

Cleanup at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach begins to pay off



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By: Ronald D. White
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An ambitious plan to clean up once-filthy air around the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach has shifted into high gear.

Hundreds of 1988-and-older trucks have been banned since October. Others that don't meet 2007 air pollution standards began paying a \$70 fee last week each time they haul cargo to and from the ports. This week, the first of a fleet of electric trucks will debut. And within three years, most ships will be able to plug into the ports' electrical grid and turn off their exhaust-belching diesel engines.

For more than a decade, South Bay and Long Beach residents have complained about pollution from the ports, and 1,200 annual premature deaths have been linked to the ports' air pollution problems. But in October, the ports launched the cleanup, and it's beginning to pay off.

"This is the No. 1 health issue in our city," said Long Beach Mayor Bob Foster, who was pleased with the new truck fees introduced last week. "By paying these fees, the people who benefit from the goods-movement industry have become part of the solution to cleaning the air."

Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa agreed. The new fee collection "marks a milestone in our efforts to clean up the ports as we roll ahead with taking 16,800 dirty-diesel trucks off the road for good."

The National Resources Defense Council, long one of the ports' toughest critics, was impressed. It praised the step in October to remove about 2,000 trucks that were at least 20 years old. As a result, the group estimated that diesel particulates emissions may have been reduced 50%.

"These are the dirtiest ports in the nation, with the worst air pollution, but if this program survives its legal challenges, the changes these ports are making now could be adopted throughout the country," said David Pettit, senior attorney for the resources council.

Experts say no other part of the nation has taken such broad steps to reduce the effect their ports have on health.

"This is putting the Southern California ports at the forefront. Port trucks are going to be cleaner than any other trucks in the region that are hauling cargo, and that is huge," said Kristen Monaco, a logistics and port trucking expert at Cal State Long Beach. "This will be used as a template for ports around the nation."

About 3,000 new clean diesel trucks have already joined the fleet, which is well above the 2,000 new trucks both ports said that they had hoped to have in place by now.

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"Everybody said that this would never work, but it is not just working, it's thriving," Villaraigosa said. Other cleanup efforts underway include:

- Ports have earmarked more than \$20 million in incentives that are encouraging more than a dozen of the world's biggest shipping lines to switch to clean-burning fuels as they approach Southern California.
- Nearby harbor areas have also become testing grounds for the latest technology, such as compressed natural gas trucks that will be moving cargo containers between the San Pedro Bay ports and nearby freight-consolidation yards.
- Los Angeles and Long Beach have become new technology incubators, with seed money for projects such as the world's first electric-diesel hybrid tugboat, which was delivered this month. That includes Balqon Corp., the electric truck manufacturer.

On Wednesday, amid confusion and traffic jams, officials launched a much-delayed effort to assess a \$70 fee on all trucks that do not meet 2007 air pollution standards each time they haul cargo containers to and from the ports.

The fees will be used to help subsidize truckers so that they can lease from the port new low-emissions diesel or natural gas trucks. Under the plan that is expected to start in the coming weeks, truckers would pay 50% to 60% of the truck leases and the fees would cover the rest, plus maintenance.

The timing is crucial because Dec. 31 is the next deadline for eliminating or retrofitting 2003 and older trucks.

It hasn't been a smooth road. An electronic system is finally in place at the ports to determine which trucks meet the new requirements. But it took weeks longer than anticipated to put in place. Until Wednesday, all trucks carried stickers and had to be monitored visually at the gates by attendants.

Retailers have threatened to take their business elsewhere, but it is not clear how much business might have been lost. Lawsuits filed by the American Trucking Assn. and the Federal Maritime Commission to block various parts of the clean truck program are pending.

Port traffic was snarled Wednesday when hundreds of trucks were turned away from the terminal gates because they did not have the proper credentials for the fee collection. There were fewer problems and delays Thursday and Friday.

It was "a realization for a lot of people that we are serious about doing this. It's like tax day. People will wait for the last minute to do what they have to, but you cannot wish it away; it is here," said Dick Steinke, executive director of the Port of Long Beach.

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S. David Freeman, chairman of the Port of Los Angeles' board of harbor commissioners, said, "The miracle is we are ahead of schedule despite all the thrashing and whooping and hollering that has gone on."

Bruce Wargo, president and chief executive of PortCheck, the organization set up to handle the fee collections, said that the first few days went off better than expected.

"Only about 10% of the trucks today were turned away at the gates," Wargo said. "I was expecting it to be about 20%."

Not everyone was pleased. Dwight Robinson is vice president of the Los Angeles Harbor Grain Terminal, a longtime local business that helps exporters move their grains and other agricultural goods overseas by transferring them to cargo containers.

One of Robinson's drivers showed up in a 2009 natural gas truck, only to be turned away from both ports because his truck tags were faulty. But officials at the Terminal Island Clean Truck Center later told him the tags were fine, after he had waited in line for three hours.

But others, including San Pedro resident Kathleen Woodfield, were ecstatic.

"It gives me a feeling of great hope that these air pollution issues will be resolved and that we will be breathing cleaner air in the very near future," she said.

Geraldine Knatz, executive director of the Port of Los Angeles, said she had already heard from officials at some of the nation's other ports who were anxious to know how it was going.

"I think we're off to a great start," she said.