

BNA-Daily Environment Report
Thursday, November 8, 2007
No. 216
ISSN 1521-9402

Public Health Groups Decry Lack of Funding For Clean School Bus Initiatives in Illinois

By Michael Bologna

CHICAGO--Arguing that thousands of Illinois school children are exposed to dangerous levels of air pollution during their daily rides to school aboard diesel buses, public health groups Nov. 7 called on lawmakers to fund an aggressive program that would retrofit the state's 18,000 school buses with emissions control equipment.

During a briefing with reporters, representatives of the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago (RHAMC), the Clean Air Task Force, and the Illinois Asthma Partnership unveiled research indicating that Illinois' aging fleet of diesel school buses is compromising the respiratory health of thousands of Illinois children each year.

While these buses can be fitted with pollution control equipment for as little as \$6,000 per bus, funding for clean school bus initiatives has completely dried up in Illinois.

The groups called on school districts, state lawmakers, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to devote resources to this issue and improve the health of all Illinois school children.

"This is something that could be done locally, it could be done on a statewide basis, or it could be addressed by the federal EPA," Joel Africk, chief executive officer of the RHAMC, said. "The problem with doing nothing--which is where we are right now in Illinois--is that there are 18,000 school buses on the streets putting out these emissions and they will have an untold effect on our children. This is an important issue for our state Legislature to consider."

Children Particularly Vulnerable

Brian Urbaszewski, the RHAMC's director of environmental health, said toxic diesel exhaust has been linked to a wide range of dangerous health conditions. He pointed to research contending that diesel emissions trigger more than 875 deaths and 19,000 asthma attacks in Illinois each year.

Urbaszewski said school-age children are particularly vulnerable to these toxins and suffer high degrees of exposure during a ride on a school bus. He noted that a child riding on a bus is exposed to four times more diesel exhaust than a child riding in an automobile traveling in front of a bus. Urbaszewski said Illinois school buses emit 141 tons of particulate matter each year.

Dr. Bruce Hill, a researcher with the Clean Air Task Force, said he recently completed research that tested air quality within Illinois school buses. The research indicated high levels of diesel exhaust in the cabins of buses. He noted that children are continuously inhaling exhaust coming from the tailpipes and engines of buses.

Simple Retrofit Would Curb Exposure

Hill said the good news is that children traveling in buses fitted with relatively simple emissions control devices are exposed to very little toxic diesel exhaust. Hill said the installation of particle filters on the tailpipe of a bus and the use of control equipment on the engine nearly eliminates diesel exhaust in the cabin. He added that tailpipe retrofits range in price from \$5,000 to \$7,000 and engine control systems can be installed for approximately \$1,000.

"Although we tested a number of different emission controls, the only combination that eliminated the bus's self-pollution was the combination of a particle filter on the tailpipe and a crankcase control device on the engine," Hill said. "This is what we call the 'gold standard' for retrofitting."

Urbaszewski said there have been a number of Illinois school districts that have been able to engage in retrofitting projects with the help of various state and federal agencies. He noted, however, that these initiatives have touched only 5 percent of the buses in the state and no funding is currently available.

State Program 'Flat Broke.'

"The program is now flat broke," he said. "In the past year several states have dedicated significant funds for diesel vehicle cleanup--\$10 million in Connecticut and \$20 million in Ohio. Legislation is still pending in the Illinois General Assembly that would create a fund of \$20 [million] to \$25 million a year that could be used to clean up diesel vehicles including school buses. Illinois school children need this funding."

Urbaszewski said the problem could be addressed if state lawmakers passed Senate Bill 268, which would establish the Illinois Diesel Emissions Reduction Funding Program. The program would fund diesel emissions control activities through the collection of a surcharge on the retail sale or lease of certain diesel vehicles.

Text of the Illinois legislation is available at <http://www.ilga.gov/>.