

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

Study blames diesel for deaths

By Jon Brodtkin / Daily News Staff
Wednesday, February 23, 2005

Diesel pollution is responsible for more deaths than drunk drivers and homicides, according to a new study that estimates how many premature deaths, asthma attacks and heart attacks are caused by diesel pollution in every U.S. county.

Nationwide, diesel pollution causes 21,000 premature deaths each year, including 475 in Massachusetts and 81 in Middlesex County, robbing those who die of an average of 14 years of their lives, according to the report by the Boston-based Clean Air Task Force. Residents in nearby Suffolk County suffer the third highest risk of exposure to diesel pollution in the nation, researchers found.

The numbers point to a failure of New England states to curb emissions, said Michael Stoddard, an attorney for Environment Northeast, a group that distributed the new report in New England.

"No state in New England currently has a systematic plan in place to address this problem," Stoddard, director of ENE's New England Diesel Initiative, said yesterday. "We have legislation about power plants. We have legislation about drunk drivers. We have legislation against firearm violations. Here's something that's in the same class in terms of impact."

To determine diesel pollution's health effects in each U.S. county, the Clean Air Task Force said it employed methodology the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency uses to assess the health benefits of new rules. The group also used the EPA's county-by-county estimates of diesel emissions.

The report compares the estimated 21,000 diesel pollution deaths with the 17,000 annual deaths caused by drunk driving and the nation's 20,000 annual homicides.

The analysis concludes diesel pollution has widespread impacts in Massachusetts, including 727 nonfatal heart attacks per year, 9,925 asthma attacks, 43 cancer deaths, 289 cases of chronic bronchitis and 61,842 lost days of work.

The effects include 43 premature deaths in Norfolk County, which includes Franklin, Bellingham, Millis and Wellesley, and 23 premature deaths in Worcester County, which includes Milford, Upton and Uxbridge.

The EPA has issued regulations requiring large reductions in diesel vehicle emissions beginning in 2007, the report said, but the new rules will not affect trucks and buses that are already on the road and will remain in use for an average of nearly 30 years.

The EPA's new rules will save lives, but an extra 100,000 premature deaths could be avoided between now and 2030 if the country reduced diesel emissions 85 percent by 2020, the report stated.

Massachusetts began banning sales of diesel cars for model year 2004, but the ban does not apply to commercial vehicles.

"Your delivery vans, your 18-wheelers, your dump truck, your school bus, are not affected by the (new) standards," said Jeremy Marin, a Sierra Club conservation organizer based in Boston.

Stoddard said replacing diesel vehicles, like school buses and garbage trucks, or retrofitting them with pollution controls, can be done on a municipal level, but ultimately state and federal help is needed to make changes on a grand scale.

Photo Gallery



Trucks idling in the parking lot of the Framingham rest stop on the Mass. Pike. (Photo: Allan Jung)

But the state likely does not have enough money to institute new spending programs aimed at cutting diesel emissions, said state Rep. Peter Koutoujian, D-Waltham, chairman of the Committee on Public Health.

"We're still looking at a billion-dollar shortfall," Koutoujian said. "I'm assuming that Ways and Means is figuring out where to cut least, more than where to add monies."

The state Department of Environmental Protection considers itself a "leader" in curbing diesel pollution, said Ed Coletta, a DEP spokesman. The state has adopted the strict California emissions standards, begun inspection and maintenance for heavy-duty diesel vehicles and retrofit [MBTA](#) vehicles and equipment used in the [Big Dig](#) with pollution controls, he said.

But many think more should be done, including Dr. Stuart Rhein, a Framingham allergy, asthma and immunology doctor who is concerned about the health impacts pollution has on his asthma patients.

"The technology is there (to control emissions)," he said, "and when you look at the expense, both in the health bill from people who have chronic illnesses...not to mention the cost of lives, I think it's clear it's worth putting the money into filtering this and preventing it before it gets to that point."

Deadly diesel fumes

Diesel fumes are responsible for more premature deaths each year than drunken driving and homicides, according to a new report.

The estimated annual death toll is 21,000 nationwide and 475 in Massachusetts, costing people an average of 14 years of their lives. Many more suffer asthma attacks, heart attacks and other health problems caused by diesel pollution.

Here's a look at diesel's impact in several local counties:

Middlesex: 81 annual deaths, 144 non-fatal heart attacks, 1,834 asthma attacks, 11,486 lost days of work.

Norfolk: 43 deaths, 73 non-fatal heart attacks, 849 asthma attacks, 5,139 lost days of work.

Worcester: 23 deaths, 35 non-fatal heart attacks, 445 asthma attacks, 2,604 lost days of work.

SOURCE: "Diesel and Health in America: The Lingering Threat," a report by the Boston-based Clean Air Task Force.

(Jon Brodtkin can be reached at 508-626-4424 or jbrodtkin@cnc.com.)