The Verdant Vigilante

WBUR's Here and Now radio show recently covered the story of George Pakenham, the self-named "Verdant Vigilante." Pakenham roams the streets of New York City engaging in citizen enforcement of the city's anti-idling law. The law, which has been on the books in various forms since 1971, prohibits idling for greater than 3 minutes (1 minute in front of schools). The problem is, according to Pakenham's informal research, three quarters of the drivers in the city are unaware of the rule. For the last two years, he has been personally educating the public on his way to and from work (as a Wall Street banker), approaching idling drivers and distributing literature about the law and the penalties. He reports no serious dust-ups in the more than 1400 encounters, and boasts a success rate of 77% in persuading folks to switch off their engines.

Pakenham's efforts are no small matter. Vandenbergh and Steinemann estimate that if American drivers eliminated unnecessary idling, greenhouse gas emissions would drop by 6 million tons annually and result in a gasoline savings of 640 million gallons each year. No doubt there would be health benefits for bystanders associated with reduced emissions as well. (The conventional wisdom regarding the benefits of idling—such as reducing wear on the engine or minimizing increased pollution from cold starts—no longer holds given the advances in automotive technology.)

EPA and the American Transportation Research Institute report that anti-idling statutes and rules are on the books in forty-one states, counties and municipalities across the country. New Jersey boasts one of the most stringent, limiting idling to two minutes in many circumstances. California has a variety of idling standards, and recently identified more stringent enforcement of those rules as an early action measure for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions under the of the California Global Warming Solutions Act of 2006. They may want to get in touch with the Verdant Vigilante for enforcement tips.