Santa Barbara Independent WHO. WHAT. NOW.

Air Pollution Grows as Vessel Regulations Flounder

Running Loose Ships

By Terry Dressler

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Two public agencies charged with protecting the environment have failed once again to act to reduce air pollution from marine shipping, a double policy balk that produces a direct threat to Santa Barbara County's air quality. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) were expected to establish stricter air pollution standards for large ships in the next few months; both recently announced additional delays in a process that has already taken far too long.

Photo by Paul Wellman

The engines of large ocean-going ships are one of the last unregulated major sources of air pollution. Their massive two-stroke engines produce as much power as a small power plant and burn an unrefined and dirty fuel. However, cost-effective technologies are available that would significantly reduce the pollution from these engines. Thus inaction

on the part of the IMO and EPA are due not to technology or engineering, but to a lack of political will.

Ships that traverse our coast are responsible for nearly 45 percent of the nitrogen oxides (NOx) emitted in the county—more than all road vehicles combined. If trade volumes continue to grow and ships remain unregulated, marine vessels will produce more than 75 percent of the county's NOx emissions by 2020. Although not all of this pollution affects air onshore, this forecasted increase in air pollution could wipe out the hard-won air quality improvements achieved in the last 30 years.

The IMO, expected to recommend stricter controls in July, just announced yet another postponement—until next year at the earliest. Since 1997, the IMO has been working on a treaty to reduce NOx pollution from ships. By March 2007, 41 countries had ratified the treaty. Noticeably absent from the ratification list are the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The treaty was not even sent from the White House to the Senate until May 2003, and it took three years for the Senate to provide its advice and consent. The U.S. still has not ratified the treaty.

In January 2003, the deadline was set for the EPA to develop rules for large ship engines by April 27, 2007. Environmental organizations unsuccessfully challenged this delay in the courts, arguing that waiting until 2007 would result in too much additional pollution. For four years, the EPA failed to issue progress reports on the rule development process; then, on April 23, just four days before the deadline, the EPA administrator announced another postponement until December 2009. This delay is a deplorable abnegation of the EPA's health protection responsibilities, and marks another missed opportunity to demonstrate that the U.S. is serious about emission reductions and will act unilaterally if the IMO does not.

These delays undermine local progress in air pollution control. The last 30 years have seen a steady decline in pollution from vehicles and industrial sources, despite significant growth in population and vehicle miles traveled. Air quality in 2005 was the cleanest on record since we began monitoring the air in the early 1970s.

However, as a direct result of California's role as a major point of entry and departure for trade between the U.S. and Asia, we have recently experienced a remarkable increase in the number and size of ships transiting the Santa Barbara Channel. Although the county does not have a port, international shipping brings significant traffic along the length of Santa Barbara County's 130 miles of coastline. The eastern terminus of one of the primary great circle routes between Asia and Southern California is an offshore point near Santa Maria. From here, vessel traffic from Asia turns south, navigating the county's entire western coast before turning east into the Santa Barbara Channel, where it travels just 10 to 15 miles off the coastline before continuing on to ports in San Pedro, Long Beach, and Port Hueneme.

In 2005, there were more than 7,000 transits through the S.B. Channel heading to or from San Pedro, Long Beach, and Hueneme. By 2020, we expect the number of annual transits to increase to more than 13,000 and the NOx pollution from them to grow to more than 80 tons per day, dwarfing all other air pollution contributions.

This dire prediction does not have to come true. Despite the excruciatingly slow treaty and federal rulemaking processes, most engine manufacturers currently are building engines to meet existing IMO emissions standards and acknowledge that further emissions reductions are feasible. Technologies and processes are also available to cut pollution from existing ship engines. However, without new, stricter standards, existing ships will not be retrofitted, and ships built to existing standards will be in service for decades.

The IMO and EPA announced their respective delays within the same timeframe, suggesting that neither agency wants to be the first to act. We do not have time for a game of political chicken. To protect our environment and our health, the IMO and EPA must act *immediately*.

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For more information on this issue and how it impacts our county, visit the marine shipping Web site at OurAir.org.

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