



<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-diesel14sep14,1,3826386.story>

From the Los Angeles Times

Unions, builders join to sink diesel reduction bill

The anti-pollution measure looked like a lock until Democrats' biggest ally weighed in.

By Evan Halper

Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

September 14, 2007

SACRAMENTO -- The skids seemed greased for one of environmentalists' top priorities this year: legislation forcing the construction industry to reduce pollution, which enjoyed strong support among environment-friendly Democrats.

But the measure died suddenly last week when another frequent ally -- labor unions -- weighed in against it.

The bill would have required construction firms bidding for certain public contracts to retrofit pollution-spewing diesel equipment. Unions, which spend millions on Democratic campaigns and have been among the party's staunchest members for decades, said they feared the regulations would make construction work too costly and result in lost jobs.

The Democrats, who dominate the Legislature, need labor's help on an upcoming ballot measure that could keep some of them in office longer. The unraveling of the diesel proposal highlights unions' influence on the lawmakers, which can trump that of nearly any other group.

"The unions played an extraordinarily large role in stopping this," said Kathryn Phillips, a campaign manager with the nonprofit Environmental Defense. "I don't think industry alone could have done it."

At issue is SB 410, which would have required construction firms bidding for projects funded with public works bond money approved by voters in November to use newer, cleaner-burning machines or outfit their older heavy diesel equipment with devices that capture pollution.

Fumes from the 112,000 tractors, backhoes, excavators and other machines running on emissions technology as much as two decades old are linked to tens of thousands of cases of asthma and 1,100 deaths annually, state studies show.

The equipment is among the state's most noxious machinery and a major source of greenhouse gases. Clean-air groups backing the legislation included Environmental Defense, Sierra Club California, the Natural Resources Defense Council and the American Lung Assn. Backers said the bill would reduce the emission of pollutants by as much as 85%.

Industry groups fought the effort for months. They said the proposed requirements were burdensome at a time when state regulators had just enacted new rules that require companies to transition their entire fleets to cleaner-burning technology.

The companies have as long as 18 years to comply.

Late last week, those opponents were joined by unions representing construction workers. Soon after, support for the bill in the Legislature evaporated and its author, state Sen. Joe Simitian (D-Palo Alto), pulled the measure from consideration until next year.

Simitian expressed bewilderment at the union opposition.

"The group of Californians most adversely affected by dirty diesel are the people out there working on those job sites," he said. "I would think a proposal like this would be met with open arms."

Union officials called the measure a misguided effort that would have reduced jobs.

Daniel Curtin, director of the California Conference of Carpenters, said his union is sympathetic to complaints from employers that too many regulations are being "piled on."

Curtin said the bill would merely have resulted in companies' moving the equipment that has already been retrofitted with the anti-pollution technology to jobs bankrolled with public works bond money, while keeping the dirtier equipment operating at other sites.

"I don't normally jump to the industry's defense," he said. "But I'm baffled as to how they would even be able to comply with this. . . . I don't think it would help clean the air any more effectively."

He disputed assertions by the bill's proponents that it would help construction workers, saying the health of workers was an "afterthought" in the drafting of the bill.

Tim Cremins, a lobbyist for the California-Nevada Conference of Operating Engineers, agreed, saying, "We don't see a predominance of lung failure" among the union's members.

"This bill would have driven up the costs of construction and probably forced some employers out of business," he said.

Environmental lobbyist V. John White disputed that assertion, saying "the labor guys have been misled" by "construction company propaganda."

Unions are the biggest source of campaign cash for Democrats, having donated some \$17 million to the state party leading up to the 2006 elections. Democrats in the Legislature were able to draw from those funds for their reelection efforts.

Environmental groups contributed \$445,000 to the party.

Democrats are looking to labor unions to help bankroll a ballot initiative to change California's term limits, a measure that will come before voters in February. Passage of the initiative would allow many lawmakers who are currently serving -- including the leaders of both the Senate and Assembly -- to hold office longer than is now permitted.

"There are other politics going on that had nothing to do with this particular issue," said Phillips of Environmental Defense. "So we are stuck."

evan.halper@latimes.com

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2007 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

