



## **It's time Oregon clean up its dirty diesel problem**

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**By Guest Columnist**

**Jim Serrill**

Being "Timber Jim" for the Portland Timbers wasn't just a stage act; I was a career line clearance tree trimmer for nearly 40 years. Late in my "day job" utility career, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. My work truck partner developed the same type of cancer. His experience has been much worse and more painful than mine. Ten men in my industry were diagnosed with cancer as well.

It wasn't long after I was diagnosed that I learned that railroad workers, firefighters, truckers, miners and others like me who worked with diesel engines and diesel exhaust face an increased risk of several kinds of cancer.

There was a sticker on my wood chipper that stated "this machine is known to cause cancer and reproductive harm in the State of California." I took this as a cautionary warning - not as a possible reality. I faced a fair amount of risk as an electrical worker. I made choices about how to work safely while climbing trees near high voltage power lines and working with chainsaws.

OSHA law requires all utilities, contractors and government agencies to recognize and mitigate workplace hazards. A simple axiom exists: "if it's not safe, don't do it."

I also made choices about what I ate, drank, how much sleep to get and how to take care of my health. But I had NO choice about exposure to diesel exhaust.

Now, Oregon has a choice to make.

A recent \$72.9 million settlement with Volkswagen gives Oregon the responsibility to limit our toxic diesel exposure. We will decide where and how to apply these dollars to make the greatest impact. It's a chance that won't come around again, which is why we have to get it right.

The Oregon Legislature is considering SB1008, a package of solutions to

address the health threat of old dirty diesel engines. The package will make sure we are not bringing more old engines into the state. Also that we understand how many dirty engines we have now and set a timeline to get those engines out of use.

I'd like to see all older diesel engines immediately taken out of service until replaced or retrofitted with filters that remove harmful particulates. The investment is worthwhile; for every dollar spent cleaning up old diesel engines, we will see as much as \$17 in avoided health costs.

The need is urgent; 19 of Oregon's 36 counties exceed the state health benchmark for diesel pollution.

It isn't just workers' health at risk - simply living a lifetime in some Oregon neighborhoods will result in enough diesel exposure to result in premature death.

I can tell you that there are parts of surviving cancer that no one wants to talk about. When I needed radiation, my world got very small. I could not continue to work and had to retire early. After 30 years, I had to stop being "Timber Jim" - the role I created for the team. My strength and stamina have evaporated. There have been other serious consequences, but I'll spare you from the graphic details. But allow me to convey the details are of a physical, emotional and financial nature. I don't want anyone's life to get cut short, or to have to give up doing what they love.

I share my story in the hopes that it will inspire change. I urge our lawmakers to support SB1008. Let's get a handle on our dirty diesel problem, once and for all.

*Jim Serrill (AKA Timber Jim) served as the original mascot (he prefers the title of Director of Love and Celebration) for the Portland Timbers; he retired in 2008. He lives with his family in Tualatin.*