

Monday February 12 3:37 PM ET

Report: Diesel School Buses Loaded with Toxics

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - U.S. environmentalists released a highly charged report on Monday alleging that children who ride to school on diesel-powered buses may be exposed to as much as four times more toxic exhaust than if they traveled in passenger cars.

The report from the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and Coalition for Clean Air said more than 23 million children in the United States ride a bus to school. "Children are especially sensitive to environmental hazards, yet they're the ones getting dosed with diesel riding to school," said Gina Solomon, a NRDC senior scientist. "The levels we measured on some of these buses both surprised and worried us. Worse still, we have reason to believe that these high levels are fairly typical."

The report said nearly 20 hours of sampling results on four school buses produced dramatic results. Assuming bus rides totaling one or two hours per day, 180 days per year for 10 years, the groups estimated the diesel exhaust exposures are likely to result in an additional 23 to 46 cancer cases per million children exposed. This level of cancer risk is 23 to 46 times the level considered to pose a significant cancer risk by the Environmental Protection Agency (news - web sites) under the federal Clean Air Act and the Food Quality Protection Act. Under California's Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act, it also could trigger an obligation to provide warnings to children that they are being exposed to a cancer-causing chemical.

The report, entitled "No Breathing in the Aisles: Diesel Exhaust Inside School Buses," said the excess exhaust levels on the buses were more than eight times the average levels found in the ambient air in California. Researchers from NRDC, the U.C. Berkeley School of Public Health and the Coalition for Clean Air rode rented school buses along elementary school bus routes in the Los Angeles area. They compared air quality inside the front and back of the bus and with windows open and closed. They also tested air quality outside the bus and in a passenger car traveling ahead of it. Buses were tested while idling, climbing or descending hills, and traveling slowly with frequent stops.

NRDC said the vast majority of the nation's school bus fleets still run on diesel fuel, but said there were other options for school districts to consider, such as buses fueled by natural gas or propane. Short-term fixes include keeping the windows open on the bus when possible and seating children closer to the front of the bus before seating children in the rear.

NRDC is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. The Coalition for Clean Air is a non-profit environmental organization advocating clean air for California through responsible public health policies.

Tuesday February 13 05:30 PM EST

Are Portland-Area Buses Endangering Kids?

Study Finds Diesel Fumes Dangerously High

Children are exposed to cancer-causing fumes every day in their diesel-powered school buses, according to a study released Monday. Are children in the Portland area at risk?

The Natural Resources Defense Council tested the air in four Los Angeles school buses. It found that exhaust levels inside the bus were more than eight times higher than outside, next to the bus. NRDC believes that the results are typical on the nation's school bus fleet.

Most school buses in the metro area run on diesel fuel, KOIN 6 News reports. Beaverton School District, which is among many districts that transport students in diesel buses, declined to comment on the study, which found excess exhaust levels on buses 23 to 46 times higher than levels considered by the Environmental Protection Agency to be a significant cancer risk.

Portland School District's fleet runs on propane. A district spokesman tells KOIN that propane is used for energy savings, rather than for environmental reasons. Hillsboro schools experimented with propane a few years ago but found it to be inefficient. The buses were not able to travel as far and they broke down more often, a spokesman says.

KOIN reports that the air quality inside the bus improves when the windows are open.

Tuesday February 13 12:34 PM EST

School Bus or Cruel Bus?

By Neil Sherman

HealthScout Reporter

MONDAY, Feb. 12 (HealthScout) -- Black clouds belched out of diesel-fueled school buses may be hiking your child's risk of cancer, says a new report. Kids who go to school in a diesel school bus may be breathing exhaust at levels that are 23-to-46 times higher than those considered to be a significant cancer risk, the researchers say.

The answer: Install existing technologies that can make diesel buses cleaner than ones that run on natural gas, say engine makers. The real issue is getting the money for school districts to pay for the refitting, experts say. "We had heard from some children and parents that the school buses smelled smoky, so we wanted to know if kids were breathing hazardous smoke on their way to school," says Dr. Gina Solomon, the senior scientist for the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) in San Francisco. "So we measured the air inside the bus, and simultaneously we had other instruments in a scout car ahead of the bus measuring the ambient diesel exhaust."

Teaming up with the Coalition for Clean Air, Solomon and her colleagues rented four "actual school buses from different companies that rent out buses to school districts and drove them for five hours around actual school bus routes in Los Angeles. And what we found" were levels of "diesel exhaust in those school buses [were] about four times higher than what we found in the scout car." The level of exhaust in the buses was also about eight times higher than average levels in California.

Estimating the amount of time kids spend on a bus ride to school they extrapolated over the whole school year, Solomon explains. When you add up the risks, it turns out these exposures would result in 23 to 46 more cancer cases per million children exposed, she says. About 23 million children around the country ride some kind of a bus to school, Solomon estimates. The findings were published yesterday in NRDC's report, No Breathing in the Aisles: Diesel Exhaust Inside School Buses.

The health effects of diesel have been studied extensively. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state of California have documented diesel exhaust's cancer-causing properties. Diesel exhaust is known to increase asthma. And smog-forming oxides, also emitted from diesel engines, have recently been linked to impairing a child's ability to breathe. "Indeed, children are generally more susceptible than adults to the negative health effects of air pollution," Solomon says.

But four buses do not a national policy make, says Tim French, a spokesman for the Engine Manufacturing Association in Chicago. "One would suggest that it is not as rigorous study as you would want if you want to change your fueling infrastructure." Which is exactly what the NRDC suggests, according to Solomon.

What To Do "In the short term, kids should sit towards the front of the bus, because we found the levels to be higher towards the back," Solomon suggests. "And when it's warmer, bus drivers should open some windows, because we found that diesel fume levels doubled when the windows are closed." In the states where low-sulfur fuel is available -- California, New York, Texas -- buses can be outfitted with particulate traps to reduce exhaust fumes, Solomon says. "That costs about \$6,000 a bus." School districts can make back "some of their costs, because there are federal and state funds available to help with additional costs and because maintenance costs are lower than diesel," Solomon adds.

But if you're going to buy natural gas buses, you have to consider performance and infrastructure, French points out. "There's no infrastructure in place for fueling of natural gas or propane. And maintenance of these buses can be especially expensive. These buses also have performance issues, especially if they have a lot of hills to ride."

"The bottom line for children's health is that there is current technology for refitting diesel engines that can make them as clean or cleaner than natural gas buses," he says.