

London Emissions Zone Gets a Green Light

by Erika-Marie S. Geiss



In early February Transport for London (TfL) launched a new, £49 million (\$95.3 million) program that is touted as the largest “green” zone in the European Union (EU). The low emission zone (LEZ) is a 1,577-square-kilometer (610-square-mile) area of Greater London and initially targets the emissions from medium- to heavy-duty diesel trucks that are over 12 metric tons gross weight and light trucks over 3.5 metric tons. The LEZ initiative will expand to buses and coaches in July 2008 and to large vans and minibuses in October 2010. The LEZ is enforced 24 hours per day and uses cameras to check the license plates of trucks and other vehicles driving in the LEZ against a database of vehicles registered as meeting Euro 3 limits on emissions for nitrous oxide, carbon dioxide and particulate matter.

Euro 3-compliant vehicles are defined as those built after October 2001 and are evaluated on a number of metrics, including vehicle weight, vehicle class, number of seats and type of fuel used. In January 2012 all of these vehicles will need to be compliant with Euro 4 standards. According to TfL, trucks, buses, vans and other diesel vehicles are targeted because they “individually cause the greatest amount of pollution.” Vehicles that do not meet the required low emission levels, and thus do not appear in the Euro 3 database, will be fined £200 (approximately US\$389) per day or a penalty of £1,000 (US\$1,944). These vehicles, however, can become Euro 3 compliant by doing any of the following:

- fitting a particulate trap or filter to reduce the amount of particulate matter emitted from exhaust;
- installing a new engine that is Euro 3 compliant; or
- converting the vehicle to an approved alternative fuel, such as compressed natural gas.

Trucking firms were given 28 days from the date of the LEZ launch to ensure compliance before fines would be assessed, according to a Feb. 4 article by the BBC News. The LEZ does not apply to cars, motorcycles or small vans under 1.20 metric tons, an issue that has drawn scrutiny from the trucking industry in the United Kingdom.

Early Criticism

A Jan. 31 press release issued by the Freight Transport Association (FTA) addressed concern about widespread

compliance and how effective the LEZ will actually be. The FTA is concerned that as many as 10,000 trucks identified as needing to conform to the new LEZ standards may not yet be compliant. Truck drivers and companies have protested the new rules. Gordon Telling, the FTA's head of policy for London, believes that the LEZ “achieves very little that would not have been achieved anyway as the result of enhanced EU engine standards. ... The biggest pollution from traffic in London comes from cars, and the scheme does not apply to them.” Telling further chastises the LEZ for the “massive and costly infrastructure of signs and cameras in place and a substantial cost to Londoners and lorry operators for a minimal benefit. This money could have been far better spent on grants or other incentives for the introduction of vehicles and equipment which actually would make a worthwhile improvement.”

In a May 2007 statement, by contrast, Mayor Ken Livingstone of London said he was satisfied that there was an urgent need for measures to improve air quality in London and that the LEZ was the right way forward. While acknowledging that the increasingly stringent emissions standards for new vehicles will gradually reduce emissions nationwide over time, “I do not see that as any reason for not making a start now and in London,” Livingstone stated. He explained further that “the LEZ is not designed to counter climate change” but is “concerned with the problem of poor air quality for all those who live or work in and visit London. ... The LEZ will achieve important improvements in local air quality in London, and also bring worthwhile health benefits, reducing the risk of respiratory and cardiovascular problems.” He further asserted that he is “satisfied that the benefits should exceed the costs.”

Closely Watched in Europe and Abroad

Eight European countries, including Germany, the Netherlands and Norway, already have or are planning low emission zones of their own. In the United States, California and 15 other states recently tried to implement tailpipe emission reductions that would be stricter than those passed by Congress in H.R. 3221. These include a requirement of automakers to reduce fuel efficiency standards by 40 percent by 2020 to an industry-wide fleet average of 35 miles per gallon. Unlike the mandates set forth in H.R. 3221, the LEZ is a bold initiative that is being carried out today. The implementation and outcome of London's LEZ will be followed closely by the European Commission and around the world as emissions regulations become tighter, especially in urban areas, in response to pollution and climate change issues. In his May 2007 statement, Livingstone stated: “This LEZ is a ‘first’ for the UK and will be one of the largest schemes of its type in the world. ... The time has now come for action. The introduction of the new emissions standards ... will set a model for tackling air quality which I hope others, at home and abroad, will follow in due course.” ♦