

LONG BEACH PRESS TELEGRAM

Port delays clean truck plan

Officials need more time to finish analysis of truck retrofit proposal.

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LONG BEACH - Port authorities Wednesday delayed by two months decision on a controversial plan to replace or retrofit nearly 16,000 diesel trucks working in the harbor.

The announcement followed a closed-door meeting between port, industry and labor leaders held in Long Beach to work out details of the plan, known as the "Clean Trucks Program."

"We're going to need more time to finish an economic impact and benefits survey," said Port of Los Angeles Executive Director Geraldine Knatz, following the session at Port of Long Beach headquarters.

"We need some additional analysis of how this will work."

The twin ports' jointly developed Clean Trucks Program seeks to replace or retrofit most of the estimated 16,000 trucks currently hauling freight in and out of the seaport complex.

About 50 truckers, labor organizers and their supporters - many wearing surgical masks - gathered outside the meeting to show support for the program and urge immediate approval.

The coalition endorses a program condition requiring trucking companies to maintain green vehicle fleets in exchange for franchise rights that offer exclusive access to marine terminals.

The proposed franchise plan would also give drivers employee status and the ability to organize - conditions strongly opposed by retailers and motor carriers.

Earlier in the day, the coalition formed a roughly 40-truck convoy from Los Angeles - promoted heavily on Spanish-language radio station 97.9 FM (La Raza) - which briefly backed up traffic on the Harbor (110) Freeway during the morning rush.

"I'm glad they have developed this program," said harbor trucker German Merino after arriving in Long Beach. "We cannot afford to maintain our old trucks or buy new ones. That responsibility should be left to the trucking companies."

Initially, commissioners had hoped to have the program approved by July, but growing opposition by industry and the threat of lawsuits slowed the process in recent weeks.

Commissioners at both ports now expect to vote in September following completion of an economic impact survey now under way.

The port-drafted Clean Trucks Program has been highly contentious since it was first proposed in November.

Developed in an effort to clean up growing air pollution problems caused in part by diesel trucks, port authorities sought to offer taxicab-style concessions to trucking firms with the greenest fleets.

The program phases out the oldest, dirtiest trucks beginning Jan. 1. Conditions grow progressively stricter through 2012, when only 2007 model and newer trucks would be given access to waterfront terminals.

If successful, the turnover would eliminate up to 80 percent of toxic diesel pollution in local communities. Health studies link diesel smoke to cancer, asthma, heart and lung diseases and other ailments.

Despite Wednesday's news, port executives continue to believe the franchise approach is the most feasible.

"There hasn't been any other model delivered to us that would accomplish (our) goals," Knatz said.

They also want the program rolling by early next year.

"We're still trying for that (Jan. 1) date, and hopefully we can reach it," Port of Los Angeles Harbor Commission President S. David Freeman said outside the Long Beach Harbor Department.

"It's not un-American to work through the Christmas holiday."