



The blue gantry cranes at the Port of Baltimore were once powered by diesel engines and now run on electric engines. Richard Sheckells Jr., chief of environmental initiatives for the Maryland Port Administration, said the government is supporting the port as it limits pollution.

By Garrett Hubbard, USA TODAY

Measures across U.S. target port pollution

By Garrett Hubbard, USA TODAY

http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/environment/2010-03-24-port-pollution_N.htm

Joe Johnson isn't a scientist, but he knows that the giant, smoke-spewing ships that dock at the [Port of Baltimore](#) can't be good for his health — or that of his 9-year-old son.

"Those things just look evil," says Johnson, a handyman who lives in a row house just east of the port. "When the wind blows the wrong way, there's no telling what kind of (pollutants) we're breathing."



A tug boat moves past overhead gantry cranes that were diesel, but have been retrofitted with electric power, in the Port of Baltimore.

Indeed, approximately 87 million [Americans](#) who live near major seaports are breathing some of the nation's dirtiest — and most dangerous — air, the Environmental Protection Agency says. But help is on the way, thanks to initiatives across the USA to cut pollution coming from ships, vehicles and other sources within the ports themselves.

"We're trying to be creative, and we're getting a lot of help from the government," says Richard Sheckells Jr., chief of environmental initiatives for the [Maryland](#) Port Administration.

Baltimore port officials are using [federal stimulus money](#) to help companies retrofit tugboats and other vehicles with cleaner engines. Ports in [California](#), [New Jersey](#) and elsewhere are spending more than \$100 million in public and private funds to help replace aging trucks with newer, less polluting vehicles.

In potentially the most dramatic move, this week the Britain-based [International Maritime Organization](#) (IMO) will consider an Obama administration request that would restrict pollution coming from foreign-flagged vessels that sail within 230 miles of the U.S. coast, or dock at U.S. ports.

If approved, the decision by the [United Nations](#) agency would, for the first time, establish an "emissions control area" for such ships, which fall outside the U.S. government's jurisdiction and often use heavy, sludge-like fuels with extremely high levels of sulfur and other pollutants.

The IMO decision "is a really big deal," says Geraldine Knatz, executive director for the Port of Los Angeles.

She says that ports have struggled for years with how to reduce emissions from foreign ships, which account for more than 90% of the traffic at U.S. ports. If a port such as Los Angeles tried to establish pollution limits — which it had no clear legal authority to do — then ships could just dock at a rival port such as Oakland instead, Knatz says.

In contrast, the IMO ruling would establish "a level playing field nationwide, and that's really what ports and private industry are asking for," Knatz says.

The proposed restrictions would force some ships to cut their sulfur emissions by 95% by 2015.

Causes Premature Deaths

A massive mountain of coal sitting next to Baltimore's harbor is a reminder that ports have not traditionally been "green" places.

Communities near ports tend to suffer from above-average rates of cancer and asthma, according to EPA head Lisa Jackson. Jackson has estimated that 40 of the largest 100 U.S. ports are located in metropolitan areas that fail to meet federal air-quality standards.

A 2007 study published by the [American Chemical Society](#) estimated that, worldwide, pollution from ocean-going ships causes about 60,000 premature deaths a year from heart and lung cancers and other ailments.

Environmental problems at ports "flew under the radar" until just a few years ago, says Elena Craft of the Environmental Defense Fund, a non-profit group.

She says a series of lawsuits and petitions by community and environmental groups, especially in California, helped persuade ports and cargo companies to act.

Some of the measures have been controversial. More than 100 truckers staged a November protest in Los Angeles to demand more time to meet new pollution standards.

'A Balancing Act'

The Obama administration has also been more active than its predecessors in both enforcing environmental regulations and in providing federal stimulus funds and other aid to help upgrade equipment, says Mike Reagoso, vice president of McAllister Towing, which operates vessels in Baltimore and elsewhere.

"In these times, it's welcome to get a little help," says Reagoso.

Among other steps:

- The Port of Los Angeles plans to begin using 20 new electric-powered trucks this spring, Knatz says. Other new vehicles have already helped cut emissions by about 70% compared to 2005, she says.
- Since 2008, the Port of Baltimore has spent \$272,000 retrofitting cranes and other equipment, Sheckells says. The port is also working on a project that would take waste produced from dredging and recycle it for use in road construction, he says.
- [The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#) said this month it and the EPA would provide \$28 million in financing to help replace about 600 trucks made before 1993 in an effort to cut soot pollution by two-thirds.

The EPA estimates that shipping companies would, over time, need to spend about \$3.2 billion to adapt to new IMO rules. Some of that cost would trickle down to consumers. Jackson estimates that would, on average, add about three cents to a pair of sneakers made abroad and shipped into the USA.

"This is all a balancing act between cost and the environment," says Lorena Johnston of Vane Brothers, which operates tugs and barges on the East Coast. "But we're convinced it's the right thing to do."