a lot busier before it slows down."

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