

Air Pollution Standards Mean Truckers Must Retrofit or Upgrade — Soon

By Chris Richard

KQED Report, Tuesday, November 19, 2013

Every time Bloomington dump truck operator Ruben Garcia pulls up at a job site, he finds himself caught in the same conversation: “What are you going to do next year?”

Not everyone has a good answer.

Truckers in the Port of Oakland grabbed headlines recently when they held a demonstration at Oakland City Hall, demanding an extension to the January 1st deadline to upgrade their engines to meet California pollution standards. They also want additional state subsidies to help them meet the cost. Meanwhile, general freight and construction truck drivers face a separate January deadline to start replacing their vehicles or install filters that can cost as much as a second-hand truck. That rule applies to most of the big rigs on the state’s roads. It’s an especially heavy burden for small operators.

“It’s like telling the person who works in an office that they’ve got to tear down the office because the outside of the office building doesn’t work well with the environment.” he said. “Those trucks are our offices. That’s how we make our living.”

With trucks a major source of particulate air pollution, officials with the California Air Resources Board counter that they’re duty bound to do all they can to clean up particulate air pollution.

These new standards are already making a difference. In early 2010, the Port of Oakland instituted a program to replace and retrofit some vehicles. Just a few months later, researchers at UC Berkeley reported that some pollutants dropped by 40-50 percent.

Now with the next phase of requirements coming for soot filters and other pollution controls, Air Resources Board inspection crews are checking trucks throughout the state.

Recently, field enforcement supervisor Ching Yang’s team set up at a weighing station north of Los Angeles. Yang motioned a truck emblazoned with the stars and stripes to pull over. Then he called to the driver to rev the engine.

Moments later, Yang had the hood open. He started spotting problems right away. Memphis-based driver Mike Cooper’s rig didn’t have a factory-issued sticker showing his engine is the right model for his truck. That meant an \$800 fix-it ticket. Even worse, Cooper didn’t know his 1999 rig is supposed to have a particulate filter costing as much as \$20,000. That’s almost what another used truck would cost him.

The median pay for self-employed truck drivers like Cooper is about \$40,000. He said there’s no way he can afford a filter. But if he wants to keep doing business in California, he’ll have to get one in the next two months.

Standing a few yards from Cooper’s truck, Air Resources spokeswoman Karen Caesar said her agency has distributed flyers, set up web sites and run training sessions for truckers. She says regulators understand the economy has been weak; they’ve extended deadlines and raised extra money to help the truckers comply with the rules. But Caesar notes that 43 percent of California’s diesel particulate pollution comes from trucks. And the bottom line is, the Air Board is under orders to safeguard public health.

“You’ve probably driven down the freeway at some point in your life behind some truck that’s just spewing all this toxic stuff, and you wonder ‘Why doesn’t somebody do something about that?’” she said. “And you know, that’s what we’re doing.”

As of Jan. 1st, trucks built after 1995 must have state-approved filters that intercept soot and toxic metals. Owners of three or fewer trucks must make a good faith effort to install their first filter on time. Then they have up to three years to get filters on the rest. Violators face fines of up to \$10,000. Trucks built in 1995 or before get out of the filter requirement, but they have to upgrade their engines to a clean-burning 2010 model or better over the next two years.

“If we can clean up these fleets, then we will definitely have a positive impact on public health,” Caesar said. “We’re talking about everybody — but especially the sensitive populations, which are generally children, and elderly and people with impaired immune systems.”

Joe Rajkovacz, government affairs director at the California Construction Trucking Assn., said regulators should take the still-impaired economy more into account.

"There is a crisis in transportation," he said. "If they enforce their rules from the first of the year, there's a very good chance that 40 percent to 50 percent of the trucks that operate in this state are not in compliance. You're talking construction coming to a halt, goods movement coming to a halt. Agriculture's the goose that lays the golden eggs in this state. And they're facing the same rules."

To help the truckers out, the state has distributed nearly \$340 million in grants to pay for newer vehicles, up to \$50,000 per truck. State-sponsored loans have provided another \$200 million.

Sieb Bangma, whose two trucks haul sulfuric acid for Los Angeles oil refineries, got a grant. In exchange for junking his 1998 truck, he received a \$15,000 check toward the purchase of a much newer rig. That fell well short of the new truck's \$50,000 price tag, because the subsidy was limited by Bangma's low annual mileage. Nevertheless, he's happy with the deal.

