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The President's Perspective: November 2026

By Ryan Ward (Owner, Plymouth Fireplace)

Here in New England, the prices of oil, natural gas, and electricity are all through the roof, so it's expensive to heat a home. Take my house, for example: I have a 275-gallon oil tank in my basement, and at $4 or $5 a gallon, it costs a heck of a lot of money to fill it. I also have a wood stove, though, so I only have to fill that tank two times a year instead of four. Compare that to the cost of two cords of wood, and I'm saving a couple thousand dollars every year. Of course, I'm not the only one trying to save money on heating this winter. Countless people in New England and across the country are looking for alternative ways to heat their homes, and that's why pellet and wood appliances have suddenly gotten so popular. We're in a modern-day fuel crisis, for sure, and it's filling our showroom faster than we can staff it, pushing us to streamline our business, and forcing our entire industry to find its place amid growing regulations.

Let's start with the strong demand we're seeing this burn season. As I just mentioned, our pellet and wood consumers are coming to us out of necessity, but our gas consumers are coming to us out of luxury. Both sides of our business are doing great, and that's probably due to our customer demographic, which tends to be higher-end. Between the two, it's

been a solid year, and there's nothing for us to complain about at all. But here's the problem: We're short-staffed right now, and the service line is ringing nonstop. It's gotten to the point where I had to change our voicemail to say we only service what we've sold and installed, which isn't something I'm proud of. The obvious answer is to hire, but we all know that the talent pool isn't deep enough. If I'm on Indeed, there are plumbers galore, but hearth technicians are nowhere to be found. Everybody says a hearth shop can just convert an HVAC technician. But in the HVAC industry, that technician can work for a union company with 100-plus employees, and a small family hearth shop like ours can't match the salary and benefits those companies can offer. It's a scale issue no other major trade has. So when we do get people who are good, we take care of them and make them feel like part of the family because we're a family business. Still, we currently have more demand than we have hands, and that means we have to do more with the people we've got.

For us, doing more with less has meant eliminating excess work and streamlining how we operate. The update we've recently made to our phone system is a good example, and it's one that any shop could copy. We used to have five extensions and five separate mailboxes that filled up every day. Now we have three. Our auto-attendant message is also way shorter and more to the point. It basically says, "For sales, press 1; for service, press 2; for billing, press 3." Even a simple change like that has made things easier for our customers to grasp and easier for our team to control. As I mentioned above, I also updated the message we use for our service voicemail. It now asks callers to leave their information only if they bought from us—because if they didn't, we simply can't service their appliances. Before, people would leave us messages asking if we service some random fireplace, and they'd wait a whole business day just to hear that we can't even do it. Now, those same callers find out right away, so nobody's time gets wasted. Those are two of the changes we've made, and there are many more, but they all came from the same place: zooming out on our business and looking at what could be optimized. Every shop has a bunch of those areas, and they're the parts of this crisis that we can fully control.

Of course, one thing we *can't* fully control is government regulation, and that's what I think about when I look further ahead. Our whole industry is trying to find its place among regulations that keep growing. Are we a backup source of heat for emergencies, a luxury item, or something else entirely? We're so small, yet we're so affected, and up here in the Northeast, it's getting pretty brutal. To me, it fundamentally comes down to fuel choice: People should be able to heat their homes with whatever fuel makes sense for them. Electrification is probably possible, but the infrastructure just isn't there yet, so it's going to take time. And electric heat pumps don't even work that well once it gets really cold out, which is when people need them most. Until somebody figures out how to create unlimited energy, we need all of it available to us, especially in colder climates like ours. For a lot of people, though, what makes sense is simply what they can afford. Again, it's cheaper to heat my house with wood than with oil, and a lot of our customers are heating with wood or pellets out of necessity. The more I think about it, the more I believe that's our industry's place: We help bring down the cost of living and keep families warm and safe. For our customers, this isn't a political argument—it's a practical reality that costs or saves them a couple thousand dollars a year.

At the end of the day, this fuel crisis has brought our team more work than we can handle, and hiring our way out isn't an option. That's why we're simplifying and streamlining everything we can control. And when it comes to the regulations we can't control, our industry has an argument that nearly everyone can get behind: We help families stay warm for less. So take care of the good people you've got, simplify your business wherever you can, and stand up for the fuels your customers can actually afford. If you do those three things, then this crisis won't just fill your showroom—it'll help you become the company your community needs you to be.

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