

Truckers oppose LA port clean-air hiring plan

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Bill Mongelluzzo / The JOURNAL of COMMERCE ONLINE

LONG BEACH, Calif. -- The harbor trucking industry in Southern California will meet the environmental requirements of the ports' Clean Air Action Plan but will resist any attempt by the Port of Los Angeles-Long Beach to force motor carriers to hire drivers as direct employees.

Trucking company executives who spoke at a meeting of the **California Trucking Association** Friday said any attempt to change the owner-operator model of harbor trucking is certain to be tied up in court and could lead to delays in adoption of the environmental provisions of the plan.

The industry's adamant opposition to the ports' truck program had an impact as Paul Johansen, assistant director of environmental management at the Port of Los Angeles, said it was the "take-home message" of the meeting.

"If you're willing to do everything but the labor issue, tell us that," Johansen said.

Los Angeles and Long Beach are operating under a tight timeline under the federal Clean Air Action Plan to reduce toxic air emissions. As one of the largest polluters in Southern California, the port complex must slash diesel emissions from vessels, trucks, trains and marine terminal operations.

The ports late last year adopted the Clean Air Action Plan that seeks to reduce total harbor-generated pollution by more than 40 percent over the next five years. The trucking portion of the draft plan aims at an 80-percent reduction in particulate matter emissions from trucks within five years.

Environmental representatives say the technology is available to achieve this goal. Clean 2007-model trucks, diesel particulate traps and use of ultra-low sulfur diesel could achieve particulate reductions of more than 90 percent. Furthermore, the ports are willing to subsidize up to 100 percent of the cost of retrofitting a 1994 or newer truck and up to 80 percent of the cost of a new truck.

The staff at the two ports is finalizing the details of the clean air plan and intends to submit it to the harbor commissions next month. If the plan is approved, implementation would begin on Jan. 1, 2008.

Action would be swift as any 1989 or older truck would be banned from the harbor, immediately eliminating about 18 percent of the total fleet of 16,000 trucks, Johansen said. In each subsequent year another 30 percent of the remaining fleet would be replaced until only 2007 model year or equivalent trucks operate in the harbor after five years.

Industry executives said they support the environmental goals but oppose a second provision in the trucking program that requires a system of concessions in which the ports license motor carriers to operate in the harbor. In order to qualify for a concession, a trucking company must show evidence of financial strength and must hire drivers as direct employees.

Trucking executives said this model would drive up the cost of harbor trucking to the point where only a handful of large motor carriers could afford to operate. This model would also discriminate against those drivers who prefer to maintain their status as owner-operators, according to the **California Trucking Association**.