

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
August 25, 2008

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EPA Finds 14 Counties in Illinois Fail to Meet "Soot" Standards

Group calls on local governments to clean up sooty diesel engines

Chicago, IL—Last week, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released a list of 14 Illinois counties which failed to meet federal air quality standards for particulate matter, commonly referred to as "soot".

Fine particle pollution is dangerous because it can evade the body's natural filters and reach the deepest portions of the lungs and enter the bloodstream. Medical research ties fine particulate matter to increased numbers of asthma attacks, as well as heart attacks, strokes, lung cancer and premature deaths.

The 14 counties include: Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, Will, Rock Island, Massac, Madison, Monroe, St. Clair and parts of Grundy, Kendall, and Randolph. Most of these counties were already classified as not meeting a less-protective 1997 health standard. Rock Island County in the Quad Cities area and Massac County in Southern Illinois are two new counties EPA plans to add to the nonattainment list.

Based on extensive scientific evidence that showed particle pollution was more dangerous than originally thought, EPA tightened the health standard in 2006. EPA plans to open a 30-day public comment period on its intended designations and will make its final designations by December 18th.

A 2005 study by the Clean Air Task Force estimates that fine particles from diesel exhaust are responsible for triggering over 19,000 asthma attacks, nearly 1,200 heart attacks and 878 premature deaths each year in Illinois. Diesel engines, industrial facilities and coal-fired power plants all contribute to fine particulate matter in the air we breathe.

"Because it is emitted in close proximity to people, diesel exhaust from trucks, buses, construction equipment, and locomotives is especially dangerous," stated Ashley Collins, Environmental Health Associate, at the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago.

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"The challenge posed by diesel exhaust is one we can solve," noted Collins.
"Technology is available today that can virtually eliminate diesel soot."

Emission control devices called diesel particulate filters (DPFs), combined with the use of now standard ultra-low sulfur diesel fuel (ULSD), can eliminate over 90 percent of fine particles from a diesel engine tailpipe.

Because of the effectiveness of using these controls, federal rules now require particulate filters on all brand new heavy-duty trucks and buses (model 2007 or later). But diesel vehicles manufactured prior to 2007 do not have these devices. New diesel powered construction equipment will not be required to have such devices until after 2012.

"Local governments should clean up their own diesel vehicles by installing these devices and require that diesel vehicles and equipment contracted for public construction projects use the best soot pollution controls available," Collins stated noting that several governments had already adopted such strategies.

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For more information about the health dangers of diesel pollution and solutions to this problem, please log onto our website at: www.lungchicago.org

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