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Cargo fee remains a viable option to reduce pollution

Opponents of the idea of California imposing a fee on cargo containers to fund pollution mitigation and reduce congestion contend such a fee would be a drag on economic growth, especially at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

But a study commissioned by environmental groups takes issue with that assessment, concluding that a \$30 container fee would have minimal to no effect on business at local ports. State Sen. Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, has proposed such a fee to raise funds to improve security and reduce air pollution.

The study by professors James Corbett of the University of Delaware and James Winebrake of the Rochester Institute of Technology found that such a fee imposed at L.A. ports would lead to at most 1.5 percent of ships being diverted elsewhere. Moreover, such a fee would increase the cost of shipping goods to L.A. ports by 1.5 percent to 2.5 percent.

Commissioned by the Coalition for Clean Air and the Natural Resources Defense Council, the professors' study found that business would continue to be strong for the local ports because of shippers' desire to compete in the lucrative Southern California market.

The study raises a key question for voters who will decide the fate of a November bond measure that would provide funding to mitigate port pollution: Does it make sense to have only Californians pay the brunt of cleaning up port pollution? Or, considering that half of the goods handled by local ports are shipped to other states, should the financial burden be shared by consumers nationwide who buy imported goods?

California voters and lawmakers need to settle this question. Pollution from goods transportation has been blamed for an estimated 2,400 deaths in the state annually. One way or another, the ports need to reduce the air pollution that advocacy groups say has a profound effect on L.A.-area residents' health.

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