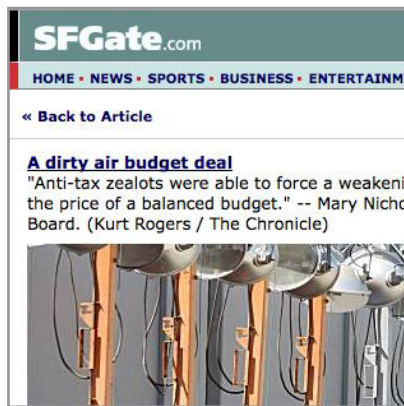


A Dirty Air Budget Deal



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California legislators may be proud they survived a marathon budget ordeal. But none should be saluted for a backroom deal that may sicken or kill thousands in the name of a special-interest loophole.

If that sounds extreme, consider what happened. The budget bargaining, which wrapped up at dawn last Thursday, contains a proviso to delay the start of pollution controls on off-road diesel engines. It's a category covering some 180,000 road graders, forklift trucks, airport baggage trucks and even ski resort snow-packing vehicles, which spew out lung-damaging soot and a key chemical that causes smog.

The delay will push back rules adopted in 2007 by the state Air Resources Board, which enacted the tailpipe limits after years of study and public hearings. Beginning next year, the off-road engines were due to be replaced or retrofitted as part of wide-ranging process to clean emissions pouring into some of the nation's dirtiest air.

These diesel power plants may be reliable, durable and thrifty. But these qualities come with a human price. The off-road engines kick out particulates, the speck-sized particles in the dark clouds of exhaust. The state rules intended to remove 85 percent of the amounts in a series of steps running from 2010 to 2025 and up to 70 percent of the oxides of nitrogen, a smog-causing chemical. During this multiyear period, the board projected the changes would save 4,000 lives.

Thus, it's no stretch to say that delaying a diesel cleanup will prolong this public health hazard. There will be more hospital admissions for lung and heart disease and asthma rates will sail on. The ill-founded decision also jeopardizes California's chances of federal highway money because of unabated dirty air levels in the San Joaquin Valley and parts of Southern California.

It's not hard to see what's going on. Construction firms had fought the rules for financial reasons, estimating that engine replacements and retrofits would cost \$13 billion. (It's a number that state smog officials pegged at considerably less.) Early in the budget debate, Republican leaders brought up the notion of delaying an even larger goal - overall limits on greenhouse gas emissions - as a bargaining chip.

For a while these arguments went nowhere. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who appointed the leadership of rule-setting state agency, stood firm behind the plans. Democrats in the Legislature disregarded the GOP criticisms. But these leaders have caved.

Was any of this debated or publicly discussed? Of course not. That's what the shame factor will do.

The decision was done quietly, and few noticed until the decision was made to delay the diesel rules. The environment and public health took a back seat to political deal-making.

When Sacramento recovers from the budget ordeal, it should reconsider this mistake. Muster a majority vote to return California to a timetable that will produce cleaner air and a healthier population.