

Port Could Cost Charleston Residents \$81 Million per Year

A study by national experts reveals that health costs associated with an expanded Charleston port could be as high as \$81 million per year.

“While the port provides many benefits for the state,” says Nancy Vinson, Program Director for the Coastal Conservation League, “there are also significant health costs to Charleston residents. These costs can and should be reduced.”

Port operations are significantly expanding in North Charleston, an area that already has serious air quality issues due to industrial and traffic emissions. CCL asked experts to quantify the resulting health costs of port emissions.

The new study focuses specifically on “fine particle pollution,” which comes from diesel exhaust. More than 2,000 peer-reviewed medical studies link fine particle pollution to serious health impacts including asthma, stroke, cancers, heart disease, and premature death.

The study focuses specifically on port operations because ships and trucks carrying cargo release substantial quantities of fine particle pollution, compared to the county’s industrial smokestacks. Also, ship and truck pollution can be especially harmful because it is released much closer to “nose level” than the average smokestack.

With the port planning to double its capacity with the addition of the North Charleston terminal, emissions will increase. “Now is the time to be open and honest about what this means for our community,” said Dr. Leslie Hubbard Pelzer, a Charleston physician. “The cost to clean up increased air pollution from expanding port operations is minimal compared to the enormous and inevitable cost of treating port-related health problems – not to mention the pain and suffering of the individuals involved.”

Starting with emissions data and air quality modeling provided by the State Ports Authority, experts quantified the costs of work loss, asthma exacerbations, chronic and acute bronchitis, non-fatal heart attacks, and death from cancer, cardiovascular disease, and other ailments linked to fine particle pollution from the port.

Their conclusion was that, at capacity, the proposed port expansion in North Charleston would have an annual health impact of up to \$27 million, in 2006 dollars.

Unless the port sets meaningful, measurable goals to reduce ship and truck emissions, health care costs associated with port emissions could be up to \$81 million each year.

The study went on to say that a conservative estimate of the health impacts of existing port facilities “would exceed that of the proposed terminal by about a factor of two.” The total health impact of all port facilities, therefore, is conservatively estimated at up to \$81 million per year.

The health impact would be lower if new rules are approved that require ships to use cleaner fuel in U.S. waters. However, this outcome is not certain and would only be a partial solution. Ships are currently allowed to use very dirty “bunker fuel” that is thousands of times more polluting than the diesel fuel EPA requires for trucks and cars on our roads.

Dr. William Prioleau, a retired cardio-thoracic surgeon, explained fine particle pollution’s profound impact on the human body: “Diesel engines deliver a large volume of exhaust in close proximity to people. Fine particles entering the bloodstream through the lungs are associated with heart disease, stroke, and more recently with deep vein thrombosis (blood clots).” Dr. Prioleau runs a free local clinic that helps people manage vascular and other chronic illnesses.

Concerned physicians and the Coastal Conservation League are urging the port and state leaders to commit to a meaningful and measurable cleanup of port pollution to reduce the impact on public health – as other ports have done. For example, the Los Angeles port recently reduced diesel truck emissions by almost 80% in just a few years. The Los Angeles and Long Beach ports have committed to reduce overall port pollution by nearly 50% over a five year period.

“The port has always been important to the fabric of the Charleston area,” said CCL’s Nancy Vinson. “Now more than ever, state leaders need to be sure ports are good neighbors – which means setting concrete goals for reducing pollution and protecting public health.”

The health impact study was conducted by Abt Associates, headquartered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which is one of the largest research and consulting firms in the world. Abt Associates created the leading computer model, used by the EPA, at other ports, and around the world, to predict health impacts and costs due to air pollution.

For three years in a row, Charleston County has received an “F” from the American Lung Association for high levels of fine particle pollution. In 2009, Charleston also received an “F” for high ozone levels. With available technology and cleaner fuels, the port can make meaningful and measurable reductions in fine particle pollution, and protect citizens’ health, rather than having individuals to bear the cost.

For additional information, contact Nancy Vinson, Program Director,
Coastal Conservation League, 843 723-8035 x1040, nancyv@scccl.org
<http://coastalconservationleague.org>