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Opinion | California Says Don't Keep on Truckin'

The Editorial Board

~4 minutes

California's climate planners aren't trying merely to extend their electric-vehicle mandate nationwide. Now they're moving to banish diesel locomotives across all 50 states. Where's Amtrak Joe Biden when you need him?

The U.S. House last week held a hearing on the California Air Resources Board's (CARB) plan that would ban locomotives that are 23 years or older from running in the state after 2029, pending approval from the Environmental Protection Agency. Passenger trains would also have to operate in a "zero emission" configuration by 2030 and long-distance freight trains by 2035.

Chuck Baker, president of the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association, warned that CARB's plan will harm its members, most of which are small businesses. Those that depend on short-line rail, he said, "will move out of California or just vanish." Why should Congress and Americans in the other 49 states care?

Because CARB is railroading businesses across the country. Its regulations would bar two-thirds of the nation's locomotive fleet

from entering California. Since locomotives can't be swapped at the state border, the rules in practice would affect trains far beyond the left coast. Zero-emission locomotives would require batteries six to 10 times bigger than those now available commercially, and smaller-battery locomotives have been prone to fires and explosions.

“These are not [Tesla](#) EVs moving a few bags of groceries around the neighborhood,” Mr. Baker explained. Locomotives must be able to haul thousands of tons “of stone, grain, chemicals and other heavy goods and commodities in demanding weather conditions” in high heat or “through California’s Sierra Nevada mountains in the depths of winter, for hours on end.”

Even CARB concedes the technology isn't ready for prime time. Hence its plan to make railroads contribute to a quasi-escrow fund that they could later tap to buy zero-emission locomotives, someday. BNSF railroad says the de facto tax would cost it about \$800 million a year, more than 20% of its annual capital spending.

This is a recipe for more train accidents and higher freight costs. Dozens of industry groups, including those representing Wisconsin and Pennsylvania manufacturers, have warned the EPA that the “costs will be passed along the entire supply chain and could inhibit rail service at facilities across the country—not just in California.”

Illinois Democratic Rep. Robin Kelly told the EPA last month that California's rule “could inadvertently move freight from the rail sector to heavy-duty trucking sector.” More big rigs on their interstate highways surely isn't what Californians want. Meantime, California and the Biden Administration are trying to force trucks

off the road via their electric-truck mandate, which also isn't close to feasible given current technology.

What's the point of it all? In the best case, California's train rule would reduce global temperatures in 2100 by 0.000063 degrees Celsius, according to an estimate from Benjamin Zycher, an economist at the American Enterprise Institute. California keeps imposing costly rules to banish fossil fuels that will have little effect on the climate. But why should other Americans be forced to ride in the caboose?

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