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Taking a message to the streets

A planned caravan of 100 big rigs with a clean-air message falls short, and few commuters notice.

By Tiffany Hsu and Rong-Gong Lin II, Times Staff Writers

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Los Angeles has seen demonstrations on streets, in parks, on hilltops and even in trees.

But civil disobedience on an L.A. freeway is tough, as truckers learned Wednesday.

Their effort to have an intimidating convoy roll down the 110 Freeway from downtown Los Angeles to the Port of Long Beach didn't seem to faze motorists used to bad traffic.

Officials and traffic reporters had warned that the protest by truckers could cause a traffic headache, with organizers promising a caravan of 100 big rigs.

The truckers, part of the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports, were supporting a draft plan by the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to slash diesel pollution from trucks by 80% in five years. The plan would require replacement or renovation of the oldest and dirtiest trucks with trucking companies, not the drivers, facing higher costs.

But at the Exposition Park staging area for the protest, it quickly became clear something was wrong: Only 27 big rigs showed up.

They merged onto the southbound 110 Freeway, driving single file.

On the freeway, it wasn't clear that the trucks even made up a convoy.

With traffic flowing relatively quickly and truckers moving between 30 and 40 mph, cars unaffiliated with the protest wove in and out of the convoy.

Polite truckers allowed them in, diluting the convoy's visual effect.

"They behaved themselves," said Officer Patrick Kimball of the California Highway Patrol, which had patrol officers lined up along the route from Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard to the port.

And from the fleet of news helicopters monitoring the drive, airborne reporters soon were reassuring commuters that they had little to worry about. One reporter even noted that many of the truckers had showed up for the protest with only their cabs, not their cargo containers.

Trucker Raul Rolando Agamenon, 56, said he decided to take part in the protest because two of his three children have asthma.

"We don't want to be here to block traffic, but we're all interested in this cause," Agamenon said.

Organizers wanted to make a statement, but it appeared few commuters noticed.

"I didn't hear about anything," said Carlos Herrera, an employee at a gas station on Vermont Avenue not far from the intersection of the 105 and 110 freeways.

Once at their destination, some trucks looped around the port building at least twice to get an extra pass at the cameras.

And somehow, the convoy parked at the port with eight fewer cabs than it started with. Organizers took pains to say that they believed more drivers participated in the rally, including some who were there for only part of it.

"I don't know why we lost trucks, although some drivers showed up initially without trucks, and then we picked up some trucks along the way," said Rafael Pizarro, senior campaign associate for the Coalition for Clean Air.

Other organizers said some truckers may have had to leave the convoy earlier for work.

"I'm not disheartened at all," said the Rev. William Smart, senior community organizer with the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, who took part in the convoy. "I think it was there. We had enough.

tiffany.hsu@latimes.com

ron.lin@latimes.com