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For cleaner US ports, cut truck fumes first?

An L.A. ports coalition hopes its plan to allow only trucking firms that embrace new emissions standards will expand nationwide.

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LOS ANGELES

As Luis Ceja steers his orange Freightliner toward the Port of Long Beach, one of the busiest seaports in the US, every rev of the engine spews more fumes into the air – some of it sucked back into the cab via an open window.

"This air pollution is no good for me or anyone," says the trucker, a legal immigrant from Mexico who has been driving big rigs for 30 years. But to curtail the emissions, he'd need to spend \$8,000 to overhaul his 18-wheeler – something he says he can't afford on \$25,000 annual take-home pay.

Now help may be on the way for Mr. Ceja and his eight-year-old vehicle. The Port of Los Angeles and its neighbor, the Port of Long Beach, are being spurred by a broad coalition of local activists to curb emissions related to the shipping industry, and their first action item is to try to streamline the trucking network that transports goods to and from the ports.

Last week, the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports unveiled a plan calling on the two ports to give trucking contracts only to companies that pledge to honor existing government standards for emissions, labor practices, and national-security measures. The hope is that drivers like Ceja will be able to earn more and upgrade their trucks – and that port authorities will be able to hold trucking firms accountable if the drivers who work for them are out of compliance.

The hope is also that this plan, which would affect 16,000 truckers, will become a model for the rest of the nation's ports and its 80,000 to 90,000 truck drivers, says the coalition, a group of environmentalists, unions, immigrants-rights activists, residents, and clergy that devised the trucking strategy for the two local ports, which together handle 40 percent of US container shipping. The coalition already is taking the initiative to four other ports – Oakland, Calif., Seattle-Tacoma, Miami, and New York-New Jersey.

"This move is well under way in all five areas," says Chuck Mack, Western region vice president and director of the Teamsters Port Division. "Because it has input from so many players on all sides of the issue, we believe this is the best, most comprehensive, creative solution."

That's not to say it would come at no cost. The plan could drive up the cost of all transported goods, as

trucking companies begin to pay truckers more and step up compliance with labor, emissions, and national-security standards.

"The truckers are not nearly in the dire straits they would have you believe," says Ed Denike, spokesman for SSA Lines, one of the Port of L.A.'s largest terminal operators and trucking firms. Payroll for the 300 truckers working for his company averages about \$50,000 per week, he says. "We like this idea and think it is the way to go. But in the end, consumers will have to pay more, and it will be noticeable."

At a Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports press conference March 29, however, the emphasis was on the need to help truckers and on health concerns stemming from port-related pollution.

Every port in America is saddled with a chaotic transportation system, exacerbated by truck drivers who are exploited and undercapitalized, says John Canham-Clyne, spokesman for Change to Win, a labor federation and a coalition member. "If [the US] is going to grow its economy and do it in a way that is green, we have to remove the barriers to efficiency, safety, and health that have been created by chaotic and inefficient port trucking."

Many trace the current problems to trucking deregulation 25 years ago. With many drivers now working as independent contractors, trucking companies do not have to pay Social Security taxes, unemployment insurance, or workers' compensation for those contract workers. To make ends meet, truckers forgo upgrades to their trucks and drive older, less safe trucks.

Another key problem, advocates say, is that truckers are paid by the truckload rather than by the hour, reducing trucking-company incentives to cut the time drivers spend waiting in line to load or unload. Waiting consumes as much as half of drivers' time, say coalition members. Meanwhile, engines idle and diesel fumes pour into the air.

"Those who live directly in port areas are the first casualties of this," says Tonia Reyes-Uranga, city councilwoman for the area. "The rates of asthma in children are soaring. Parents are actually afraid to go out of their homes."

"We don't believe California can achieve its clean-air goals without a huge reduction [in emissions] from these trucks," says Tim Carmichael of the Coalition for Clean Air.

The trucking plan is the first part of a five-year plan to cut emissions by 50 percent at the Port of Los Angeles, says port spokeswoman Theresa Adams-Lopez. The port has been working with federal, state, and regional agencies to meet the goal. Other issues to be addressed are pollution from ocean-going vessels, tugboats, and harbor craft; trains; and yard equipment, she says.

Wal-Mart, a huge importer, says it is evaluating whether the new plan will raise costs. It is already working to double the efficiency of its truck fleet of 7,200 by 2015, says spokesman Dave Tovar. Already, installation of auxiliary power units on all trucks has cut Wal-Mart's annual consumption of diesel fuel by 10 million gallons and eliminated about 100,000 metric tons of carbon-dioxide emissions.

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