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Students demand bus idling ban

By Nancy Remsen
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MONTPELIER -- Five seventh-graders from Browns River Middle School in Jericho made a case Thursday that the Legislature should ban idling by buses on school grounds.

Quite simply, they said idling wastes fuel and money, pollutes and affects public health.

They did the math on waste and told the House Natural Resources Committee that the 1,800 school buses in Vermont needlessly burn up 13,500 gallons of diesel while idling on average about five minutes waiting to load students every afternoon. School districts spent about \$36,450 on the fuel -- wasted money, said Mikeala Osler.

"By the time I'm 21, if you do not pass this law, our state alone will have wasted 243,000 gallons of diesel fuel," Osler said. As for pollution, she said, "By the time I'm 21, our state will have emitted 2,697,300 pounds of carbon dioxide just by letting buses idle."

Adults addressed the committee, too. Most backed up what the students said.

Dr. Anne Dixon, a Fletcher Allen Health Care physician, verified the hazards that diesel exhaust poses to people, especially youths.

Tom Moyer from the Air Pollution Control Division at the Agency of Natural Resources confirmed the pollution problems caused by idling. He testified that allowing a bus to idle instead of shutting it off and restarting it once students are on board produces 10 to 20 times more pollution.

Moyer urged lawmakers to enact a statewide ban on school bus idling, noting that "voluntary measures alone aren't enough." The Air Pollution Division has encouraged schools to adopt idling restrictions, he said, but fewer than 10 percent have responded.

Ed Miller, a lawyer and lobbyist representing the Vermont Truck and Bus Association, argued against a statewide ban and defended some idling as necessary for bus safety.

He said drivers start up their buses to defrost windows and warm the interiors. He noted students might be getting aboard right after sports, sweaty or damp from showers.

"How many students take showers and run directly to the bus?" asked Rep. Betty Nuovo, D-Middlebury.

Earlier in the hearing, Adam Martin, one of the Browns River students, challenged what he called the myths about idling -- including that buses had to be warm when students boarded.

"We're Vermont kids. We know how to stay warm," Martin said. "We bring winter clothes." As he spoke, the rest of the class pulled on their coats.

Bob Magee, Chittenden East Supervisory Union transportation supervisor, said when students crowd onto an unheated bus, "you get the fogging effect." Still, he didn't dispute the health hazards of diesel exhaust.

His district has restrictions on idling -- although they aren't strict enough to satisfy the Browns River students. Magee said he buys buses equipped with supplementary heaters that warm interiors without starting the engine. They reduce the need to leave buses running for long periods, Magee said. One-third of the fleet serving

Bolton, Huntington, Jericho, Richmond and Underhill has these heaters.

Magee noted that buses are not the only vehicles idling in schoolyards. Fewer than half the 3,000 students in the Chittenden East schools ride buses, he said. Many are dropped off and picked up by parents.

Jeff Francis, executive director of the Vermont Superintendents Association, suggested lawmakers address all idling by diesel-fueled vehicles.

Two representatives of Idle Free Vermont spoke of the problems posed by all idling vehicles.

"I hope you pass a complete no-idling bill," said David Polow of Morristown. "And if you pass this bill, you need an education component."

House Natural Resources Chairman Robert Dostis, D-Waterbury, praised the students' presentation.

"They shared with us the impact it is having on their lungs, their lives," he said. "They are asking us to do something about it. We can't ignore their request."

Still, he noted the political reality. Such a ban was proposed before and died. Dostis said, "I'll be interested to see if committee members still see this as a very controversial issue."

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