

Diesel-truck cleanup considered

By Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News

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Dec. 11--The black soot that big-rig trucks belch from their chugging diesel engines may soon become a thing of the past.

In one of the more far-reaching smog regulations that California has ever proposed, state air regulators are considering a first-in-the-nation plan that would require nearly every privately owned heavy diesel truck in the state to install a filter that would reduce emissions of soot from their rigs by 85 percent.

The new regulation would affect 1 million truckers, half of them registered out of state who regularly drive on California freeways. If approved by the California Air Resources Board at its meeting Friday, it would take effect in 2010, with nearly all trucks required to be retrofitted by 2014.

The filters -- stainless steel and three feet long -- attach to exhaust pipes and cost \$15,000 to \$20,000 per truck. Those who back the proposal point to massive public health benefits. Opponents call the costs prohibitive, especially during a time of economic crisis.

Supporters note that medical research over the past decade shows that microscopic diesel particles are among the most harmful type of air pollution. Not only can they lodge deep in the lungs during regular exposure, but also they can penetrate the walls of blood vessels, causing inflammation that can lead to strokes and heart attacks.

"This is a very big deal. Particulate matter from diesel engines is one of the most toxic substances that we have found," said Dr. Thomas Dailey, chief of pulmonary medicine at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center in Santa Clara.

Diesel soot contains more than 40 cancer-causing chemicals, including formaldehyde and benzene. The elderly and children are considered most at risk, particularly in urban areas.

"Nearly 50 percent of Californians live within one mile of a freeway. And there is a higher concentration of pollutants there," Dailey said.

The crackdown is supported by the American Lung Association of California, the Sierra Club, the California Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

But critics, led by the California Trucking Association, the California Chamber of Commerce and roughly 100 other business groups, say the proposed rule would deal a crippling blow to the state's truckers at a time when the economy already is in recession.

"I am 100 percent on board with the need to clean up the air," said Robert Ramorino, president of Roadstar Trucking in Hayward. "The concern is the ability for trucking fleets in California to make these changes financially in such a short period of time."

Ramorino's father started the company in 1959, and now it employs 60 people. About 30 of the firm's trucks deliver everything from food to Safeway supermarkets to footwear for Payless shoe stores and vitamins to GNC nutrition centers.

The filter rule is tough enough, Ramorino said, but he is also gravely concerned about a second phase of the proposed rule. It requires all trucks in California to meet super-clean emissions standards on 2010 engines under a staggered schedule that begins in 2012 and ends in 2022, with the oldest trucks facing the rules first.

Even trucks that installed the soot filters a few years earlier would be required to comply, which means they would need new engines, or would have to be replaced by new trucks, each of which costs at least \$100,000.

"If this passes," Ramorino said, "over the next five years I'll have to make payments on 30 new vehicles. That's \$900,000 a year in payments, which is unfathomable."

The air resources board estimates the rule would cost \$5.5 billion but would save at least \$48 billion in reduced health care costs and increased productivity.

In human health terms, the board, whose 11 members are appointed by the governor, estimates that from 2010 to 2025 the regulations would prevent 9,400 premature deaths, 150,000 asthma cases and 950,000 lost workdays.

Starting about a decade ago when new studies began coming out of the Harvard School of Public Health and other universities showing diesel's medical toll, the state air board has been steadily reducing emissions. It has passed rules cutting sulfur in diesel fuel by 97 percent. It has replaced hundreds of old school buses. And in June 2007, the board required at least 165,000 bulldozers, backhoes, cranes and other types of construction equipment that have been in operation for years to have their engines retrofitted or replaced entirely by 2020.

Big-rig trucks, however, are the largest remaining source of diesel emissions.

"There's still some ratcheting to be done on locomotives and ship engines and jet engines," said Mary Nichols, chairman of the air board. "But as diesel rules go, this is the biggie. It requires the whole diesel truck fleet to turn over in about 10 years."

Nichols noted that California will provide \$1 billion in low-interest loans and grants to help truckers comply with the rule. One major source of funding is from Proposition 1 B, a transportation bond approved by California voters in 2006.

The basic issue, Nichols said, is that people replace cars about every seven years with less-polluting models so the air continues to get cleaner. But diesel engines can last up to 1 million miles and, unless their turnover is accelerated, can be around for decades.

If the rule is approved, as expected, Nichols predicted that other states will copy it.

School buses also would be required to get filters but not replace their engines under the rule. Private motor homes, military vehicles and emergency vehicles would be exempt.

The trucking industry is hoping to have an extra six years to comply.

"A lot of people might say you truckers are self serving, and crying wolf. But we're talking about people's jobs and truckers going out of business," Ramorino said.

"And I think this will increase the costs to the consumer on everything from flat-screen televisions to a \$10 pair of sandals at the shoe store."

progers@mercurynews.com (408) 920-5045.