More trains but less pollution?

Experts debate BNSF planned rail hub’s environmental impact on High Desert air quality

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VICTORVILLE — The rail hub that Victorville is exploring with BNSF Railway Co. could bring more than jobs to the region.

Along with employment opportunities, the facility at Southern California Logistics Airport would also redistribute the sources of air pollution within the goods movement industry in the High Desert. Whether those changes would make the air cleaner or dirtier in the High Desert depends upon who is speaking.

"Anyone proposing a project that’s going to handle the future growth in these imports should also be putting in place the future and existing technologies that are the cleanest," said Martin Schlageter, campaign director for the Coalition for Clean Air, a statewide non-profit with an office in Los Angeles.

The goods movement industry expects to triple the amount of cargo coming into California ports by 2025, he said.

Trains and heavy duty trucks both currently run on diesel fuel. While trains are more efficient and produce less net air pollution than trucks for the same amount of cargo, some characteristics of rail transport reduce its cleanliness. While the multimodal facility could take some heavy duty trucks off the roads, less obvious inefficiencies of trains could eat away at the reduction in truck pollution.

More trains mean increased vehicle congestion at railroad crossings and trains usually spend a lot of time idling, said Annette Kondo, spokeswoman the Coalition for Clean Air.

A 2004 environmental impact report found that operations at the multimodal yard would adversely impact air quality to a "significant and unavoidable" degree. The rail hub would process approximately 50,000 freights cars in the first year, according to the report.

Emissions anticipated by the report include nitrogen oxides and reactive organic gases, which combine to form smog. PM10 particulate matter from diesel-fueled engines, which can cause lung disease, is another pollutant listed.

"Trains versus trucks is a hot subject," said supervising air quality engineer Alan De Salvio of the Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District.

"Because both trucks and trains travel interstate, it’s literally impossible for air districts like ours to regulate them," De Salvio said.

A locomotive can pull the load of about 280 trucks with about 30 times the
emissions of one truck, said California Air Resources Board spokesman Jerry Martin.

"I think the major issue for the intermodal yard is that the air district believes the relocation of industry up here is a major benefit because it reduces commuters down the hill," De Salvio said.

With over 40 percent of the nation's containers coming through the Long Beach and Los Angeles ports, the High Desert faces decisions about jobs and air quality that are echoing across Southern California, Kondo said.

"What you're seeing is more and more pressure put on our state to really service the rest of the country's goods," Kondo said.

Pollution would come not only from the rail hub but from trains on their way through Victor Valley neighborhoods, she said.

The rail industry is currently operating under agreements with the state Air Resources Board to use its cleanest engines in Southern California and to shut engines down after idling for 45 minutes, Martin said.

However, switching out engines is a slow process. "America only builds about one locomotive a week," he said.

Schlageter said that a third source of emissions at multimodal yards is the cargo handling equipment that transfer goods between trucks and trains.

"Electric, gas and hybrid diesel are technologies that are available for that equipment," Schlageter said.

As for trucks, cleaner natural gas technology already exists. Railroad companies could also work on using cleaner diesel fuel or natural gas and turn off engines before idling 45 minutes.

When the Air Resources Board issued its goods movement emissions reduction plan in 2006, Schlageter said, it found that 2,400 people across the state die prematurely due to emissions from goods movement. The industry will continue to grow in California, but cities can require that multimodal yards use cleaner technology, he said.