

1-25-05 Submission to the Ann Arbor News “Your World” column:

Engine idling wastes gas and pollutes the air

Now is the time of year when many of us find ourselves idling our engines. The amount of gas this wastes can be significant—a Canadian study found that engine idling accounted for three per cent of Ontario's fuel consumption.

Some people feel that idling an engine is better than turning it off and restarting soon after. But actually, more than 30 seconds of idling uses more fuel than restarting the engine.

Idling causes significant and unnecessary emissions of particulate matter, hydrocarbons, and greenhouse gases. The resulting pollution causes asthma, acute respiratory infections, and lung cancer.

A study performed in the City of Toronto found that more than a third of parents idle their vehicles while waiting to pick up their children. Children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution—they breathe faster than adults and inhale more air per pound of body weight.

Especially harmful emissions are produced by the idling of diesel engines (trucks, buses, construction equipment, etc.). And idling increases costs for the owner-operator or fleet through increased engine wear, and higher fuel and maintenance costs.

Progress is being made in the area of diesel emissions. New federal regulations being phased in mandate stricter emission limits on diesel trucks, and off-road diesels such as bulldozers, farm combines, and marine engines. The rules also require cleaner burning diesel fuel that contains 99% less sulfur, which is mandated to be available nationwide by June 2006.

AATA buses already use ultra-low sulfur diesel. The Ann Arbor school system has received EPA grants to test equipment to reduce emissions on their buses, and to test the use of B20, a cleaner-burning 20% biodiesel fuel. Although successful, funding to use B20 has not been renewed.

Is idling necessary to power heating and air-conditioning for truck drivers? The EPA is promoting technologies which allow truckers to have climate control cabins without running their engines, by using an external docking station or an internal battery.

To speed up adoption of idling-reduction measures, communities nationwide are passing anti-idling ordinances. The City of Ann Arbor is considering the adoption of an ordinance that will limit the idling of heavy-duty diesel vehicles to five minutes. For alternative climate control technologies and ordinances elsewhere, visit www.epa.gov/smartway/idlingalternatives.htm.

Most of us can probably shave time off the amount of idling we do. And keep in mind that the emissions of two-stroke engines such as lawn mowers and chain-saws are very polluting, so limiting idling of these is very important as well.

Submitted by,

Barbara Lucas, Program Assistant
Washtenaw County Planning and Environment
Solid Waste Program
Phone: 734-222-6889
Fax: 734-994-2459
E-mail: lucasb@ewashtenaw.org