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## Is Biden's EV school bus push at odds with diesel funds?

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By Sean Reilly  
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While the Biden administration's top brass this week hailed a burst of billions of dollars for the purchase of new electric school buses to reduce pollution, a separate — and potentially conflicting — EPA program is still be funneled significant funding.

Under a long-standing program beloved by Congress, EPA has previously helped underwrite the purchase of new diesel school buses that, while cleaner burning than their predecessors, still release pollutants linked to asthma attacks and other health problems.

From 2008 through 2018, EPA received more than \$800 million in Diesel Emissions Reduction Act (DERA) appropriations to replace or retrofit older diesel-fueled equipment to cut emissions, according to a recent [report to Congress](#).

Of the projects funded with grants or rebates, the single largest share, 43 percent, was for school buses, the report said, although other EPA figures don't furnish a clear accounting of the number of new buses that ran on diesel, as opposed to models powered by electricity or cleaner-burning fuels like propane.

With electric buses still considerably more expensive than their diesel counterparts, the issue also underscores the competing views on how to cut emissions most effectively.

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At the American Lung Association, which has received DERA grants, Paul Billings saw the use of program funds to buy lower-polluting diesel buses as a bridge on the transition to zero-emission alternatives.

**DERA program annual appropriations 2008-present**

*Congressionally approved spending on the Diesel Emissions Reduction Act grant program has more than tripled in the last decade.*

<b>Fiscal year</b>	<b>Amount</b>
2008	\$49 million
2009 (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act)	\$300 million
2009	\$60 million
2010	\$60 million
2011	\$50 million
2012	\$30 million
2013	\$20 million
2014	\$20 million
2015	\$30 million
2016	\$50 million
2017	\$60 million
2018	\$75 million
2019	\$87 million
2020	\$87 million
2021	\$90 million
2022	\$92 million

*Source: EPA/E&E News research*

"We're anxious to see no more diesels anywhere," said Billings, the group's national senior vice president for public policy. "But we also want to get the oldest, dirtiest diesels out of the system."

The stakes are enormous. Out of about a half-million school buses, just 1 percent were electric, compared to 75 percent that ran on diesel, the National School Transportation Association, an advocacy group, wrote in a report last year.

Once on the road, large diesel buses typically last 15 years. Their emissions include smog-forming nitrogen oxides and soot that's tied to a variety of health problems. Because children's

lungs are smaller and still developing, they are more vulnerable than adults' to air pollution of all kinds; they may be particularly exposed as they line up after school to board idling buses.

"Diesel vehicles are the work horses of our economy and they last a long time," Dale Krapf, an NSTA representative, said in prepared testimony during a 2019 Senate Environment and Public Works Committee hearing on DERA reauthorization ([E&E Daily](#), March 14, 2019).

Since its creation in the 2005 Energy Policy Act, DERA has emerged as a Capitol Hill rarity: an environmental program with widespread bipartisan support. That endorsement can be traced back to a diverse coalition of supporters.

Public health groups applaud its focus on cutting emissions; engine makers like Cummins Inc. and Navistar benefit from taxpayer funding for their products. In its recent report, EPA credited the program with cutting tens of thousands of tons of emissions of nitrogen oxides and soot, with estimated lifetime health savings valued at least \$8 billion. For new diesel buses, releases of those two pollutants can be more than 90 percent below the levels of older models, according to the report.

DERA "has been one of EPA's most successful programs in terms of benefits per dollar," Senate Environment and Public Works Chair Tom Carper (D-Del.) said in a statement. Together with then-Sen. George Voinovich (R-Ohio), Carper was responsible for plugging DERA into the 2005 law. With projects also targeting pollution from ports and other heavy-duty vehicles, Carper said, the program has "helped school kids and front-line communities across our nation breathe cleaner air."

### *Concerns with DERA*

Not everyone is a fan, however.

Under both former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, the White House unsuccessfully sought to slash or eliminate DERA spending. An initial Trump budget blueprint, for example, said that other funding sources were available and the "legacy fleet" of diesel-powered vehicles would eventually give way to cleaner replacements, regardless ([Greenwire](#), March 7, 2017).

Lawmakers responded by steadily boosting DERA's budget. The fiscal 2022 total of \$92 million was more than three times the 2015 sum. For this fiscal year, President Joe Biden is seeking to push that amount to \$150 million.

While the program's effectiveness has received relatively little outside scrutiny, independent assessments have periodically raised questions.

[In a 2012 report](#), the Government Accountability Office placed DERA in a cluster of 14 programs run by EPA, the Energy Department and the Transportation Department, all aimed at reducing diesel emissions from cars, trucks and other "mobile sources."

But because of varying levels of performance measures, the overall impact of the combined federal funding was "unknown," reviewers at the congressional watchdog agency wrote. While they recommended that the three other agencies develop a formal collaborative strategy, that advice was never implemented after DOT officials refused to accept it, according to [a follow-up retrospective](#).

In a [separate audit summary](#) released in 2014, EPA's inspector general questioned more than 90 percent of the spending on a half-dozen DERA projects awarded with money allotted under an earlier economic stimulus bill. Among the problems: dubious emission reduction claims by two state agencies and shaky financial management by five of the six recipients (*E&E News PM*, Sept. 15, 2014). In response, EPA's Office of Air and Radiation blamed the lapses partly on the need to dole out the stimulus money quickly and revamped emission reporting methods, among other changes.

Current Inspector General Sean O'Donnell now intends to take a look at school bus replacements funded through DERA, both to make sure that the money was properly distributed and that the projects "were selected to achieve the intended climate change and environmental outcomes," according to [his fiscal 2022 oversight plan](#). That audit is now set to begin next year, an IG spokesperson said in an email.

Vice President Kamala Harris and EPA Administrator Michael Regan were in Seattle on Wednesday to tout the first round of disbursements in a \$5 billion program enacted last year as part of an infrastructure bill to pump money into the purchase of electric and cleaner-burning school buses and charging equipment (*E&E News PM*, Oct. 26).

Through that program and others, the administration is sending "a strong signal" that zero-emission vehicles are the future, Regan told reporters beforehand on a conference call.

"This is just the beginning of our work to build a healthier future," he said, "to reduce climate pollution and ensure the clean breathable air that all of our children deserve."