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COMMUNITY NEWS TIMES RECORD

Midcoast Wood Bank prepares to meet huge need as heating oil prices surge

The Midcoast Wood Bank provides firewood to any household in need. The organization expects increased demand this winter.

Community: **Topsham**

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Midcoast Wood Bank volunteer Lew McCarthy uses a chainsaw to cut logs into 16-inch lengths. (Libby Kamrowski Kenny/Staff Photographer)

TOPSHAM — The Midcoast Wood Bank is bracing to meet high demand for free firewood as heating oil prices peak and temperatures drop.

Midcoast Woodbank founder Bruce Wildes expects high demand this year. "The price of oil is through the roof, and people are struggling with heat and food and fuel for their cars. We are counting on donors and volunteers to help us bring the wood to people who need it," he said.

On Wednesday, volunteers split donated wood into 16-inch pieces, and then used a small tractor to dump it on a pile to dry. This batch likely won't be ready to burn until the fall of 2027, said wood bank volunteer Nat Pulsifer. Burning firewood while its moisture content is too high can lead to buildup in chimneys that can cause chimney fires.

Lisa Bouchard came from Phippsburg with her husband, Rick, to pick up firewood. She said her family is still getting back on its feet financially because Rick had cancer a few years ago. "Every little bit helps," she said. Bouchard is considering coming back to volunteer at the wood bank later on. "That's the Mainer way," she said.

The wood bank provides emergency firewood to nine nearby towns. The organization also offers two cords of wood to any household that needs it. The volunteer-run operation prepares firewood in Topsham, stockpiling

Rick Bouchard, left, loads firewood into his truck with Midcoast Wood Bank volunteer Lew McCarthy. (Libby Kamrows Photographer)

in the leadup to the winter months. Volunteers meet to work from 8 a.m. to noon on Saturdays and Wednesdays.

Wildes launched this woodbank in 2023. In 2024, the organization gave out 30 cords of wood; in 2025, 100. This year, the volunteers expect to distribute 200 cords.

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Wildes started the Cumberland Wood Bank in 2007, after the minister of a local church asked him to help his widowed neighbor split wood for the winter. She had previously been burning furniture to keep warm. In the roughly two decades since Wildes started the Cumberland bank, he said he's seen the need for firewood

increase in Maine. He has since founded the Maine Wood Banks Network to help expand and support these organizations — nearly 20 wood banks now operate throughout the state.

Midcoast Woodbank Interim Director Rich Gravelin said his gut is telling him there will be high demand for wood in the coming months, but there may be other factors to consider. For instance, this winter is expected to be characterized by El Niño weather patterns, likely heralding warmer temperatures.

"I hope for folks that there is a warm enough El Niño that they don't need as much, but we will support folks regardless of what the winter looks like when it's done," Gravelin said.

Midcoast Wood Bank, holds up a chainsaw and protective gear. (Libby Kamrowski Kenny/Staff Photographer)

Around 10% of Mainers burn wood as their primary source of fuel — more than any state in the country except Vermont. Wildes said about half of Maine households use firewood for some of their heating needs.

People can request firewood by calling (207) 800-1658 or emailing info@midcoastwoodbank.org. Recipients are encouraged to transport their firewood home, but if circumstances prevent them from doing so, the wood bank can usually deliver.

The wood bank does not have a vehicle, and for now volunteers use their personal vehicles for wood transportation. The organization is hoping to acquire a truck.

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Midcoast Wood Bank volunteers don't fell trees, they collect and process already downed wood that comes from many sources — arborists, towns, firewood dealers, and more. Wildes said individuals and organizations can get tax breaks from donating wood, while simultaneously avoiding disposal fees.

Though people of many ages are involved, the volunteers tend to skew older — Nat Pulsifer said he estimates the average age to be 73. Many appreciate the active nature of processing wood. "This is my gym," said volunteer Lew McCarthy, who recently turned 70. He said he's been splitting wood since he was in high school, when he helped his parents and grandparents get ready for the winter.

Wood processing days also provide a chance to socialize. Gravelin said he's seen friendships form at the wood bank.

"Imagine it's late December, it's freezing outside, you're splitting wood, you're walking through snow, and you got a couple people with you," Gravelin said. "You have to find ways to have some fun doing that. And we do."

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Midcoast Wood Bank volunteer Lew McCarthy loads seasoned firewood into the truck of a couple picking up wood for tl Kamrowski Kenny/Staff Photographer)

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