

At a Glance: The Ports of Seattle and Tacoma

The Ports of Seattle and Tacoma are national assets and both serve as critical economic engines in a nation rocked by the Great Recession. But port trucking is an overlooked weak link that must be fixed to fuel job growth and meet federal air quality standards.

At issue is the controversial profit-maximizing strategy that has dominated in the three decades since deregulation, in which trucking companies and their retail shipper clients use a contracted workforce to transport their goods. For trucking companies who sell freight services to Target and Wal-Mart, dealing with “independent contractors” has advantages because they don’t have to buy trucks and diesel fuel, nor maintain equipment. Neither do these companies contribute to Social Security, unemployment insurance, or workers’ compensation taxes.

Individual drivers –impoverished according to most credible studies – must assume all costs and liability associated with port hauling. As a result, old polluting trucks are all these low-wage drivers can afford, leading to U.S. seaports being dubbed “the place where old trucks go to die.”

Labor advocates, elected leaders, and environmentalists alike have argued that trucking companies must legitimately employ their workforce to end these consequences.

A Profitable Waterfront Industry

The Ports of Seattle and Tacoma sit 25 miles apart on Puget Sound. Together, they form the third largest container load center in North America, trailing only the Port of New York and New Jersey and the adjacent Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach.¹

- The total value of the Port’s maritime imports and exports annually exceeds \$56 billion dollars.²
- 70% of the goods arriving in Puget Sound ultimately end up in the Midwest; Puget Sound ports principally serve as a transit point for goods moving from East Asia to Midwestern retailers.
- The Ports’ principle imports are toys, cars, sports equipment, clothing and electronics.³
- In 2009, the Ports moved roughly 1,700,000 containers.⁴

Truck Drivers Do Not Share in the Prosperity

The vast majority of cargo handled at the Ports is moved between the region’s marine terminals, warehouses and rail yards by diesel trucks. Port officials counted 3,259 of these trucks serving the Port of Tacoma in 2010 and 1,416 serving one of Seattle’s four terminals in 2008.^{5,6} After discounting for infrequent visitors and drivers that visit both ports, the Port of Tacoma and Seattle terminals are routinely served by an estimated 2,000-2,500 drivers.

- The most recent study of port drivers in Puget Sound was conducted in 2006, just before the economic downturn. Even so, the survey found that the median income of drivers working at the Port of Seattle was \$28,500 per year.⁷
- More than half reported working longer than the legal limit of 11 hours per day. The typical driver is married, in his forties, and has children.⁸

Port-Adjacent Communities Suffer the Consequences

The misclassification of port truck drivers has allowed industry to shift the responsibility of the truck purchase and maintenance over to individual workers. These low-wage earners have purchased the only vehicles they can afford: old, dilapidated rigs. Unable to afford proper maintenance, these vehicles become more polluting and unsafe with every passing year.

- An estimated 95% of the nation’s 110,000 port trucks fail to meet current U.S. EPA emission standards, increasing diesel pollution by one thousand percent.⁹
- In the immediate port-adjacent neighborhoods of South Park and Georgetown, the EPA has found that cancer risk is 27 times higher than the national average.¹⁰ Dioxin from diesel burning trucks is reported to be one of the principle culprits.¹¹

- Similarly, the concentration of fine particulate matter – one of the principle pollutants emitted by diesel trucks – in Georgetown appears to be the highest in the region.¹² Because of the high concentrations of particulates, residents are at elevated risk for asthma, cancer, heart disease, and other life threatening diseases.

Selected Recent Media Covering Port Trucking

Port's short-haul trucks struggle to make a living *Seattle Times* Sept. 15 2011
How some employers skirt paying benefits *CBS National News* Dec. 2 2011
Container trucks near Port of Seattle most dangerous in the state *KING 5 TV* Oct. 27 2011
Breathing Uneasy: The air pollution crisis in South Seattle *KCTS 9 TV* June 17 2011
Residents near port want more air quality protection *KING 5*, Oct. 7, 2009
Truckers who keep Port humming pushed to brink as costs soar *Seattle Times*, June 15, 2008

In Their Own Voices



Habtu Habremichael, Seattle Port Truck Driver, 7 years

Habtu Habremichael has driven container trucks at the Port of Seattle for the last seven years. In all that time, he has been called an "independent contractor" by the companies he has worked for. Like other drivers, Habtu struggles to provide for his wife and children while maintaining his truck.

"The side of my truck has my companies name on it. They check my truck to make sure its in decent shape. Each morning and throughout the day, I call my dispatcher and he tells me where to go and get my loads. Every time I drop off a load, I call-in to get my next assignment. When I'm with a customer, I say I'm with the company. They tell me exactly what they will pay for each lot. I don't have any say. I have to buy insurance from them. In the end, I don't get anything for this so-called independence except head-aches and bills. They control everything that matters about this work."

¹ American Association of Port Authorities (AAPA), <http://aapa.files.cms-plus.com/Statistics/NORTHAMERICANPORTCONTAINERTRAFFIC2009.pdf>; Port of Seattle Press Release "Port of Seattle once again tops 2 million TEUs," Jan.18, 2012

² Port of Seattle, *Foreign Waterborne Trade Report*, 2009, 2010

³ Port of Seattle, *Foreign Waterborne Trade Report*, 2009, 2010

⁴ American Association of Port Authorities (AAPA), <http://aapa.files.cms-plus.com/Statistics/northamericanportcontainertraffic2009.pdf>

⁵ Port of Tacoma, *Drayage Truck Fleet Study: 2010 Update*, 2010

⁶ Port of Seattle, *Age Analysis of Drayage Trucks Operating at the Port of Seattle*, 2008

⁷ Port Jobs, *Big Rig, Short Haul: A Study of Port Truckers in Seattle*, 2006

⁸ Port Jobs, *Big Rig, Short Haul: A Study of Port Truckers in Seattle*, 2006

⁹ See for instance Beacon Economics, *CTMP: Economic Impact Analysis, 2009*; CGR Consultants, *A Survey of Drayage Drivers Serving the San Pedro Bay Ports*, 2007; Rutgers University, Bensman and Bromberg, "Port Truckers Survey at New Jersey ports," 2009; and University of North Florida, Jaffee and Rowley, "Hauling Containers: Port Drayage Drivers in the Logistics Supply Chain," 2009.

¹⁰ Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, "Information Sheet: 2002 National Air Toxics Assessment," 2009

¹¹ Seattle Post-Intelligencer, "New test results on dioxin source raise alarm in South Park," Jan. 21, 2009

¹² Puget Sound Clean Air Agency, *Final Report: Puget Sound Air Toxics Evaluation*, 2003