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State health officials want further study of fire-affected school buses

Oregon health officials recommend further investigation into possible health hazards posed by school buses in the Salem-Keizer School District that were subjected to smoke from a fire two years ago.

The December, 2006 fire at the Salem-Keizer School District school bus facility destroyed seven buses and heavily damaged five others. Damaged buses were repaired, cleaned, and placed back into service. School bus drivers have reported ongoing health complaints as a result of driving the damaged buses, as well as more than 25 other smoke-affected buses.

The Oregon Department of Human Services State Public Health Division's Environmental Health Assessment Program (EHAP) has released a final health consultation to address the possible health risks to children riding school buses affected by fire.

The final report, issued March 25, 2009, expands on an earlier report to include comments from the public. Several bus drivers and one parent expressed ongoing concern over the possibility that residues from the fire could be causing health-related problems for drivers and children alike. State health officials have recommended that bus drivers in the Salem-Keizer school district request that the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) conduct a health hazard assessment because NIOSH has the resources and authority to investigate work-related risks from environmental exposures.

A NIOSH health hazard evaluation would include additional sampling on buses to determine whether chemicals related to the fire remain on the buses and, if so, whether they pose a health hazard to drivers and children alike.

If drivers or their union make the request to NIOSH, the federal agency can operate under its own authority which exceeds that of the state. This is important because the school district has said it lacks resources to do further testing.

Any concerned parents whose children are currently riding the fire-affected school buses can contact EHAP for more information about the report and related fact sheets.

The list of school buses that were affected by the fire, as well as the report and additional information, can be found on EHAP's web site, located at www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/ehap/.