

Emissions and Vehicle Overpopulation Threaten Air Quality

Cleaner Fuel Tops the List of 'Must Haves' as Regional Conference Considers Options

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According to the latest data collected by the United Nations Environmental Programme, air pollution shortens the life of the average person by nine months worldwide. This index is higher in big cities in developing countries, like Tbilisi. On December 24 and 25, the Sheraton Metekhi Palace hosted a conference on "Cleaner Fuel and Vehicles for Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia" (EECCA) where the representatives of organizations like REC Caucasus, UNEP and the Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles, as well as officials from nine countries in the region brainstormed solutions for this problem.

Every year, approximately 1.5 billion urban citizens breathe air containing pollution which exceeds WHO standards. Every year 800,000 people die because of air pollution, and 70% of these are city dwellers. USD one billion is paid annually to deal with health problems, mainly pulmonary and cardiovascular, due to air pollution. In EECCA cities, including Moscow, Tashkent, Kiev, Yerevan and Tbilisi, 80% of the air pollution comes from a rapid growth in the vehicle population and low-quality fuel. These are the statistical notes that Elisa Dumitrescu the project manager of the Better Outdoor Air Quality through Cleaner Fuels and Vehicles, started her report with. According to her presentation, despite a growth in the EU's vehicle population, air pollution has decreased by 1/3 due to innovations in exhaust gas and improved fuel quality. This very project is now being brought to Southeast Europe and Central Asia. The main focus of the program is to improve diesel and gasoline quality by reducing several substances, like lead and sulfur and to do these things by the end of 2008. The reduction of lead will lead to a 90% emission reduction, while the reduction of sulfur to 50ppm will create cleaner vehicles with a better engine life maintenance. Miss Dumitrescu also stated: "The first thing that crosses investors' minds when they hear 'clean fuel' is higher prices, but our studies have shown that the marginal fluctuation per liter of cleaner fuel is inconsistent with market fluctuation, so actually there will be no change in prices. On the other hand, in Hong Kong the government manages to produce cleaner fuel for less expenditure, so maybe Georgian government could try to do that."

Another piece of astonishing statistical data was offered by Michael P. Walsh of the International Council on Clean Transportation. Apparently, the global vehicle population is growing drastically, with 25 million vehicles added annually. Besides this, hotter days lead to higher emissions and more smog, so global warming adds more problems to the case. At the end of his presentation, Mr. Walsh stated three of the forty main principles displayed in the program: "First of all, the government of the country should come up with several programs to reduce the toxicity of air, also, people should learn to treat vehicles and fuel as a system and finally, there should be no 'second class citizens' when it comes to public health, that is, every country should get equal quality fuel."

The problem is a serious one and drastic measures should be taken to solve it. REC Caucasus, Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles, and UNEP together with their associates will be trying hard to improve Georgian ecology by the end of this year. The success of the program will benefit society more than people can imagine, since high levels of lead and other harmful substances in the air leads to IQ reduction in children.

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