Residents living in San Diego’s portside neighborhoods, from Barrio Logan to National City, have for years breathed some of the most polluted air in California. These low-income communities have pleaded for relief, suffering severe risks for asthma and cancer.

However, there’s been disagreement about what’s causing that pollution.

While community members and their advocates have pointed to the shipbuilding industry, freight operations and other activities at the Port of San Diego, businesses have argued that freeway pollution is the primary threat to nearby communities.

Both sides now see an opportunity to get clarity on the situation and rein in toxic emissions — whether from diesel-powered cranes, cargo ships and freight trucks or the heavily trafficked Interstate 5.

Millions of dollars in state funding have started to flow from Sacramento to the San Diego region as part of a statewide effort to clean up disadvantaged communities, dubbed the Community Air Protection Program.

“This is the biggest thing to happen for air quality, I think, in 20 years,” said Jack Monger, CEO of the Industrial Environmental Association, a prominent industry trade group. “Finally, we’re going to have some scientific data to look at.”

The California Air Resources Board has targeted 10 communities around the state to be part of an initial air monitoring and cleanup effort, from Richmond in the Bay Area to East Los Angeles to the port neighborhoods of San Diego.

“Our communities have been neglected by regulatory agencies for decades,” said Diane Takvorian, executive director of the Environmental Health Coalition, who was recently appointed to the air board. “The Community Air Protection Program is a significant step in the right direction.”

Barrio Logan residents, such as Philomena Marino, are also supporting the effort. She said that for the first time, she’s optimistic her lifelong neighborhood could be a healthy place to breathe the air.

“If you would have asked me that three years ago, I would have said no,” said Marino, 49, “but now, I’m hopeful it will get cleaned up.”

According to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, residents in Barrio Logan experience asthma at more than twice the national average, and the risk of cancer is in the 80th to 90th percentile.
Marino said her parents and many other members of her family have suffered from asthma.

“I notice the difference especially when I’m in cleaner air,” she said. “We’re living in a Petri dish with all this pollution. Just blow your nose after a few hours of visiting Barrio Logan.”

The program was mandated by the state legislature in 2017 under Assembly Bill 617 and is largely funded by the state’s cap-and-trade program. Regional air pollution control districts oversee the process, which is guided by a steering committee of industry officials, health experts, community members and environmental justice advocates.

The San Diego County Air Pollution Control District said it has received about $3.75 million from the state last year to roll out its program and expects to pull in another $2.5 million by spring.

The steering committee is preparing to deploy air monitors in Barrio Logan, Logan Heights, Sherman Heights and west National City. The devices are expected to be providing data on pollution by July. Monthly meetings of the steering committee started in October and are open to the public. The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, Jan. 29 at 6 p.m. in Perkins Elementary School, located at 1770 Main St.

While the process has been a model of collaboration so far, the harder work will begin once the data comes in this summer. That’s when the group will likely be faced with addressing specific sources of pollution, from vehicle fleets to individual businesses.

In the meantime, some efforts are already underway. The San Diego County air district has started considering grant applications for projects that, for example, electrify port operations or replace older boat and truck engines.

And the Port of San Diego struck a deal with the Environmental Health Coalition in 2016 to green up certain operations as part of a more than $32 million expansion of its Tenth Avenue Marine Terminal.

While the Port ramps up its cargo throughput from roughly a million metric tons a year to 4.7 million by 2035, it has agreed to invest in low-emissions freight equipment. It’s also planning to purchase a roughly $8 million “bonnet” to capture smokestack emissions from ships that cannot plug into the electric shore-power system while docked. The system, which is used at the Port of Long Beach, captures diesel emissions directly from a ship’s main exhaust port and then vacuums it into a machine that can trap more than 90 percent of the pollution, including particulate matter, as well as sulfur and nitrogen oxides.

“We very much have a desire to electrify the terminal,” said Job Nelson, assistant vice president of government and civic relations for the Port. “We all want to get to the same place. It’s just a question of where the technology is.”

Last summer, port tenants rolled out several large electric trucks and forklifts secured in a $5.9 million grant from the California Energy Commission. The battery-powered vehicles went to the Dole Fresh Fruit Company, Marine Group Boat Works, Pasha Automotive Group, Terminalift and continental Maritime.

However, even the Port admits there’s much it could do to electrify its equipment. At
a recent meeting of the San Diego Association of Government Freight Stakeholders Working Group, Aimee Heim, manager of grants and policy with the Port, said the group has missed out on grant funding to electrify operations because it lacked some long-range planning.

“One of the things we’ve really been challenged with in the past is that this money has come up, it’s been ready, but we haven’t been ready to execute it,” she said. The air board “has a program that looks at fully electrifying freight or warehouse facilities. We would love to take advantage of that. But it requires a full comprehensive plan for how you electrify a terminal or warehouse facility, and we at the Port don’t have that plan in place yet.”

In the long run, one of the toughest and perhaps most important challenges will be limiting emissions from freight truck fleets.

The city of San Diego has taken steps to protect residents in Barrio Logan by expanding the number of streets that freight trucks are restricted from using, unless they are making a delivery. It’s also rolling out new signage directing truckers along predetermined routes.

The San Diego County air district has also ramped up efforts to assist state regulators in conducting freight-truck inspections to ensure that fleets are in compliance with clean-air rules.

While such efforts can help reduce diesel emissions near homes and schools, most environmental advocates would like to see cargo-truck fleets eventually converted to battery power. It’s unclear how much air districts can do right now to force industry to do so given the current state of technology and charging infrastructure.

Still, a community in San Bernardino, also selected under Community Air Protection Program, has been calling for aggressive action. They’re grappling with pollution from the huge number of freight trucks servicing warehouses that popped with the boom in Amazon-style delivery services.

“The community wants to see more than just air monitoring,” said Andrea Vidaurre, an advocate with the Riverside-based Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice. “We’re interested in solutions and not just band-aid measures.”

To that end, the South Coast Air Quality Management District is developing rules to regulate emissions from mobile sources associated with the warehouse industry. The move has been controversial and the district’s board rejected a similar proposal for the ports in Long Beach and Los Angeles.

Traditionally the state air board regulates mobile emissions, such as from cars and trucks, while the regional air districts are responsible for tracking stationary sources of pollution.

“Even getting to the point where they’re thinking about pursuing rules took months and months of meetings,” said Meredith Hankins, a fellow at UCLA School of Law’s Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, who has been following the regulatory process.

“Obviously these warehouses are a huge economic driver in the Inland Empire, but
reducing those emissions could really help a lot of people,” she added. “Communities are faced with unbelievable toxic emission from these diesel trucks going out to these warehouses.”

Even some environmental advocates have admitted that freight operators have a limited number of financially viable options when it comes to ditching dirty diesel fuel.

“What we’d like to see here is the entire internal-combustion truck fleet go away in favor of zero-emission trucks. But that’s going to take a long time,” said David Pettit, an attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council. “If we’re lucky, in a couple years there will be those trucks that are market ready.”

Air district officials in San Diego said they are open to the idea of regulating truck emissions as an extension of port operations. However, such a move would need to be approved by its governing body, which is the San Diego County Board of Supervisors.

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