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Metro area chokes on off-road rigs' fuel

Two-thirds of the soot over Portland comes from diesel exhaust, which poses a health risk and could lead to cancer

Thursday, November 16, 2006

JAMES MAYER

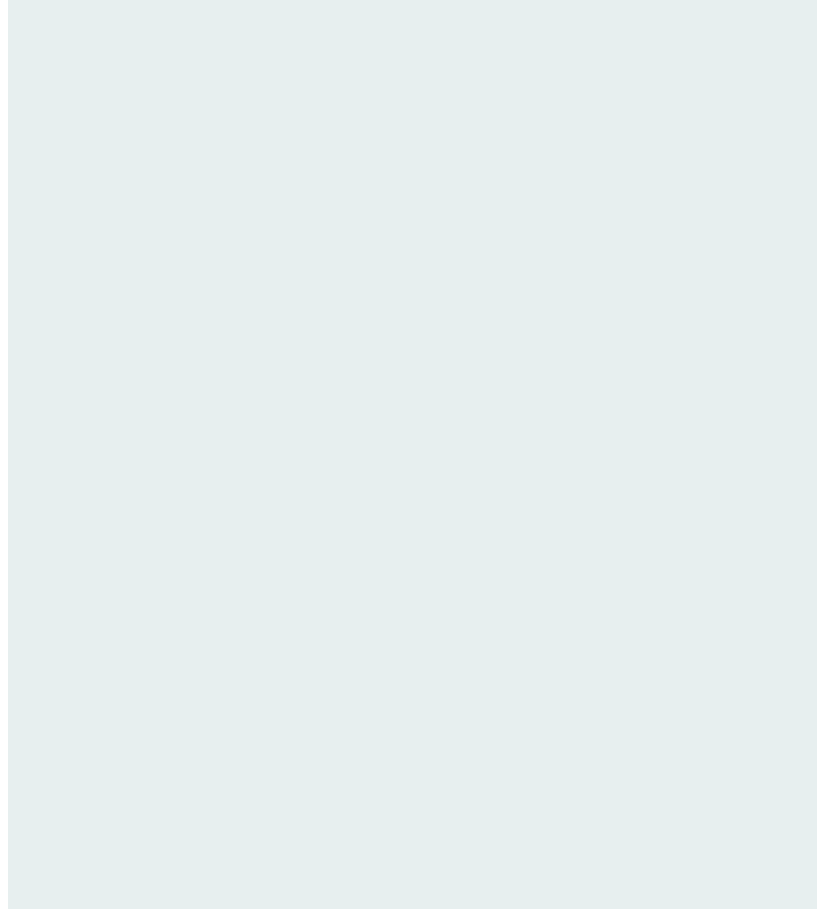
Those backhoes and bulldozers prowling Portland's construction sites are more than a traffic nuisance: They are a cancer-causing health hazard.

"Exposure to diesel is one of the leading health risks from breathing outdoor air in Oregon," said Kevin Downing, diesel programs manager for the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

Construction equipment belches more diesel exhaust into metro-area air than all tractor-trailers, buses and other diesel vehicles combined -- nearly 500 tons of soot a year, according to DEQ. An Oregon environmental advocacy group calls diesel exhaust the state's No. 1 air-quality problem.

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Off-road sources -- tugboats and locomotives as well as backhoes and bulldozers -- contribute two-thirds of the soot in the air over downtown Portland.

But stricter emission standards for these machines won't take full effect for nine years, overshadowing recent small gains with biodiesel.

Low-sulfur fuel, biodiesel and new engine emission standards will eventually make diesel power cleaner than natural gas, the cleanest burning fossil fuel. But allowable limits for exhaust pollutants for off-road engines, such as construction equipment, lag far behind on-road sources such as cars and trucks. And the new exhaust standards don't apply to existing diesel engines,

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which have a very lengthy lifetime.

Congress didn't give the Environmental Protection Agency authority to regulate off-road diesel emissions until the Clean Air Act was amended in 1990.


"The initial focus for reducing diesel pollution was on heavy-duty trucks, since they were the largest source," said Don Anair from the Union of Concerned Scientists.

Pressure is building now to accelerate regulations as evidence of harm mounts, Anair said.

Associated General Contractors of America opposes proposed new air-quality standards for soot, arguing that they could lead states to impose construction bans.

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