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From the Los Angeles Times

## Cancer risk rises for those near rail yards

A study says Commerce neighborhoods near several major facilities face a greater threat from diesel soot than residents elsewhere.

By Janet Wilson  
Times Staff Writer

May 25, 2007

Residents who live in the shadow of Southern California's booming rail yards face cancer risks from soot as much as 140% greater than in the rest of the region, according to new studies by state air regulators.

In addition, clouds of diesel exhaust blown by the wind from the rail yards blanket wide swaths of Greater Los Angeles, upping annual cancer risks slightly for millions more residents.

"The risks are much higher than they ought to be, and we need to do everything we can to reduce them," said Michael Scheible, deputy executive officer of the California Air Resources Board.

The health risk assessments, which were released in draft form this week, were prepared as part of a voluntary agreement between the nation's two largest railroads and the state air board. Such assessments have been done only once before in California, at a Roseville rail yard.

Hardest hit in the region are neighborhoods in Commerce that are near one Union Pacific and three BNSF yards. Residents in the tidy, working-class neighborhoods of Bandini and Ayers-Leonis are 70% to 140% more likely to contract cancer from diesel soot than people in the rest of Los Angeles. Regulators said some homes are only a few feet from rail-yard fence lines, and there are schools and parks near the yards, which operate around the clock 365 days a year.

Other rail yards and neighborhoods covered by the initial round of studies include Union Pacific's Los Angeles Transportation Center, Mira Loma near Union Pacific's yard in Riverside County and a BNSF facility in Wilmington. In those places, residents are 11% to 26% more likely to contract cancer from soot.

Railroad officials said the studies showed that the rail yards produce less than 1% of the region's diesel particulate emissions. But they said they were concerned about their contribution to local health risks and were spending millions of dollars to slash emissions in coming years with hundreds of new locomotives, anti-idling devices, cleaner fuels and other measures.

"We're certainly part of the issue," said Lanny Schmid, director of Union Pacific's environmental programs. "We like to think we're a small part of the issue, and we're going to get it even smaller."

But angry, anxious Commerce residents and others who were informed of the higher health risks at a City Hall briefing Wednesday night said faster action was needed. They also were disturbed that risks of respiratory disease, asthma and impaired lung function — all shown in numerous studies to increase with exposure to diesel soot — were not included in the health assessments.

"We need to figure out what we can do now, right now," said Commerce Mayor Robert Fierro, who added that as a schoolteacher he regularly received absentee notes for children who have suffered from asthma attacks or bronchitis.

"We've lived in Commerce since the 1950s, and I come from a family of four generations of asthma in the home," resident Nancy Ramos said. "My 4-year-old grandson is already dealing with asthma, including two ambulance visits."

"Quite honestly it's laughable" not to include health risks such as asthma and respiratory disease, said Ian MacMillan, who conducts similar health risk studies for the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Scheible said state health guidelines, which were prepared in the late 1980s, don't call for non-cancer health risks to be included, and, he said, they are more difficult to assess accurately. But he said that if enough people wanted officials to try, they would see if it could be done for the final reports.

The analyses showed that in addition to locomotives, giant cranes, refrigerated cars and aging short-haul trucks contribute to diesel emissions in the yards.

Trucks on nearby freeways and busy streets also add risk. The Commerce yards, for instance, spewed out a combined 40 tons of soot in 2005, while short-haul trucks on nearby streets put out about 113 tons.

Modeling and weather data used in the study showed that lower levels of soot spread for miles from the yards. The Union Pacific Los Angeles facility, which is less than a mile from downtown, spread a fine blanket of soot as much as four miles east and north of the facility, increasing cancer risk for 1.2 million residents by an average 10 chances in a million.

A past study has shown that cancer risks are highest at the ports that feed the rail yards.

But activists and local air regulators said the elevated cancer risks near the yards were "extremely high" compared with those near refineries and other "stationary sources," which are tightly regulated.

Allowable levels of risk from factories and other industrial sources are between 10 and 25 chances per million in the Los Angeles air basin, said South Coast Air Quality Management District spokesman Sam Atwood. Railroads claim exemption from local and state air pollution laws under interstate commerce clauses.

"Living next to a rail yard is like having a factory with 100 smokestacks going all the time," said Angelo Logan, head of East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice.

Mark Stehly, assistant vice president of environmental for BNSF, said it was unfair to compare factories with rail yards because locomotives and other mobile equipment cannot be fitted with the same types of heavy, high-volume emission control devices as factories.

"For [a rail yard] to be treated as a stationary source, it's appealing in its simplicity, but it's really not true. They are mobile sources," he said.

Additional meetings will be held on the studies in the next two months. The study findings are at <http://www.arb.ca.gov/railyard/hra/hra.htm>

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