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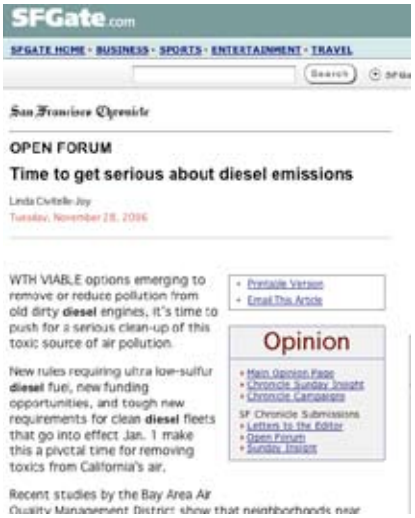
Time to get serious about diesel emissions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Time to get serious about diesel emissions
Linda Civitello Joy
Tuesday, November 28, 2006
WTH VIABLE options emerging to remove or reduce pollution from old dirty diesel engines, it's time to push for a serious clean-up of this toxic source of air pollution.
New rules requiring ultra low-sulfur diesel fuel, new funding opportunities, and tough new requirements for clean diesel fleets that go into effect Jan. 1 make this a pivotal time for removing toxics from California's air.
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OPEN FORUM - SAN FRANCISCO - WTH VIABLE OPTIONS emerging to remove or reduce pollution from old dirty diesel engines, it's time to push for a serious clean-up of this toxic source of air pollution.

New rules requiring ultra low-sulfur diesel fuel, new funding opportunities, and tough new requirements for clean diesel fleets that go into effect Jan. 1 make this a pivotal time for removing toxics from California's air.

Recent studies by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District show that neighborhoods near major roadways and ports receive a disproportionate share of diesel emissions, putting nearby residents at increased risk of asthma, hospital admissions, aggravation of bronchitis and emphysema and even premature death. It's time to take action to reduce these risks.

The passage of Proposition 1B on Nov. 7 provides $1.2 billion to improve air quality on the roads in and out of ports and to clean up school bus emissions. This is an opportunity to fund the cleanup of thousands of dirty diesel vehicles now on our highways. A concerted effort is now needed to encourage owners of diesel vehicles and fleets to make use of this incentive funding to clean up the air for the operators of these vehicles and the public.

Fortunately the high-tech cleanup of toxic diesel emissions has begun in the Bay Area. A small number of hydrogen fuel cell buses -- whose only emission is steam -- are now operating on Bay Area roads, though they are expensive to purchase.

Another option, diesel emission control retrofit devices, have been installed on nearly 1,700 diesel buses for 13 Bay Area transit systems including Muni, AC Transit, County Connection, SamTrans, and the Golden Gate Bridge District. The filters bring immediate and economical reduction of toxic diesel pollution. They allow transit fleets to keep using buses that have years of good service left in them while reducing pollution. The transit bus filters were funded by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, and the transit agencies themselves. As a result, the Bay Area air will have 50 tons a year less of particulate matter (PM) and 436 tons less of oxides of nitrogen (NOx), according to the MTC. As toxic diesel particulate matter is eliminated, the real benefit is fewer cases of respiratory disease.

Diesel retrofit devices that meet the California Air Resources Board's anti-pollution

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rules reduce particulate matter by more than 85 percent and oxides of nitrogen -- a smog precursor -- by more than 25 percent.

Reducing diesel emissions also helps fight global warming, since diesel particulate matter is at least 60 percent black carbon. These particles absorb and then re-radiate sunlight into the atmosphere, increasing ambient temperatures and contributing to global warming.

Diesel filters are now being installed on school buses in the San Joaquin Valley, and in Southern California. Starting next year, every government entity in the state - including city governments, county governments, utilities, and water districts -- must reduce the pollution from their diesel fleets.

The San Francisco Unified School District can also take credit for mandating the clean-up of its diesel school fleet. In September, 50 new natural gas school buses were purchased to transport San Francisco children to and from school.

Exposure to diesel particulate matter has serious health consequences. Of greatest concern are the very smallest particles -- generally 2.5 microns or smaller in size -- that are invisible to the eye. These “ultra-fine” particles can stay airborne for months and, when inhaled, bypass the body’s natural defenses and lodge deep in the lungs, causing permanent lung damage.

Ultra-low-sulfur diesel fuel, mandatory in California since September, allows diesel exhaust filters to operate more efficiently than before - the same way unleaded gas allowed catalytic converters to reduce automobile pollution in the 1970s.

There are many routes to clean air. In the long term, new clean-burning or zero emission vehicles are the best solution. However, truck owners, heavy equipment operators, school bus districts, and fleet managers throughout the state now have realistic options to help clean up toxics in the air. We can’t afford to wait for their trucks and buses to die before they stop emitting soot.

What we need now are partnerships among state and local leaders - in the public and private sector - to move this agenda forward. The time has come to protect the public’s health from the harmful effects of diesel exhaust.

Linda Civitello-Joy is president of Breathe California, originally founded in 1907 as the Tuberculosis Association. Breathe California is dedicated to promoting healthy lungs and fighting lung disease through education, advocacy, prevention and patient services. Contact her at lindacj@ggbreathe.org ###