

# Living in Two Parallel Universes: The Port of LA Leadership versus Residents Exposed to Port Pollution

Andrea Hricko & Janet Gunter / 15 February 2022

*Port of Los Angeles (POLA) celebrates record-breaking cargo – and garners awards ...*



*Port of L.A., website 13 Dec 2021*

*... while Southern Californians are forced to breathe unhealthy air!*



*Photo by San Pedro resident Janet Gunter 17 Nov 2021*

*During the pandemic, POLA has seen huge increases in the number of cargo ships trying to unload goods for U.S. consumers. POLA applauds its all-time high imports, while arguing that the global supply chain is in disarray for lack of truck drivers and other workers. But the influx of ships is not just a supply chain issue. The delays impact more than store shelves, manufacturers and consumer prices.*

*The record-breaking cargo over recent months at the POLA impacts people's HEALTH. Emissions in Port communities are up dramatically during the past year, according to regulators, who predict more illness and deaths from the idling ships. Over the past year, expressions of celebration from POLA and opposing expressions of concern by residents about pollution, health impacts and congestion ... seem to reflect that **Port leaders and community residents are living in two parallel***

**universes.** The differing concerns are shown below, primarily in details from news stories highlighting very different perspectives. *Note: below, P stands for viewpoints of POLA leadership; while R/EA represents the viewpoints of residents/environmental advocates. We show the comments chronologically.*

## Dec 2020

**P:** [‘Cargo imports continued a remarkable surge at the Port of Los Angeles](#). ‘As the turbulence of 2020 draws to a close, port Executive Director Gene Seroka said in his monthly update... “It is unusual to see this kind of import activity this late in the year,” Seroka said. ... “But as we know, 2020 has been anything but normal.” ... “Considering the roller coaster we’ve been on all year long,” Seroka said, “I’m pleased at how we’re ending the year.”

**R/EA:** [“Supply-chain logjam becomes air pollution nightmare](#). Wilmington and nearby areas breathe the port congestion daily.”

**R/EA:** Since the port slowdown, the [increase in pollution](#) is roughly equal to emissions from 5.8 million passenger cars, [according to the California Air Resources Board](#). **P:** A rare admission by POLA staff in the [same article](#): “We are very concerned about the effects of the anchorages on the environment,” Chris Cannon [head of environmental management] said. “And not only about people’s asthma and other effects on people, but also ... and an extraordinary increase in greenhouse gas emissions that come from the ships just sitting there.”

*During the pandemic...*

**P:** [“Executive of the Year Award.”](#) “Seroka has helped the logistics industry navigate the uncharted waters of the pandemic while aiding the city in procuring personal protective equipment.”

**Author AH:** 108 individuals – more than 10% of the Port of LA employees (not dockworkers) tested positive for COVID-19 between May 2020 and March 2021, according to California Public Records Act documents received from POLA by Andrea Hricko in July 2021. These included 15 port police, 9 student employees, plumbers, electricians, administrative assistants and many more employee classifications.

## June 2021

**P:** [Gene Seroka Honored with Lifetime Achievement Award From Inland Empire Economic Partnership](#). “Seroka has served as the Executive Director of the POLA... since 2014. ... He has led the Port to record-breaking cargo volumes, including setting a new record for a Western Hemisphere port this month when Los Angeles passed the 10-million annual container volume threshold.”

## Aug 2021

**R/EA:** Editorial: [Port pollution is choking Southern California](#). "With smoke-belching container ships, diesel cargo-moving equipment and thousands of polluting trucks, the ports ... are the single largest source of pollution in the nation's smoggiest area... ."

## Sept 2021

**P:** "Ship another honor to ... Gene Seroka, ..." "who oversees the busiest container port in North America, which has experienced record-breaking performances since his appointment." Award from [The Employees' Club of California](#).

**R/EA:** [L.A.'s backed-up port is smothering neighborhoods in smog](#). Port officials have ... suggest[ed] the increased throughput would become the new normal, which [Adrian] Martinez [of Earthjustice] says would be a catastrophe for people who live nearby. "The 'new normal,'" he says, "is when we'll force them [Port officials] to care about air quality just as much as moving cargo...."

**P:** [Grunion Gala at Cabrillo Aquarium: Honoree Gene Seroka](#) for his leadership at POLA. Sept. 25, 2021. [Note: On September 23, 2021, [POLA gave the Aquarium a grant of \\$900,000 ...](#)].

**R/EA/reporter:** "All the while Seroka gets a hefty pay raise and honors from the Grunion Gala at Cabrillo Aquarium. [Seroka is on a roll, except when it actually comes to hitting the target for zero-emissions.](#)"

## Oct 2021

**P/Biden Administration:** "[Biden](#) on Wednesday announced support for opening the Port of Los Angeles round the clock... ."

