

Clean Air Action Plan Has Advantages Despite Flaws

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By **MANUEL PASTOR**

Los Angeles stands at a crossroads. The ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach handle more than 40 percent of the imports that come to the United States, making L.A. a key center of America's global trade. But we are also ground zero for many of the conditions that plague America's big cities: rising income inequality, increasing disparities in neighborhood environments, and growing concern about sustaining regional economic vitality in the face of intense international competition.

Sounds tough – and it is. So it is all the more disturbing to see the trucking industry savage a plan that promises a potential trifecta: improved opportunity for low-skill workers, cleaner air for distressed communities, and broadened political support for an industry that just might prop up the Southern California economy for years to come.

The ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach have announced a Clean Air Action Plan that seeks to reduce port-related emissions by at least 45 percent over the next five years, in part by requiring that the trucks that service the ports reduce their pollution by 80 percent. Since big change requires, well, big change, the ports are mandating that nearly 16,000 trucks be replaced or retrofitted – and insisting that future contracts to service the ports will be granted only to firms that are willing to meet the new environmental standards and can implement monitoring by utilizing statutory employees rather than independent contractors.

Officials with the California Trucking Association argue that this is an assault on drivers who are small-time owner-operators – the sort of “mom and pop” (mostly pop) firms of which the American marketplace is supposedly built. Virtually all of the truckers currently working the ports' short-haul traffic are nominally “independent,” although it's questionable how independent they really are of the companies to which they lease themselves. But the CTA is actually dominated by somewhat larger trucking firms that are really worried that the port proposal will open the way to unionization. Little wonder: the Gateway Council of Governments reports that independent truckers are now averaging \$12 an hour after expenses, with virtually no benefits.

These small and cash-strapped operators are not in a position to afford the retrofits, even with the public subsidies the ports hope to raise through new fees on gate moves. Nor can they afford the expensive computer-driven maintenance necessary to keep the new trucks running

“green.” In any case, port authorities argue that it would be impossible for them to work with and police such an array of small operators; the better bet is to consolidate and provide mechanisms to give current owner-operators first crack at the more stable employment that will result.

Right direction

Meanwhile, local community groups – plagued by air-related cancer and respiratory risks that more than double those in the rest of the region – have welcomed the Clean Air Action Plan as at least a step in the right direction.

My mother – not an expert on port shipping but certainly one for common sense – used to say that some things are just wrong and some things are just right. The current system has created incentives for the degradation of both wages and air quality. Being paid by the load rather than the hour leads to risk-shifting: Since only the trucker bears the cost of wasted time, the market has little incentive to reduce the sort of idling that produces excess emissions. The inefficiencies could be addressed by a new system and the benefits would be economic as well as environmental.

The logistics industry represents an opportunity to turn globalization to our advantage. It can spur the Los Angeles economy and situate us for a new prominence in the 21st century. It can create jobs for those with fewer skills and less education, and stabilize poor neighborhoods in need of job creation. The Clean Air Action Plan may have its flaws but it offers a positive vision of how to make this happen. With one sector of the business community pushing in the opposite direction, it is key that more far-sighted business leaders – those who are committed to regional economic health and who understand that sustainability is a prerequisite – step up to the policy plate and lead the way to a less shrill dialogue about the port plan, one that could produce the sort of commitments and refinements that would work for everyone.

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