



LowCVP's Andy Eastlake Air quality, court rulings and implications for diesels

Few fleet operators can fail to be aware of the intense discussions that have been taking place in recent months about the operation of diesel vehicles in our most polluted city areas.

Following the NGO Client Earth's court victories, the government is under intense pressure to come up with a plan explaining how it's going to meet European targets for air quality.

So it's an uncertain – even scary – time for fleet managers with significant urban operations. The evolving policy environment presents a challenge to those considering the composition of their future fleets and their operational arrangements.

There has already been significant progress in cutting polluting emissions from buses. The LowCVP has been closely involved in policy formulation and introduction in this area and we are now aiming to make similar progress in the freight sector.

Increasingly, attention is moving to diesel cars and vans which are seen as responsible for the largest amount of urban particulate (PMs) pollution as well as a considerable amount of NOx. The level of public concern has been further raised by evidence that real-world emissions are exceeding those predicted by type approval tests.

In London, the new 'T-Charge' (officially the Emissions Surcharge) means that cars, vans, minibuses and heavy vehicles driving in Central London that do not meet the emissions standards will have to pay a £10 daily charge, in addition to the Congestion Charge. It's expected that the T-Charge will mostly affect vehicles registered in, or before 2005.

There have been increasing calls for a diesel scrappage scheme, targeted at older vehicles, which may well have a part to play. From the LowCVP's experience in assessing retrofit options for buses and trucks we know that, for example, fitting an older vehicle with SCRT (Selective Catalytic Reduction Technology) can reduce NOx emissions by 80 per cent, while the latest European data indicates that new Euro 6 standard vans may only be 20-30 per cent better in terms of NOx than Euro 2 or 3. So there are discussions going on – in which the LowCVP is closely involved – to figure out the costs, benefits and practicalities of alternative approaches.

In this debate, which is focusing mainly on the urgent need to improve urban air quality, we must also be mindful of the potential impacts on CO₂ emissions. On a like-for-like basis, diesel cars generally emit significantly less CO₂ than their petrol counterparts so may still offer benefits when operating in areas free from air quality problems. Road transport electrification is, of course, one of the main prescriptions of policy makers and can help to tick both the CO₂ and air quality boxes.

Solutions to the twin problems of pollution and climate change are closely inter-related, complex and needed urgently but they need to be based on solid evidence, innovative and not too narrowly focused.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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