



Filters proving costly to truckers

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Edwin Siliezar did everything right. He applied early when grant money was first offered by the state of California to help pay for new diesel particulate filters for trucks hauling at the Port of Oakland.

His new filter, a hybrid model he was told was suitable for short-haul trucks such as his, was installed in the fall. He was sitting pretty when the Jan. 1 deadline rolled round for meeting the state's strict new air quality rules for port trucks.

Except he wasn't. While some drivers are still scrambling to get their filters installed by a new April 30 deadline, Siliezar and a growing number of Oakland's truckers are finding that the costs do not end with the purchase of the filters.

Instead of fretting about getting a filter, Siliezar spends a lot of time worrying about the one he has. He has had to take his truck in to the NorCal Kenworth service center 11 times — an average of once every two weeks — since the filter was installed so his rig can be plugged into a special device to burn off the dangerous soot collected in the filter.

Each visit costs him \$50 and five to eight hours of down time, precious time during which he is not driving and not earning money. He also had to pay an extra \$500 one time to have his filter unit removed and cleaned. The managers at Kenworth feel so bad for him that they have given Siliezar five free plug-ins. He used his third free pass Friday.

"It's not just me. All the local operators have the same problem if we don't do long hauls," he said. "I lose work. When the (warning) light goes on, I come in."

Siliezar also had to spend \$3,000 to upgrade his 1995 model engine before the filter could be installed.

"Right now, I'm in a deficit," he said. "I didn't know how much I would have to spend. It's less work and more service."

Siliezar, however, most likely is better off than the more than 1,300 drivers who lost out on \$22 million in state, local and federal grants available last year that paid \$50,000 toward a new truck or the entire cost of the filters, minus sales tax. Before the grant

funds ran out, basic filter costs averaged \$16,000 to \$21,000.

Although an additional \$11 million was found over the New Year's holiday to help those drivers, the new retrofit grants were limited to \$5,000 each. Oakland Mayor Ron Dellums' staff has been trying to secure more money for truckers, but nothing has come through so far.

So, the 670 drivers who qualified for the new grants had to scramble to find \$10,000 to \$20,000 in financing to pay the difference. They are barely scraping by, and now they have monthly loan payments of \$300 to \$500 on top of their other bills.

Costs pile up

Most of their trucks were older models with hundreds of thousands of miles of deferred maintenance. Many of the rigs needed expensive engine overhauls before the highly sensitive filter systems could be installed, said Wayne Dorchester, service manager with NorCal Kenworth Bay Area.

A poorly maintained truck translates to more frequent trips for service to clean the new filters. Those visits can cost as little as \$50 for a plug-in or as much as \$600 for a de-ashing. If the unit is really bad, a manual cleaning of the filter insert is needed. The soot is burned off in a kiln at the service center, and the residue is disposed of as hazardous waste, he said.

As a result, the port truck retrofit program is bankrupting many independent truck operators, many of them newer immigrants who are driving older trucks with as many as 1 million miles on the odometer. The filters weigh 80 pounds, which hurts gas mileage.

Dorchester said he feels bad for the drivers — who sometimes come with family in tow — who are stunned to find out how much it costs to maintain their trucks with the new filters installed and wonder how they will pay. Older trucks may have been able to rack up the miles without engine maintenance or even an oil change. However, the new computerized filter systems are sensitive, and everything has to be up to par. "Diesel output is related to oil consumption," Dorchester said. "These trucks are being driven to the breaking point."

Deferred maintenance

"A lot of our customers' issues are because they weren't forced to maintain their trucks," branch manager Harry Mamizuka added. "But now they have to because of the filters. If they drive on a red light (a computerized signal that the filter is full), they might crack the filter."

The drivers are doing their best to comply with new state air quality rules for diesel trucks used to haul cargo at California ports. The regulations took effect Jan. 1, but the deadline was extended to April 30 because of a severe backlog of filter orders. Trucks with engines manufactured before 1994 are banned outright, and engines manufactured from 1994-2003 must be outfitted with new filters that reduce diesel particulate emissions by 85 percent.

The microscopic particulates can lodge in the lungs and cause higher rates of cancer

and serious respiratory problems for drivers and residents who live near the port. The deadlines are phased in for owners of trucks manufactured from 2004 to 2006. Trucks manufactured in 2007 or newer are compliant. Even tougher emissions regulations go into effect Jan. 1, 2014. For all the money being poured in these old rigs now, most of them will have to be scrapped before the loans are repaid.

Worry about now

Many of the drivers say they will worry about that later. For now, about 500 of them need to get their filters installed by Friday or they will not be able to work inside the port.

Nearly 300 drivers who were among the last to line up filter financing have been given until June 30 to comply with the new regulations. Of those, 187 drivers who did not qualify for conventional bank loans were able to obtain financing from Cascade Sierra Solutions, and another 100 or so from Opportunity Fund or Superior Financing Group. All are nonprofits.

Sandor Lau, development director for Cascade Sierra Solutions, said he is confident that the drivers will be able to repay their loans as long as they can get on the road and work. He said 34 of his clients already have the filters installed, and 55 more are scheduled for completion by Friday. The rest will be installed by June 30.

It's a tall order. Dorchester, of Kenworth, said there was a big rush on installations before the Jan. 1 deadline for drivers lucky enough to receive full grant funding last year. There was a lull for a couple of months, but the pace is picking up again with the new deadline looming, and they are doing about five or six installs a day. It can take from half a day to half a week to do the work, depending on the condition and age of the truck.

"We've installed 300 filters in the past eight months," Mamizuka said. "We have another 100 to go, 20 that have to be installed by April 30."

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