

Are We Ready?: A roundup of environmental happenings from ecoRI News

An Unenforced Emissions Law Means Diesel Trucks Can Pollute at Will

Your personal vehicle has to undergo an emissions check every two years, but Rhode Island doesn't inspect long-haul trucks and heavy-duty vehicles for emissions at all, in spite of a 21-year-old law mandating such checks.

In mid-July, 21 years ago, a law was passed to crack down on diesel emissions emanating from Rhode Island's largest vehicles.

The amendment to the state's General Law (§ 31-47.2) acknowledged that heavy-duty diesel vehicles contribute significantly to air pollution and diminished "the quality of life and health" of all Rhode Island residents.

"It is in the public interest to establish a program regulating exhaust emissions from heavy-duty diesel trucks and buses traveling within Rhode Island," the law stated. It directed the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) and the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) to tackle the issue and launch such a program by 2003.

As of this month, according to state officials, "the program has not yet commenced."

According to the Environmental and Energy Study Institute, heavy-duty diesel vehicles emit about 20% of all transportation emissions. These emissions include carbon dioxide and monoxide, nitrogen oxides and ultrafine particulate matter. All are associated with a host of environmental and public health impacts.

DMV spokesperson Paul Grimaldi said test methods are now expected to be defined by the end of this year with a program launch no later than 2023.

"Equipment has been ordered and software is currently under development by Opus Inspection," said Grimaldi, chief of information and public relations with the Department of Revenue, which houses the DMV.

Mushrooms and Mosquitoes Won Summer

Rhode Island experienced the third-rainiest July on record, with most areas receiving more than twice the average monthly precipitation and some areas receiving much more. Local scientists said all that rain likely had an impact on wildlife and the environment, in both positive and negative ways.

In many neighborhoods, it was the mushrooms that were the most visible winners. Mushrooms of numerous species sprouted from lawns, gardens, forests, meadows and elsewhere in huge numbers. Mosquitoes also thrived in puddles and standing water.

Other wildlife didn't fare nearly as well, however. Butterflies, moths and dragonflies were barely

noticed in many areas for much of the month, though that doesn't mean the insects were killed by the rain. Most were probably just in hiding. They are typically visible only during sunny days, and since July had few sunny days, most species did not make their presence known.

The abundant precipitation provided a significant boost to lawns and wild plants, but many cultivated plants, especially vegetables, struggled to survive.

The biggest losers were beach-loving humans.

Providence Knowledge District Is Slow to Grasp Climate Reality

For more than a decade, political leaders have seen the overlapping Jewelry District and the I-195 Redevelopment District (aka the Knowledge District) as an area for economic renaissance and development.

The past three years have finally borne the fruits of these political efforts — with at least five multimillion-dollar developments built in these districts and two still under construction — thanks, in large part, to city and state tax incentives and subsidies.

Yet, as dollars are poured into developing the district, the ad hoc preparation for sea-level rise among the various buildings in the area begs the question: How prepared is this burgeoning economic and innovation district to deal with flooding?

Since 2015, the executive director of the Coastal Resources Management Council has been pushing those building in the I-195 Redevelopment District to prepare for at least 3 feet of sea-level rise. But so far, not a regulation exists that requires property owners in the Jewelry District and I-195 Redevelopment District to do so. Instead, these decisions are left to architects and building-project managers.

Peter Gill Case of Truth Box Inc. and Christine Malecki West of KITE Architects, both of whom have built or are building in the I-195 Redevelopment District, said their decisions to prepare for rising sea levels were not required in any building code, regulation or policy.

And without these regulations, many of the buildings in the Jewelry District and the I-195 Redevelopment District are more vulnerable.

The Aloft Hotel, for example, which is under construction and sits within 600 feet of the Providence River, has a first floor at an elevation of just 6.5 feet, according to public records. The land on which the building sits will flood with just 5 feet of sea-level rise, according to the Coastal Resources Management Council's STORMTOOLS. At high tide, 5 feet of sea-level rise overtakes the hotel's first floor.

*For detail on these stories, and to get more of the latest environmental news, visit www.ecoRI.org.
Subscribe to ecoRI News' free weekly e-newsletter at www.ecoRI.org/subscribe.*