

Support Growing for Idle-free Schools

25 September 2004 Lynn Jones

The Ottawa River Institute, with support from Environment Canada's EcoAction program and the Ontario Trillium Foundation is distributing information about the benefits of idle-free zones outside of Renfrew County elementary schools.

Schools and school boards in many other places in Canada and the United States are considering or have already established idle-free zones outside of schools because of the many benefits of doing so. These benefits include:

Our air stays cleaner. Driving a car is the single most polluting thing that most of us do (according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency). Motor vehicles such as cars and buses, emit a dangerous mix of pollutants including carbon monoxide, benzene, dioxin, arsenic, lead and microscopic soot. Catalytic converters are designed to remove some of the pollutants from car exhaust, but they function less efficiently or not at all when the car is idling. Therefore, greater amounts of toxins are released during idling than when the car is moving. Idle-free zones help to keep some of these pollutants out of our air.

The health of children is protected. Pollutants in motor vehicle exhaust cause a host of human health problems from minor eye irritation, to respiratory problems such as chronic bronchitis and asthma, lung damage, impaired immune function and cancer. Health Canada estimates that more than 5000 Canadians die prematurely each year because of air pollution, and thousands more become unnecessarily ill. Children are particularly vulnerable to air pollution because they breathe faster than adults and inhale more air per pound of body weight. They're also more likely to breathe through their mouths, which makes children particularly susceptible to soot and other small air particles. Reduced idling helps to reduce these adverse health effects.

Vehicles will last longer and require fewer repairs if they are idled less frequently. Many people believe that stopping and starting a car is "hard on it". Actually, the opposite is true. Idling is hard on a car's engine. An idling engine is not operating at its peak temperature, which means that fuel combustion is incomplete. This leaves fuel residues that can condense on cylinder walls, where they can contaminate oil and damage engine components. For example, fuel residues tend to deposit on spark plugs. As the amount of engine idling increases, the average spark plug temperature drops and spark plug fouling is accelerated. This, in turn, can increase fuel consumption by 4 to 5 percent. Excessive idling can also allow water to condense in the vehicle's exhaust, which can lead to corrosion and reduce the life of the exhaust system.

Money and fuel are saved. According to Natural Resources Canada, Canadians waste millions of dollars on unnecessary idling each year. On average, Canadian drivers idle their vehicles for five to ten minutes every day. If each motorist in Renfrew County would avoid idling for five minutes each day, more than two million litres of fuel worth over a million dollars would be saved every year!

Fewer greenhouse gases will be released, helping to slow the process of climate change. In Canada, the transportation sector is the single largest source of greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change. Emissions from idling vehicles are unnecessary and can be easily prevented with the turn of a key. If each motorist in Renfrew County avoided idling for just five minutes each day, more than ten thousand tonnes of carbon dioxide would be kept out of the atmosphere each year. That's enough to fill close to two thousand gymnasiums!

To date, interested elementary schools in Renfrew County have received information about the benefits of reduced vehicle idling. Additional activities are currently underway. For more information, please contact Skye Faris, project coordinator, at 613-756-5555.

Lynn Jones is a member of the Ottawa River Institute is a non-profit, charitable organization based in the Ottawa Valley.