**Pediatrician/Regulator:** In response to announcing a policy to open the ports 24/7, [Dr. Afif El-Hasan](#), an Orange County pediatrician and volunteer with the American Lung Association, said: "there was no acknowledgment for anything except the economy." An AQMD spokesperson added: "In the long-term South Coast AQMD believes the 24-hour operation will result in increased throughput/emissions potentially offsetting the nighttime and lower congestion benefits."

**P:** "The port has taken steps to address air emissions, including clean air action plans and seeking to fully implement a Clean Trucks Program to cut down on diesel PM and other emissions, according to [an article on the 24/7 policy](#). Gene Seroka added: "That conversation with the community ... NGOs and environmental groups is ongoing every day here at the port."

**R/EA/Regulators:** The two ports "have a history of reducing emissions through implementation of their Clean Air Action Plans," an AQMD spokesperson added, "however [progress has stalled](#) over the past decade, right when emission reductions have needed to accelerate." Adrian Martinez with Earthjustice added: "... the ports have been coasting on environmental success they had a decade and a half ago."

## Nov 2021

**P:** Seroka addressing his university's alumni: "We estimate 2021 will be about 14% more cargo than in 2018, which was our best year ever in 113 years of doing business," Seroka said.

**R/EA:** Editorial: Supply chain issues affect almost everything, but surge in port pollution threatens our lungs. "[CARB] estimates that ships alone are pumping an additional 20 tons of ... nitrogen oxides into the air each day... while adding as much ... diesel particulate matter as nearly 100,000 big rig trucks."

**P:** "Ship emissions have increased substantially when compared to the pre-pandemic era, said Chris Cannon [of] the Port of Los Angeles.... [but] we have not seen any emissions increases at our local [air quality] monitoring stations during these anchorage periods..."

**R/EA:** What Chris Cannon conveniently fails to mention is that one of the key air monitors operated by POLA was shut down unilaterally by the Port in May 2021, with no public input. The Port claims that the monitors are all outdated and need to be replaced and better maintained. Despite claims in September 2021 by Deputy Executive Director of POLA Mike DiBernardo that ALL of the monitoring stations would be replaced and made more reliable, the Port has not responded to a letter from the authors about the timeline for their replacement. In a recent public meeting about Clean Air Action Plan updates, Cannon said that the POLA is working on acquiring new pollution monitors.

## Dec 2021

**P:** Gene Seroka Receives Top Shipping Maritime Award honoring leadership, achievements. Seroka: "Let's take a moment to celebrate... yes, to celebrate what we have achieved over the last year and a half. Because yes, we have delivered... We've moved more cargo into the American marketplace than ever before." ... Seroka: "The business of POLA is to provide the most efficient ... trade gateway to move cargo."

**R/EA:** Port trackers highlight worst ship logjams. "... The worst performance is at [the Ports of] LA/LB, where the average turnaround time almost doubled this year to 6.4 days from 3.6 ..."

**R:** In his 9+ minute acceptance speech accepting the top shipping award, Seroka uttered not one word about air pollution or the impacts on health resulting from POLA's surge in imports, although he did speak about those who "live in the Port community" (just not about the actual impacted residents, but rather some businesses in the area who rely on the Port of LA for their imports). Seroka: "A genuine leader values people ... including the people who live and work in the Port community – the drycleaners, the restaurants, the pizza shops – they all count on us [to supply them with goods]."

**P:** Gene Seroka: "As we approach a new cargo milestone amid this pandemic, I'm so proud of the resilience of this Port, our labor force and all of our partners." "Moving into 2022," Seroka added, "we'll continue our focus on efficiency improvements, job creation and economic development."

**R/EA:** “Exhaust from trucks is another concern in a community already beset by air pollution from the nearby port. Wilmington [adjacent to San Pedro and the Port of L.A.] has one of the highest cancer rates in Southern California and some of the state’s highest rates of asthma.” City Councilperson Joe Buscaino says the neighborhood’s proximity to the nation’s main trade gateway has brought “good jobs and tremendous economic impact” to the region. “But locally, we’re always dealing with the negative impacts of air pollution, traffic and noise.”