"It was probably about three, four months for us to get the whole thing going. I'm glad to get it over with and don't have to worry about it for a couple years, and then we'll see where it goes," he said.

Monte Eberhardt is measuring his future in months. He just found out at a roadside inspection that he's going to need a \$17,000 filter for his 1998 truck by Jan. 1. Eberhardt thought he had more time to get one, and he says he had been working on it well before he got pulled over.

Eberhardt thinks he could afford the monthly payment, if he could just get a little more time. He says he's called the Air Board over and over.

"If they're gonna stand there and make me feel like I'm doing something wrong, trying to feed my family, on the side of the road, like I'm breaking the law, at least when I call to see if I can get some kind of financial aid or help, answer the damn phone."

The air board's Karen Caesar says they've been getting about 2,000 calls a week, four times the number received this time last year. Caesar says they've installed a better phone system and put more people on the line, and they're returning calls as fast as they can.

Bike plan up for council discussion Tuesday

By Theo Douglas, staff writer

Bakersfield Californian, Wednesday, Nov. 22, 2013

The city's downtown, and adjacent eastern and southern areas are its least safe for bicyclists, though the number of collisions involving cyclists dropped regularly between 2006-2010, according to a draft Bicycle Transportation Plan the Bakersfield City Council will consider Wednesday.

Still, the report says, just 7 percent of Bakersfield bicyclists are "enthused and confident" and will use most available roadways, while 60 percent are "interested but concerned" and "are typically not confident cycling with motorists."

These are the kinds of findings the Bakersfield City Council will discuss Wednesday when it considers approving the plan, done by Alta Planning & Design during the past year and a half with a \$120,000 grant from the Kern County Air Pollution Mitigation Fund.

The city needs such a plan to qualify for state and federal grants that would allow it to maintain and add to existing facilities -- from the Kern River Parkway bike path to the bike lane on Coffee Road.

Community Development Director Doug Mclsaac characterized the plan as " ... the beginning, not the end, in terms of trying to pursue further enhancing our bicycle transportation network."

The eight-chapter plan includes a needs analysis, recommended programs and an analysis of the 256 wrecks involving bicyclists that occurred between 2006 and 2010, the most recent year surveyed.

The number of bicycle-related collisions dropped every year but 2008, from 56 in 2006 to 49 in 2010. During 2007 and 2008, 54 bicyclists were in collisions each year.

"Compared to other California cities with populations over 250,000, Bakersfield ranked the lowest by average population," the report reads, noting that "(the) vast majority of collisions occurred in downtown Bakersfield or adjacent to downtown to the east and south."

Ward 4 Councilman Bob Smith, who led a tour of a variety of city bikeways Tuesday, emphasized the report's finding that the No. 1 violation cyclists commit is traveling on the wrong side of the road -- riding against traffic -- saying that riders need to obey traffic laws in order to be safe.

Smith said the council needs to target the 60 percent of "interested" riders instead of the 1 percent who are "strong and fearless" or the 33 percent in the "no way, no how" group, and approve the plan.

"This new plan shows (expansion) on slower streets, what we call more family-friendly routes. This is a pretty high-dollar example," Smith said, indicating the bike path along the western shore of the Central Park lake, where the ride began. "We get 50 percent of that 60 percent and we'll be doing well."

Many of the dozen riders who rode Tuesday were members of Bike Bakersfield, the group Smith helped found. But regardless, riders said that slower, smaller streets make biking safer and more enjoyable.

Bike Bakersfield board member Cindy Parra praised the Garnsey Avenue neighborhood -- which would be intersected by the Centennial Corridor freeway link -- saying it helps her avoid California Avenue.

"I had no idea you could use it to wiggle through to California," Parra said. "I like the neighborhoods a lot better."

Zachary Griffin of Kern Active Transportation, a transportation consultant and cyclist, said the city needs to add its bicycle plan to the General Plan, to demonstrate its commitment to cyclists.

City Attorney Ginny Gennaro disagreed, saying that would help, but is not necessary.

In other business, the council will consider paying Parsons Transportation Group an additional \$144,000 for environmental work on building four unrelated parts of Centennial Corridor separately and earlier than the freeway connection between Highway 58 and Westside Parkway.