

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-trucks12nov12,1,2038555.story?coll=la-headlines-california>

Trucks targeted in clean-air drive

Bond funds may boost a plan by the Long Beach and L.A. ports to replace older diesels, but more money is needed. Who will pay? It's still a bit hazy.

By Janet Wilson
Times Staff Writer

November 12, 2006

Around the corner they rumbled, hundreds of aging tractor-trailers gunning to get another load into Terminal S at the Port of Long Beach. But on a recent weekday, air brakes hissed as drivers were pulled over by air pollution enforcement crews.

The short-haul diesel trucks, which ferry cargo between the docks, rail yards and area warehouses, are one tiny leg in the global journey of goods between Asia and the United States.

Their drivers are among the lowest-paid workers at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach — the nation's busiest, which handle \$360 billion in annual trade. Officials say the trucks are a leading cause of deadly pollution at the ports and need to go.

"Residents around here call this the diesel death zone," said California Air Resources Board spokesman Jerry Martin.

Tuesday's approval by voters of Proposition 1B, combined with an aggressive clean-air plan due to be voted on by local officials this month, could help replace more than 16,000 trucks with new ones within five years. Indeed, within 20 years, many short-haul trucks could be replaced by conveyor belts, electric "maglev" — magnetic levitation — trains and other "clean" technology.

"That is the long-term goal, to shovel the cargo with new technology," said Paul Johansen, assistant director of environmental management at the Port of Los Angeles.

Jose Gonzales, 60, a Carson resident originally from Mexico, stood by his 1989 engine as inspectors went under the hood. He paid \$10,000 for the dingy beige tractor with a rickety trailer. Asked if he would like to replace his truck, which could cost as much as \$180,000, he said there was no way he could afford it. At first he didn't understand when asked if he would accept a new truck financed with public dollars or private fees, then replied, "In a heartbeat."

Gonzales said he knows clean air is important. He put nearly \$300 into repairs after being cited for air violations earlier in the month, a big expense on weekly wages of \$1,000. "The mechanic told me everything is outstanding now," he said.

"Hardly," said the inspector, taking readings on a portable "smoke meter" stuck into the innards of the exhaust pipe. Gonzales' truck did pass, but it is still emitting 34% more soot than a new truck.

The push to replace the trucks is part of the struggle to clean up stubbornly dirty Southland air while the amount of goods shipped through the ports skyrockets.

Local trucks are only one piece of the problem, and the easiest to pick on, some say.

"It's inherently unfair to target this sector.... The independent harbor truckers are seen as low-hanging fruit. They can't organize, they can't push back," said Ezra Finkin, legislative director for the Waterfront Coalition, a Washington, D.C.-based group of big-box retailers, including Wal-Mart, and other cargo importers. Environmental and labor groups recently formed an alliance to help the drivers.

"The problem is that if you give a poor truck driver a clean truck, he needs to be able to afford maintaining it," said Melissa Lin Perrella, staff attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council's Santa Monica office. "Only through improving the wages can you ensure that a clean truck is going to stay clean for the long run."

The ports' clean-air action plan draft, released Monday, proposed charging "polluter pays" impact fees to help pay for the new trucks. It said the fees should be assessed not on drivers but "as close as possible" to the firms that own the cargo.

Not surprisingly, cargo owners disagree. Finkin said the plan was a poor one, and that "if California thinks they have an air pollution problem," the state should pass laws to tax long-haul corporate trucking companies.

Lin Perrella, of the natural resources council, said it was disappointing that cargo owners "would take a position that seems to deny the pollution and public health impacts caused from goods movement.... The problem is undeniable."

She said imposing clean-air fees would add "pennies to the cost of a VCR and about half a penny on the cost of a Barbie to the consumer."

Studies have estimated that 2,400 people die annually statewide because of chronic diesel exhaust exposure, many along transportation corridors.

Freight locomotives also emit diesel exhaust, and international marine vessels cause more than half of all port-related air pollution. Rail and marine officials say they are voluntarily making improvements, but they claim interstate and international immunity from California air pollution laws.

Port officials say they can win changes from marine shippers and some rail companies through lease negotiations. State officials said they need stronger federal laws.

At one point, three truck inspectors turned and pointed at a locomotive on tracks just across the road belching thick black smoke. "Look at that!" they shouted in frustration before turning to the next semi lined up at the curb.

Port officials want to replace all trucks built before 1993 and retrofit those built between 1993 and 2003, at a cost of about \$1.8 billion. They say a 2005 survey found about 16,800 trucks that would qualify. The ports have pledged \$200 million, and the South Coast Air Quality Management District has allocated \$48 million. That local money could help in winning a large chunk of the \$1 billion that Proposition 1B designates for reducing emissions from cargo movement, because state officials often require matching funds.

"We told them we'd take the whole \$800 million" left after the ports' \$200-million pledge, said Johansen, of the Los Angeles port. But local officials face stiff competition statewide for the funds, from Oakland, Sacramento and others.

California air board Deputy Executive Officer Mike Scheible said state environmental officials agree that replacing Southland port trucks is "a top priority," but added that his staff had found about 12,000 trucks there needed help, not 16,800.

He said many could be retrofitted with new filters at lesser cost.

The ports are examining several ways of getting new, cleaner trucks to drivers, including lease-to-buy programs or low-interest loans. Officials pointed to a smaller program administered by a regional nonprofit organization using state motor license fees that has helped 500 drivers buy new trucks.

Several truckers said they had not heard of the program, and one air board inspector said the convoluted application process was "brutal."

Port officials said they would issue fliers and use other means to get out the word on any future program.

"Our intent isn't putting anybody out of business," said Port of Long Beach spokesman Art Wong. "Our intent is to replace the dirty trucks."

janet.wilson@latimes.com

*

(INFOBOX BELOW)

Emissions

Port officials want to replace more than 16,000 aging short-haul trucks, just one source of air pollution there.

Particulate emissions from diesel engines, by source

Ocean-going vessels: 59%

Cargo-handling equipment: 14%

Harbor craft: 11%

Short-haul trucks: 10%

Locomotives: 6%

Source: Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, 2001-02

Copyright 2006 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

PARTNERS:

