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Article published Feb 14, 2010

We need a new idling law

It was a cold morning this past December in the parking lot of the Wayside Restaurant in Berlin. As my friend tells it, he was making his way around six or seven FairPoint Communications trucks parked in a row. What he couldn't believe was four or five of them were spewing diesel fumes, idling away unoccupied. Is it sound business practice for a company to be dirtying the air, polluting the environment and wasting fuel, especially one that can dearly afford not to be doing so? I didn't think so either. Add to that, allowing these trucks to idle unoccupied, violating Vermont's unattended motor vehicles law and putting them at risk for being stolen, and you have the height of irresponsibility.

My friend complained to FairPoint. A representative responded that the trucks were left running because they were older diesel vehicles that had to remain running as they would not start well outside of the protection of the garage. This is a classic example of the misconceptions about when trucks need to idle. As long as they were maintained in a proper state of tune and were using the proper winter blend (with the added fact that diesel engines hold their warmth in the cold for a long time), they would have no problem starting up after a driver's 30-45 minute meal.

The EPA, diesel engine manufacturers, the American Trucking Association, and other diesel technical experts all agree there are several myths associated with diesel idling. The realities are:

- Heavy-duty diesels need not warm up for longer than three to five minutes before driving.
- It is better for them to start and stop at least several times a day rather than run continuously causing engine wear (just look at UPS, which shuts off their diesel trucks at every delivery).
- Refiners have resolved the issue of gelling by creating winter blends that better withstand colder temperatures.
- Idling poses health risks to drivers sitting in an idling vehicle, being exposed to the vehicle's pollution.

As to the health impacts, diesel exhaust, contains 40 toxic components. Long-term effects of breathing diesel exhaust are: increased risk of premature death, increased risk of lung cancer, heart attacks and asthma attacks, and increased hospitalization and ER visits. And according to the Clean Air Task Force, the projected impact from exposure to diesel exhaust in Vermont for 2010 is 10 premature deaths, 292 asthma attacks, 1,261 work loss days, 7,477 minor restricted activity days, all of which equals \$78 million in costs and lost productivity in Vermont.

Some companies, understanding the economic effect of idling, have adopted idling reduction policies. Waterbury-based Green Mountain Coffee Roasters is a great example. They save more than \$20,000 annually just by avoiding unnecessary idling. And UPS reports for their fleet of 88,000 vehicles, that by reducing idling, they save \$12 million annually.

There is a bill in the Legislature, H.97, calling for restricting idling of vehicles in excess of 10,000 pounds. This means commercial trucks and buses, many of them among the 31,000 diesels registered in Vermont.

H.97 is currently being debated in the House Transportation Committee. The bill might move over to the Senate side soon, but how many exemptions will be attached to it, watering it down? We need an idling law that will truly restrict idling while still allowing a few legitimate exemptions.

Vermont's time has come. Vermont is the only state in New England that has not enacted a diesel idling law. Let your representatives know that you are in support of a strong version of H. 97.

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The writer is director of the Idle-Free VT campaign, idlefreevt.org.
