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Diesel Exhaust Poses Health Threat to Port Truck Drivers

New Rules Needed to Cut Emissions In and Around Ports

OAKLAND (December 4, 2007) . California port truck drivers face increased health risks from breathing dangerous levels of diesel exhaust fumes inside their truck cabs, according to a new report released today. The report was released just days before regulators are scheduled to consider requiring a clean up of the fleet of heavy duty trucks that transport cargo to and from the state's busy ports. The report's authors say their study shows the need to overhaul the fleet, reduce waiting times at terminals and limit pollution from other port sources.

Entitled "Driving on Fumes: Truck Drivers Face Elevated Health Risks from Diesel Pollution," the report prepared by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Coalition for Clean & Safe Ports, details the health risks of truck drivers who haul containers in and out of the Port of Oakland. The report revealed that the amount of diesel particulate matter found inside the truck cabs was double the level considered acceptable by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and up to 2,000 times greater than the level typically considered acceptable by state and federal environmental protection agencies.

Drivers are often forced to idle for hours in long lines, causing them lengthened exposure to old polluting trucks, as well as other polluting sources at the port, such as cargo equipment and ships carrying freight.

Diesel engines emit a toxic brew of pollutants, causing adverse health impacts, such as asthma, increased risk for cardiovascular disease, increased emergency room visits, birth defects, premature births, and other respiratory illnesses. While previous studies have shown that 2,400 Californians die prematurely each year from diesel exhaust, the new report reveals that port truckers may face cancer risks even greater than other port community residents.

Individual truckers say the health threat is all too real.

"I get these coughs that don't go away for weeks at a time, and my throat always feels sore," says Lorenzo Fernandez, who has been driving a truck at the Port of Oakland for two-and-a-half years. "But I don't have health insurance so I cannot go to the doctor. I'm afraid of what will happen in years to come. If I get too sick to work, I don't know how I am going to support my family."

But according to the report's authors, many drivers can't afford health insurance for themselves or their families because they are misclassified as independent contractors, and are paid only for the loads they deliver each day, not the time spent waiting. Independent contractor drivers lack protections and earn about \$30,000 per year, and are responsible for buying and maintaining their own trucks. After paying for operating expenses, they often make no more than \$8 an hour, making it difficult for them to upgrade to cleaner, less-polluting vehicles.

“The current port trucking system is broken. We aren’t going to have healthy air or a sound trucking system, until we make truck drivers employees and shift the responsibility of clean and safe trucks onto the trucking companies and their clients,” said Doug Bloch, Director of the Coalition for Clean & Safe Ports, a diverse coalition of environmental, labor, and community groups working to bring clean air and good jobs to the residents of West Oakland.

The California Air Resources Board (CARB) will vote on the proposed clean truck rule at a hearing in El Monte on Friday, December 7. The proposed rule would require approximately 18,000 heavy-duty trucks to be retrofitted, replaced or otherwise upgraded by 2009. The new rule is an important first step, according to the report’s authors. But without changes to the business model for port trucking, the burden of cleaning up the truck fleet will fall on impoverished truck drivers and taxpayers. The cost of operating cleaner trucks should be shifted to where it belongs – to the trucking companies and their big box customers, according to the report’s authors.

The authors of the study support the implementation of concession agreements that incorporate environmental, community and labor standards such as shifting responsibility to trucking companies for using the cleanest available trucks and technology, and transitioning drivers to employee status.

“These changes to the Port trucking system go hand in hand with the CARB Port Truck rule,” said Diane Bailey, scientist at NRDC. “CARB should ensure health protections to truck drivers and the community by adopting a strong rule and the Port must act responsibly to guarantee that the CARB standards are met by instituting an enforcement plan that includes concession agreements.”

To read “Driving on Fumes: Truck Drivers Face Elevated Health Risks from Diesel Pollution” go to: <http://www.nrdc.org/health/effects/driving/contents.asp>

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The Natural Resources Defense Council is a national, nonprofit organization of scientists, lawyers and environmental specialists dedicated to protecting public health and the environment. Founded in 1970, NRDC has 1.2 million members and online activists, served from offices in New York, Washington, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Beijing. Visit us at www.nrdc.org

The Coalition for Clean & Safe Ports is a coalition of environmental, labor, faith, and community organizations promoting sustainable economic development at Coast ports. We are working to clean up the port trucking industry, reduce environmentally harmful port emissions, and stimulate greater economic opportunities for surrounding port communities. To ensure a level playing field, the Coalition is organizing Ports of Oakland, Los Angeles, Long Beach, New York-New Jersey, Miami and Seattle, so that standards are lifted nationally and no one is put at a competitive disadvantage.