

OUR STATE

Cancer risk high due to diesel engines

Report puts N.J. 2nd only to N.Y.

By LAUREN O. KIDD
GANNETT STATE BUREAU

TRENTON — Old diesel engines make New Jerseyans the second-most vulnerable in the nation to cancer stemming from emitted soot and the fourth-most vulnerable to all diesel-related health risks, according to a nationwide report released Tuesday.

The report, released by the Clean Air Task Force, a Boston-based nonprofit, ranked New Jersey behind only New York in its diesel-related cancer risks.

"Truck traffic will increase by 80 percent over the next 15 years in New Jersey," said Valorie Caffee, director of organizing for the New Jersey Work Environment Council. "Finding solutions to this problem is an imperative we can't ignore."

Based on U.S. Environmental Protection Agency data from 1999, the report found that diesel emissions caused nearly 900 premature deaths, 1,400 non-fatal heart attacks and 18,000 asthma attacks in New Jersey adults that year.

The toxins caused roughly 1,300 cases of acute bronchitis and 27,000 cases of respiratory symptoms in state children.

Assemblyman John F. McKeon, D-Essex, sponsor of a bill aimed at cutting diesel emissions by 20 percent in 10 years, called the issue a "health problem of epic proportions." Similar legislation is pending in the state Senate.

All but one county in New Jersey, Cape May County, was tagged one of the nation's "unhealthiest," with Hudson County ranked fifth, Camden County ranked 20th and Mercer County ranked 22nd among the 3,109 counties in the United States.

Report states that N.J. is second-most vulnerable in the country to cancer stemming from diesel emissions.

"This risk does not have to be taken," said Amy Goldsmith, director of the New Jersey Environmental Federation, one of several environmental advocacy groups calling for the use of retroactive filters and low sulfur diesel fuel.

By 2007, federal legislation will require new diesel engines to produce fewer toxins. Tuesday, advocates pushed to reduce the toxins emitted by old engines that will remain in use.

Doug O'Malley of the New Jersey Public Interest Research Group said the combination of retroactive filters and low sulfur diesel fuel could reduce emissions by 90 percent.

About 250,000 vehicles in the state are powered by diesel engines, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection. They include garbage trucks, construction vehicles, delivery trucks, nonroad vehicles like bulldozers, commercial buses and school buses, said Karen Hershey, a DEP spokeswoman.