

Emissions program shifts to high gear

County installing smog-cutting devices on Mexican big rigs

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March 23, 2006

One truck at a time, San Diego County air pollution officials are trying to cut the smog-forming particles spewed by old Mexican big rigs that cross the international border.

By installing pollution-control devices on these vehicles at no cost to the owners, the pilot program promises to reduce each truck's output of toxic air contaminants by up to 50 percent.

Now, the work is at a crossroads.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is considering whether to expand the project to Imperial County and elsewhere along the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico border, which trucks cross by the millions each year. The deliberations are taking place as the daily number of Mexican semis entering California is expected to more than triple once U.S. travel restrictions are removed to boost international trade.



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune
California Air Resources Board field representative
Ching Yang conducted emissions inspections on trucks
yesterday.

“We hope the (retrofit) concept catches on and other parties, such as the maquiladoras, expand the program to additional border-crossing trucks,” said Robert Reider, planning manager for the San Diego County Air Pollution Control District. “That said, it may take another round of EPA funding to continue watering the seed.”

Business leaders in Tijuana and San Diego County commonly cast traffic congestion at the border as an economic damper because it slows the movement of goods and people. However, it is also a growing environmental problem because long lines of diesel trucks can idle for an hour or more at checkpoints.

On both sides of the border, government agencies are exploring ways to reduce the spread of diesel exhaust, which California classifies as a toxic pollutant because of its link to lung cancer and other diseases.

Despite wide agreement on the nature of the problem, air quality officials cannot pinpoint how much pollution trucks and other vehicles generate at ports of entry. The commonly cited reason is a lack of data from Mexico, though that is changing due partly to an expanded Mexican air monitoring system and a California study designed to more accurately characterize the Mexican truck fleet.

“We are trying to get a better handle on it,” said Gennet Paauwe, spokeswoman for the California Air Resources Board.

Air regulators already know that trucks carrying everything from apples to televisions cross the San Diego-ports of entry about 1.5 million times each year. Between 1995 and 2004, northbound truck traffic at the Otay Mesa checkpoint jumped by more than 60 percent because of increased international commerce.

Trucks from Mexico are more than twice as likely as California trucks to violate the state's smoke emissions standards, data show.

While violation rates are dropping, the inspection program still faces hurdles. About half of the air board's fines against Mexican truckers have not been paid and about the same level of board-mandated truck upgrades have not been made, state officials said. The latter is a particularly pressing problem because diesel truck engines typically run for several hundred thousand miles.

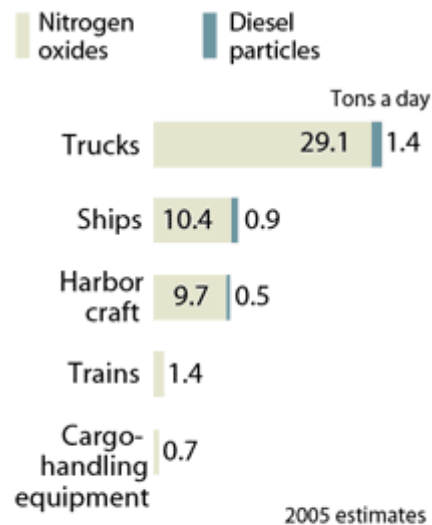
The majority of trucks from Mexico are made in the United States. However, the Mexican fleet is significantly older and dirtier than the U.S. fleet, one state report said.

President Bush is widely expected to dissolve the current limits on Mexican truck travel in the United States as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement. It's not clear when that will happen.

A recent state analysis projected that 12,250 to 17,500 trucks from Mexico will enter California each day once the restrictions are lifted. That's more than three times the

Big-rig emissions

Trucks are a major source of the total air pollution at sea and border ports in San Diego County.



SOURCE: California Air Resources Board

DANIEL WIEGAND / Union-Tribune

present number, and one reason the San Diego air district hopes to expand its truck-retrofitting program.

Since July, local air officials have worked with Mexican trucking companies to replace their big rigs' mufflers with pollution-scrubbing devices called diesel oxidation catalysts.

Each catalyst takes a few hours to install and costs roughly \$3,500. It is virtually maintenance-free.

The device reduces diesel particulates by at least 25 percent and hydrocarbons and carbon monoxide by 40 percent to 50 percent.

Mexican truckers have volunteered 25 trucks for the pilot program. An additional 25 retrofits are anticipated in coming months, the county air district said.

Salvador Mapula, owner of the Montana Express trucking company in Baja, offered six semis for the catalysts and said he would recommend the program to other truckers.

"My drivers are telling me the smoke is not as thick" as before the filters were installed, Mapula said.

At the federal level, the EPA is evaluating several other options to reduce diesel exhaust, including the upgrading of Mexican trucks to improve their fuel economy. Meanwhile, Mexico is moving toward requiring trucks to use ultra-low-sulfur diesel in the border region starting next year.

It's unclear whether San Diego County's experimental retrofit program will take off by then, though it offers the kind of on-the-ground improvements that EPA officials like.

"I don't know how many total trucks we would have to retrofit" to see major changes in air quality, said Amy Zimpfer, associate director of the EPA's air division in San Francisco. "But I know there is tremendous opportunity."

Staff writer Sandra Dibble contributed to this report.



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Diesel smoke billowed from a Mexico-registered truck at an emissions inspection station in Otay Mesa yesterday. A San Diego County program is installing pollution-control devices on Mexican trucks.