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Alan Betts: What's next for VT?

(HOST) *Where do we stand now in Vermont after this year's scientific reports on global warming? Commentator Alan Betts says it is time to change direction.*

(BETTS) Sorting through files this week, I found my notes for the 1990 meeting in Burlington of the National Governors Association Global Warming Task Force with Madeline Kunin. Now, seventeen years later, Vermonters are finally beginning to grasp what's coming. At our present rate of burning fossil fuels, the earth's climate will warm by the end of the century by about 5degF, and Vermont will warm about 10 degF. But we could cut this in half, if we start the shift away from fossil fuels now.

What does this really mean for Vermont? We use a lot of gas for transportation, as well as heating oil or natural gas to keep warm in winter, and the prices keep going up. Not only are the days of cheap oil over, but as global demand for oil keeps rising, prices may climb to more than \$100 a barrel. And still, most of our houses leak heat in winter, and our cars slurp gasoline, as if it were still 50cents a gallon! So if we really want to get serious about energy efficiency, we need efficient cars and well insulated homes. Cars last 10 years and homes more than 50 years, so what we build now matters for a very long time.

Let's start with transportation. When my wife and I brought our hybrid car two years ago, people were still scoffing that they weren't worth the extra cost. Now we are saving \$1000 a year in gas, and putting 7000 fewer pounds of carbon dioxide into the air. Furthermore, Vermont could grow enough biofuels in 10 years to power a whole fleet of efficient cars, but not the present low mileage vehicles that we now drive! It is scandalous that the US automobile manufacturers are still fighting Vermont's new high auto efficiency standards in court.

Now despite the expectation that winters will get warmer this century, we'll still need to heat our houses and businesses. We must retrofit our old homes with more insulation and better windows, and new construction should be super-insulated. In our cities, we need district heating powered by wood-fired electric co-generation. All this will take investment. This is why we need a well-funded energy efficiency utility for heating. The legislature made an effort to draft a bill this year, but people objected to a modest 1 cent efficiency charge on heating oil, and eventually the governor vetoed the amended bill anyway.

Vermont, it is time to get real. So now it's summer, but we all know that cold weather will return all too soon, and that in only the last two years, the cost of heating oil doubled. Seven years ago, Vermont led the way with Efficiency VT for electricity, and now other states in the Northeast are following. We need to follow our own good example and invest in efficiency measures for all of our energy needs. Reduced demand will reduce the upward pressure on prices. Vermonters will save money; our homes will be less drafty in winter; and Vermont's children, streams, lakes, maple forests, and the earth we love, will all be grateful.