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Propane demand outstrips supply chain

By [Bruce Edwards](#) Herald Staff

Vermont and other New England states have waived a restriction on the number of hours propane drivers can be on the road because of a fuel bottleneck compounded by the recent cold snap.

The "emergency notice" issued by the Vermont Department of Motor Vehicles waives the number of hours commercial truck drivers hauling or delivering propane can log in a day.

Capt. Jake Elovirta, the department's chief of safety with the Enforcement and Safety Division, said Monday the law limits commercial drivers to 10 hours of driving time per day or a combination of 14 driving hours/off-duty hours in any given day.

"What's happening is the carriers that are going to the facilities in Selkirk, N.Y., are having to wait in line for a considerable amount of time," Elovirta said, "and because they're in interstate commerce by the time they get fuel and get ready to head back to Vermont, they're over on their allowable hours to operate."

Authorized by DMV Commissioner Bonnie Rutledge, the waiver took effect Saturday and remains in effect until Feb. 2.

Matt Cota of the Vermont Fuel Dealers Association said the bottleneck has not caused anyone to run out of fuel.

"The good news is that dealers have been out straight, but no one has lost heat," Cota said. "Everyone is OK, but (there's) been some headaches involved."

The major logjam is along a pipeline from Texas to Selkirk, N.Y., that also transports other fuel besides propane. Cota said butane deliveries through the pipeline to gasoline refineries in the Northeast meant there was less propane making its way to Selkirk.

Beside the Selkirk terminal near Albany, Cota said, other propane sources for Vermont are Canadian propane shipped by rail and port terminals in Providence, R.I., and Newington, N.H., near Portsmouth.

The average propane price last week was \$2.31 per gallon nationwide, but \$2.74 per gallon in New England, according to the federal Energy Information Administration. Average prices in New England ranged from a low of \$2.55 per gallon in Massachusetts to a high of \$3.35 per gallon in Rhode Island. The Vermont average was \$2.94 per gallon.

This isn't the first time Vermont has waived the regulation for drivers. Cota said it happens every two or three years when heating fuel supplies hit a bottleneck. When a similar delay occurred in the past, he said, the problem has been heating oil, but this year it happens to be propane.

Cota said every New England state but Maine has an "hours of service" waiver for drivers.

Elovirta said there is no limit on the number of hours propane drivers can be on the road during the waiver period. He cautioned, however, that drivers who request immediate rest will be allowed at least 10 consecutive hours off-duty.

Joe Rose, president of the Propane Gas Association of New England, said the region will get some relief this week when two tankers laden with millions of gallons of propane dock in Providence and Newington.

Rose said several additional ships are scheduled to dock by mid-February.

He also said state and federal officials are collaborating to expedite rail deliveries, giving priority to propane rail cars that pass through switching stations.

"The industry is working hard as a group to make sure no one goes without fuel," Rose said.

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