

“Please don’t idle” reads a sticker on a local vehicle. When asked, its owner stated that a few years ago a movement began in Jackson Hole to limit exhaust emissions.

Jackson Hole residents aren’t alone in their concern. “Did you know that children breathe in twice as much air for their body weight than adults?” This question is posed by a Portland, Ore, website. Idling your car during school drop-off and pick-up is a health hazard that harms our children, it states. Idling also costs money: it’s hard on the engine and it wastes expensive gasoline or diesel fuel.

Some states distribute bumper stickers of “Mind Your Idle. Please Don’t Idle Near Schools.” A poster of “Idle-Free Zone . . . Turn Engine Off . . . Young Lungs a Work,” illustrate the message with a small child holding its nose while exhaust pours from a tail pipe.

Three New England states have anti-idling laws. Utah’s Salt Lake City and Oregon’s Portland have enacted city ordinances or promote anti-idling strategies. The Halifax Regional Municipality of Canada’s Nova Scotia instituted comprehensive consumer awareness campaigns in 2002; it has continued to “train the trainers” of municipal fleets that represent approximately 1800 vehicles. Not to be outdone, the American Trucking Association (ATA) recommends incentive-driven solutions to eliminate “discretionary” truck idling.

Vehicle exhaust is a leading source of toxic air pollution. Even inside our cars, we pollute our own immediate air quality when we idle. It may seem counter-intuitive, but when we keep the engine running in efforts to provide warmth to small children inside, we actually render hazardous the air they breathe. (In vehicles in motion, airflow vents the emissions.) Vehicle exhaust is associated with worsening symptoms for children with asthma.

There’s more.

“Excessive idling is damaging because your engine doesn’t work at peak operating temperature,” states the ATA website. “Fuel does not undergo complete combustion, leaving spark plugs dirty and contaminating engine oil.”

Today’s engines need no warm-up or at most 30 seconds of idling on winter days before driving, the site explains, but old habits are slow to die. Warm-up idling was the norm back when engines were hard to start, but that’s no longer the case. For example, gelling of diesel fuel was a problem years ago, but refiners have worked to resolve that issue by creating winter blends that better withstand colder temperatures.

The ATA targets diesel engines that idle during rest periods (to provide heat or air conditioning for the sleeper compartment), or to keep the engine warm during cold weather, or to provide electrical power for their appliances. These practices annually consume an estimated 1.1 billion gallons of diesel fuel. Although there are some legitimate reasons why trucks and buses idle (e.g., to bring the engine to proper operating temperature), there are also misconceptions. Don’t assume new engines should be

operated like older ones, says the ATA. Options available to fleets to minimize discretionary idling have the potential to reduce CO₂ emissions by an estimated 61.1 million tons over the next ten years, the equivalent of 16 million Americans not driving for an entire year. One solution: installing a small generator or auxiliary power unit specifically designed for a truck that provides heat, air conditioning, and/or electrical power while the vehicle is not in motion.

Diesel-engine manufacturers recommend block heaters are a good alternative to excessive idling in colder climates. These plug into electrical outlets and help warm the engine to avoid starting difficulties, reducing idling time during engine warm-up. Although manufacturers still recommend letting the engine idle for a few minutes before turning it off, most newer diesel engines will stay warm for several hours after they have been running, retaining more than enough heat to keep the engine warm and avoid starting difficulties, says ATA. Older vehicles may have more difficulty restarting, and users should check the manufacturer's recommendations.

As with passenger vehicles, letting a diesel engine idle does more damage to the engine than starting and stopping. According to the ATA, running a diesel engine at low speed (idling) causes twice the wear on internal parts compared to driving at regular speeds, increasing maintenance costs and shortening the life of the engine. Generally, fuel consumption during engine start-up is equivalent to about 30 seconds of engine idling.

Past ATA efforts focused on improving air quality, primarily by reducing particulates and nitrogen oxides. But concerns about climate change prompted ATA and its member companies to address the industry's carbon footprint. Carbon dioxide is the primary component of greenhouse gases; that is to say, gases that trap heat in the atmosphere. The United States produces almost a quarter of the world's total emissions of greenhouse gases, and trucking is one of the largest CO₂ emitters in the country, alongside coal, passenger vehicles (including motorcycles and light trucks), natural-gas power plants, and oil-fired power plants.

Diesel engines play an important role in the transport of goods in our country; however, concerns about the health effects associated with exposure to diesel exhaust add to the greenhouse-gas worries. Scientists only recently identified the tiniest particulates in diesel exhaust. We now know that this exhaust is full of particulates that find their way into lungs—and the smaller you are, the closer your nose to exhaust-pipe levels, the more your lungs absorb invisible particulates. In addition to children, people with asthma or a heart or lung condition are more vulnerable than the general population to the particulates in diesel exhaust. Yet it's not unusual to see diesel-fueled school buses idle for thirty minutes or more near a school entrance.

The anti-idling warning, "Young Lungs at Work," is pertinent everywhere. Another is the wasted fuel and the damage done to engines that idle unnecessarily.

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