

Public to speak about trucks plan

Clean Truck Program hearing expected to draw diverse crowd.

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In an effort to prove that the stalled Clean Truck Program isn't completely dead in the water, Los Angeles and Long Beach harbor commissioners will convene a joint meeting next week to hear public comment on the plan.

A final decision on whether to implement the \$1.8 billion program isn't anticipated as officials at both ports struggle to keep it afloat.

The meeting, scheduled for 8 a.m. Oct. 12 at the Doubletree Hotel in San Pedro, is expected to draw truckers, environmentalists and those who live near the twin port complex.

"It's obviously very controversial," S. David Freeman, president of the Los Angeles Harbor Commission, said Thursday.

"Before we take any final action, we want to be sure we've heard from everyone with a stake in it in a manner that gives them enough time to express their views," he said. "We're determined to bring it to a meaningful conclusion, but we're determined to consider everyone's point of view."

After a series of public hearings over the past year, the Los Angeles and Long Beach harbor commissions have already postponed two previous votes on the Clean Truck Program, which calls for replacing or retrofitting about 16,000 older, diesel-operated rigs.

The change is expected to reduce diesel emissions by 80 percent.

"I think holding yet another public meeting only sets the commissioners up for hearing from a very angry community for dragging this out for so long," said Rafael Pizarro, senior campaign associate for the Coalition for Clean Air.

"About 2,400 people in California have died from port and freight-related pollution since they introduced this plan a year ago," Pizarro said. "I think they should be busy implementing what they promised us, instead of hearing our frustrations again and again."

Port officials had hoped to launch the five-year plan on Jan. 1, but those close to the project say a more realistic start date would be mid-2008.

Part of the delay stems from a report by economist John Husing, who has cited the high cost of implementing the proposal and potential financial fallout.

"This is an extremely complex issue," said Mario Cordero, president of the Long Beach Harbor Commission. "We just want to make sure we're taking the right steps to minimize economic disruption while maximizing reductions in air pollution."

Husing said the cost of converting the trucks, coupled with a caveat that would require all independently contracted drivers to become employees of the trucking companies, could force a majority of the 1,300 port trucking companies out of business.

Such a move would lead to loss of drivers and a temporary slowdown of cargo deliveries, Husing said.

The findings have led to increased opposition from truckers and the shipping industry.

"I think if they use this public meeting to formally announce a long delay, then I think that would be beneficial to everyone involved," said Julie Sauls, vice president of external affairs for the California Trucking Association, based in West Sacramento.

"We don't feel the proposal, in its current form, is good for the truckers, nor will it have any real impact on cleaning the air," Sauls said. "We need a statewide solution that concentrates on reducing emissions while not crippling the goods movement industry."

In a related action, the Los Angeles harbor commission agreed on Thursday to purchase 158 trucks that operate on LNG for \$27.4 million.

The cleaner trucks will replace pre-1994 diesel rigs and will be used by 10 firms that do business with the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

The trucks will be funded by both ports and the Southern California Air Quality Management District.

The Los Angeles City Council is expected to sign off on the port's \$13.5 million contribution sometime next month.

The Long Beach harbor commission has not yet voted on its \$8 million contribution to the purchase.

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