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Julie A. Gill: Using oil is getting safer and cleaner

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By JULIE A. GILL

Regarding your July 8 editorial, "Far better than coal and oil": It's time to take the blindfold off.

Because a person uses artificial limbs, is he or she addicted to them? How about those people who use other things, such as heart valves, motorcycle helmets, life jackets, medications, or eyeglasses? Are people addicted who use these items: toothpaste, telephones, cars? What do all these things have in common? They are just a few of the 6,000 items made from petroleum.

In fact, more than half of every 42-gallon barrel of petroleum is used to make the products we use daily. Only 1.38 gallons of that barrel are used as heating oil.

Since the 1970s, we have been inundated with the mantra "America is addicted to oil," but is the mantra true? Consider for a moment what life would be like without the use of this natural resource that has more flexibility and varied uses than any other material on this Earth.

Let's take this a step further and look at the rest of that barrel of oil. What other substance is abundantly available to provide fuel for transportation purposes? What would our lives be like if we couldn't obtain gasoline for our needs? Many readers remember the shortage of gasoline during World War II, the dissemination of vouchers by the government, and the value of those vouchers. Without diesel fuel, how would your food get to market; how would all the products you need to purchase be delivered to a department store or to your home? Does that make you addicted to oil?

Although ambitious efforts have been made toward renewable energy, there is nothing that is as abundant or can substitute for the versatility of petroleum. We should be grateful that this God-given substance exists for our use.

Now let's look at one more product: heating oil. Thousands of Rhode Islanders prefer to heat their homes with oil (43 percent) because they enjoy its comfort, safety and reliability. Through the development of new technologies, heating oil has become a much cleaner fuel. In the 1970s, an average home had an annual consumption of 1,294 gallons per year. Today, that same home's annual consumption is 833 gallons.

During the past 10 years, a great deal of research and development has gone into new technologies and in blending heating oil with renewable fuels. Significant progress has been made. Legislation was introduced in the [General Assembly](#) this year to mandate the use of bio-blended, ultra-low-sulfur heating oil. By changing to an ultra-low-sulfur product with just a 12 percent bio-blend, heating oil will be cleaner than natural gas for carbon-dioxide emissions. The industry will also be able to make highly efficient equipment available to consumers at a considerably reduced cost.

Natural gas is 95 percent methane — an odorless poisonous gas. Methane has been 72 times as potent in contributing to greenhouse-gas emissions over 20 years as carbon dioxide, according to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. To our knowledge, there are no renewable fuel-use options with natural gas. The odorant natural gas uses is Methyl Mercaptan, used in pesticides, and according to OSHA may cause nausea, unconsciousness or respiratory failure. Heating oil does not contain these products.

Are trees and vegetation inexplicably dying in your neighborhood? Prior to the advent of leak-detection equipment, natural-gas workers were told to look for dying vegetation to spot natural gas leaks.

Legislation was recently submitted in the Massachusetts legislature to force the gas industry to pay for damages resulting from gas leaks to trees. The Massachusetts Shade Tree Trust has been working with nine communities where the estimated damages exceed \$3 million. The Town of Brookline alone claims more than a million dollars in damages, and the taxpayers are stuck with the bill.

Trees take carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and turn it into oxygen, but they can't do that if they're dead. These gas leaks are not just killing trees but are causing unknown amounts of methane to escape into the atmosphere. Statistics on gas leaks in Rhode Island are not readily available.

People's lives are improved through the use of petroleum products, and heating oil has a bright future as it transitions to bioheat.

Are we a society addicted to petroleum? I don't think so. It's time to take off the blindfold.

Julie A. Gill is executive director of the Oil Heat Institute of Rhode Island.