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School bus fix en route Smog-belching vehicles to be replaced by 2016

Zachary K. Johnson
Record Staff Writer
Published Friday, Sep 22, 2006

MODESTO - While the wheels of the school bus go round and round, the diesel engines pushing some buses forward emit soot and chemicals studies say contribute to air pollution and cause health problems for the students riding inside.

But buses taking kids to school in the San Joaquin Valley are set to run cleaner now that the governing board for the regional air pollution control district passed rules regulating school buses.

The rules are intended to weed out older and dirtier buses from school fleets within 10 years, according to the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District, which unanimously approved the rules at a Thursday morning meeting of its governing board.

By 2016, schools will be required to replace all buses manufactured before 1978 and replace or retrofit newer school buses to meet emission standards. Schools have the option to retrofit existing buses with engines that use cleaner-burning fuels. All school buses manufactured since Oct. 1, 2002, will be in compliance, whether fueled by diesel, gasoline or an alternative fuel.

Members of the public mostly supported the new rules at the air district meeting, which took place by video conference in Modesto, Fresno and Bakersfield. Environmental

groups supported the new regulations but criticized the district for not requiring schools to phase out the oldest and dirtiest buses before the 2016 deadline.

"It's a good first step," but the board missed an opportunity to put in the stricter time line, said Sarah Sharpe of the California group Coalition for Clean Air. The new rules also should have included incentives for schools to use buses powered by natural gas, she said.

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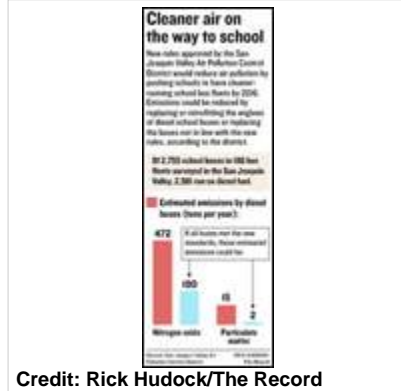
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The rules will affect Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Tulare counties. Air quality in the San Joaquin Valley falls short of federal standards regulating the levels of smog and solid particles in the air.

The new regulations would cut the emission of smog-causing nitrogen oxide by three-quarters of a ton per day and reduce the emission of particulate matter by three-tenths of a ton per day, according to pollution control district staff.

These reductions are relatively minor compared with the amount of ambient air pollution, but the real public health benefit will be seen by cleaning the air breathed by the students and school employees in and around buses, said Seyed Sadredin, executive director of the pollution control district.

Toxins in diesel exhaust can cause cancer, attack the immune system and cause irritation of the eyes and lungs, according to the district.



Credit: Rick Hudock/The Record

The particulate matter in exhaust can find its way deep into a child's sensitive lungs and can exacerbate, or even cause, asthma, said Patricia Monahan, senior analyst for the Union of Concerned Scientists.

In 2003, the California Air Resource Board enacted rules, citing health concerns, stating school buses could not idle in front of schools for more than 30 seconds.

Costs to retrofit a school bus can range from \$8,000 to \$12,000, said Jason Osborn, director of transportation for the Manteca Unified School District, which has a fleet of 52 diesel buses. But 31

of those buses were manufactured before 1994. The current technology available will not bring buses this old up to the new standards, he said. This means Manteca Unified would have to replace some buses in its fleet earlier than anticipated, Osborn said.

The cost of new diesel-powered school buses starts at around \$120,000, according to transportation officials. Buses that run on natural gas cost more.

The pollution control district counts 2,581 diesel school buses in the San Joaquin Valley. Of these, 1,354 were manufactured in or before 1990. The oldest bus in the Valley was made in 1949.

In 2006, a control district program used more than \$13 million of district and state funds to replace 101 buses and retrofit 123 more. There are other grants available for schools looking to update their fleets, said George Heinen, supervisor for rule development at the air district.

The Lodi Unified School District won't have to change what it's been doing to meet the 2016 deadline, said Terry Fugsang, the district's transportation director.

The life of a school bus in Lodi is expected to be about 20 years, and the school district has kept its fleet up to date, he said.

Of the school district's 103 buses, 41 were built in or after 2002, he said. Nineteen of those run on natural gas.

"I think any rule that improves the quality of air for our young students is a good rule," he said.

Contact reporter Zachary K. Johnson at (209) 833-1142 or zjohnson@recordnet.com



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