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Two sides emerge in emissions argument at CSUSB

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Written by

[K Kaufmann](#)

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PALM DESERT — Slapping tighter regulations on emissions from diesel-burning trucks might not help the Coachella Valley or other regions across Southern California create economically and environmentally sustainable communities, but keeping schools away from major sources of emissions, such as highways or railroad yards might.

Two very different schools of thought emerged early at the Sustainable Goods Movement Symposium, held Thursday and Friday at California State University, San Bernardino’s Palm Desert campus. On the one hand, some researchers at the two-day event argued that emissions from diesel, such as the microscopic particles called PM-2.5, are overregulated, and their health impacts — particularly death rates — are distorted, resulting in potentially negative impacts on the economy.

“PM-2.5 is the only regulated pollutant that doesn’t have chemistry attached to it,” said Robert F. Phalen, co-director of the Air Pollution Health Effects Laboratory at UC Irvine. “Further restrictions on diesel could have only negligible impacts on PM-2.5; I’m not sure there are any. California has serious economic problems. If you regulate transportation, you regulate the cost of milk.”

But focusing exclusively on mortality rates is equally distorted, countered Penelope Quintana, a professor of public health at San Diego State University, who has studied the high levels of pollution people may be exposed to while waiting in long lines to cross the border from Mexico.

She and other researchers pointed to the chronic health impacts of diesel and other transportation emissions on low-income communities located close to highways, warehouse districts or railroad yards.

Samuel Soret, associate dean for public health practice at Loma Linda University, found children at a school located near the San Bernardino rail yard were 59 percent more likely to score below normal levels on lung function tests than children at a control location not near the yard.

Both sides of the debate have strong resonance for the Coachella Valley, where air quality is affected by the fleets of diesel trucks moving goods east and west on Interstate 10 and where business leaders want to draw more of that traffic to diversify the economy and grow jobs by developing the area as a distribution and warehouse hub.

“In environmental groups, there is a focus that doesn’t adequately address socioeconomics,” said Riverside County Supervisor John J. Benoit, who opened the conference with an overview of air quality issues in the South Coast air basin. “We’ve made such strides in air quality. We have to balance socioeconomics.”

The American Lung Association regularly rates Riverside County as having some of the worst air pollution in the nation.

A possible midpoint between the two opposing views is a concept of sustainability that encompasses environmental, economic and social concerns, said Robert N. Phalen, an associate professor of public health at Cal State San Bernardino and son of Robert F. Phalen.

“We need to consider more than one factor,” said the younger Phalen, who also served as the conference organizer. “Risk assessment is done on a case-by-case basis, yet public health does not occur on a case-by-case basis. We have to push something that’s multifactorial, that’s going to improve public health instead of tackling 5 percent or 10 percent of the issue.”

The pitfalls of finding that middle ground were played out in conference sessions where advocates for low-income communities and representatives from industry groups each laid claim to the banner of environmental justice.

Penny Newman, executive director of the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, recalled the challenges faced by the small Riverside County community of Mira Loma, which in a period of about four years went from a quiet enclave of dairy farms to a distribution hub completely hemmed in by large warehouses.

“We worked with developers so there is room for trucks to park instead of being out on the street and designing projects so there is somewhere (for truckers) to eat,” she said. “A lot of things, it comes down to planning. No one is thinking it through.”

Joe Rajkovicz, director of governmental affairs of the California Construction Trucking Association, spoke of the pending economic impacts of regulations requiring truckers to install expensive pollution filters by Jan. 1, 2014 — costs that will fall heaviest on owner-operators who only have one to three trucks.

“They’re using environmental regulations to eliminate small competitors. Small guys are the ones who bring you products,” he said. “You can’t regulate with a broad rule. There are all these micro-industries. Diesel engines for mining are different from refrigerated trucks.”

The California Air Resources Board is launching the regulations as part of a larger statewide program to cut diesel emissions. Agency representatives were invited to speak at the conference, but did not attend, Robert N. Phalen said.

Beth White, a manager for the agency, said in a phone interview Friday that more options are being developed to help owner-operators with small fleets, including extensions and extra funding. A series of community meetings will be held across the state next month.

Echoing Phalen, Soret said the way forward must be one that can acknowledge the conflicts and pull in a broad range of voices and views.

“What we still need to reckon with, there are specific places, certain communities and other collective organizations receiving a negative impact. That’s where the rubber meets the pavement. How do we reconcile the fact that goods movement is good overall but there will be times that there will be acute effects for certain places or certain people. and how can we resolve that? We need to bring people around the table people who may not have thought of themselves as players.”

Energy reporter K Kaufmann can be reached at (760) 778-4622



The American Lung Association regularly rates Riverside County as having some of the worst air pollution in the nation. / Richard Lui The Desert Sun



Dr. Samuel Soret, Associate Dean for Public Health Practice and Associate Professor of Environmental Health at Loma Linda University School of Public Health speaks at the Sustainable Goods Movement symposium held at the California State University San Bernardino Palm Desert Campus on November 21, 2013. / Omar Ornelas, The Desert Sun