



November 20, 2009

Why the L.A. Clean Truck Program is Worth Fighting For

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Just over a year ago, the Port of Los Angeles started the Clean Truck Program (CTP), a groundbreaking initiative designed to take the truck pollution issue head-on, once and for all. Prior to the implementation of the CTP, pollution generated by port-related sources (trucks, trains, ships, etc.) was such an issue that mounting health concerns and legal threats paralyzed port expansion efforts and threatened Southern California's future viability as the nation's largest cargo gateway.

As part of the CTP, we are developing long-term business relationships with the hundreds of trucking companies that routinely access port terminals. Through their concession agreements with the Port of Los Angeles, these companies are accountable for operating and maintaining trucks that meet local and state emissions requirements and also for the safety and security performance of their drivers. Our concessionaires represent 700 area trucking companies, 80 percent of which are small businesses with less than 50 trucks. We have concessionaires with as few as one or two individuals.

Now, the Port of Los Angeles is engaged in a lawsuit with the American Trucking Associations (ATA) over our right to have access controls for the thousands of trucks that enter into our cargo terminals each day.

The ATA was successful in getting the court to stop our direct enforcement of the truck replacement program against trucking companies, as well as a requirement that these companies gradually transition over to using employee drivers – a measure that would have made our port more secure and our program more sustainable over the long-term. But the ATA is not stopping there. In fact, the most significant legal fight our port continues to wage with the ATA is over our ability to use concessions, or enforceable agreements, to hold trucking companies responsible for the trucks and drivers they dispatch to our port. Instead, if problems arise with any of these thousands of contracted drivers or their trucks, the ATA wants the port to chase down those individual truckers – an enforcement measure that is neither practical nor realistic.

We argue the opposite position. We believe in creating accountable, self-reliant trucking companies that can continue to operate clean truck fleets for generations to come. And we have already seen the benefits of a program tailored to this goal. So far, the CTP has created a more efficient trucking system. Our roads and facilities aren't overwhelmed by thousands of independent truckers who drive rates below the true cost of business, cannot afford to purchase and maintain clean trucks -- even with significant public subsidies -- and, as a result, operate dirty trucks at the expense of the community's health and safety.

Yes, the ATA will extol its support for cleaner truck fleets and cleaner air. And, not surprisingly, it's not opposed to the tens of millions of dollars in local and federal subsidies and incentives that have helped truck operators purchase clean trucks. The ATA contends that if we have come so far so quickly -- reducing truck emissions by as much as 70 percent since October 2008 -- our mission is accomplished and we should stop arguing for program requirements like concession agreements. But who will pay for the next fleet of clean trucks when today's new trucks will need to be replaced? It's too soon to pat ourselves on the back for a job well done.

Our concession program was not set up to replace the present fleet of port trucks and say "mission accomplished!" We didn't set out to clear the air for one point in time. Our challenge -- and what the ATA fails to acknowledge -- is that emissions standards are a moving target. If that wasn't the case, perhaps we could wipe our hands, say "we're done" and move on. But we know that even today's cleanest trucks will not pass 2020 environmental standards, when mandatory caps will push greenhouse gas emissions back to 1990 levels. Even the next generation of trucks will fall short of those 2020 clean air standards.

As the largest port in the nation and a major economic engine in a region with legacy air quality issues, we need to operate in the "now" *and* plan for the future. Accordingly, the Port of Los Angeles' Clean Truck Program wasn't designed to be a quick win and a one-shot deal, but rather a long-term solution for ensuring that our port trucking system will be environmentally clean, financially self-reliant and continually upgraded. And that's a goal worth fighting for.

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