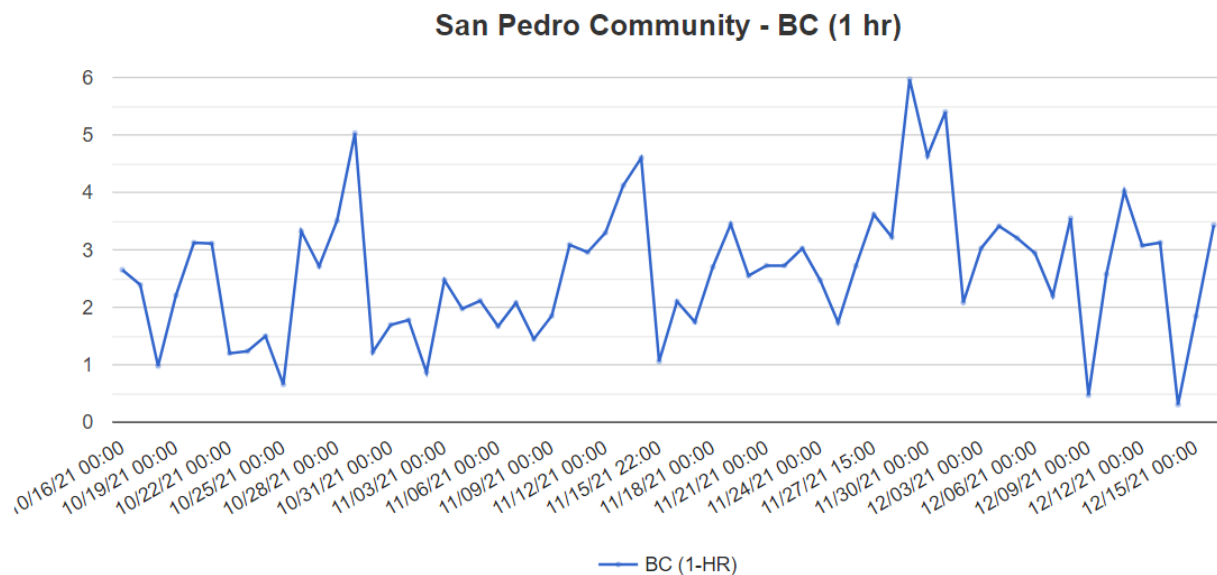
**P: Bloomberg Podcast:** Seroka said people kept asking: “How many ships do you have sitting outside?” ... “With all those ships stacked up, they were creating more pollution, he added.”

**ABC News/R/EA/Air Resources Board member/Forbes:** Southern California port pollution plaguing local neighborhoods. Reporter Ginger Zee: “The average number of ships at the Ports of LA and Long Beach, 16; today? 110!” “People are having to breathe in this stuff so that others can get cheaper tv’s!, said Hector De La Torre, Ca Air Resources Board. *[Note: the reporter Ginger Zee, chief meteorologist and managing editor of a new climate bureau at ABC News, is reported to have received thousands of harsh complaints on social media about her reporting on port pollution.... A Forbes reporter noted: “The irony for me were comments demanding that Ginger Zee focus on the more important issues related to the container ships like the economy. Umm, hellooooo. As a parent myself and breathing human being, air pollution and our health seem pretty important to me. Our ability to live literally depends on clean air.”*

**P: Bloomberg Podcast:** Seroka added: “On November 16<sup>th</sup> the private sector industry folks... started ... a queueing system,” [to address]: “... the pollution problem ... “[The new system] moves all those emissions farther offshore and nowhere near the proximity of the residential areas here in Los Angeles and Long Beach.”

**Regulators:** ‘Regulators at the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) agree that if anchored vessels are kept 150 miles offshore, they expect to see an air quality benefit, though that could be partially offset by an increase in emissions from ships needing to run their engines to navigate out at sea.’ “We do not yet know what the net impact or benefit of these potentially higher emissions would be for our region’s air quality,” agency spokesperson Nahal Mogharabi said. He added that “although the new system reduces the number of ships close to shore, near-shore congestion remains higher than it was before the pandemic.”

**From the authors:** Seroka appears to be incorrect in claiming that the new “queueing scheme” is causing pollution levels to drop in residential areas near the POLA .... air monitoring near the POLA actually shows higher pollution levels for PM2.5 (fine particle pollution) and Black Carbon (BC, a marker for diesel exhaust) during the month *after* many cargo ships anchored further away from the Ports. In the month before November 16, 2021, there were 9 days with BC (1 hour) daily high levels in San Pedro at 3.0 ug/m<sup>3</sup> or above. In the month after November 16, 2021, there were 14 days – more than 1.5 times as many days. See graph below.



**Bloomberg:** 'Port of Los Angeles Executive Director **Gene Seroka** said the scramble to clear the logjam of imports through the largest U.S. gateway for goods trade resembles the game of [Whac-a-Mole](#).' "Suddenly we've taken care of one thing, then three others pop up," he said Wednesday at a briefing to review the progress made in recent weeks reducing both the number of containers on site and ships waiting to unload."

***Definition of Whack-A-Mole management style:***

"One of the most important things to remember when analyzing [Whack-a-Mole Management](#) is to note that the manager's behavior is completely reactionary. No action is taken until the mole raises its head. The manager is not proactively trying to prevent things from happening, or trying to direct things to happen, or even making things happen, the manager's behavior is a reaction to some other stimulus."

**Jan – Feb 2022**

**P:** [Cargo continues flooding into Port of LA with 2022 looking to be a repeat performance.](#) ... 'Puts the nation's busiest port on track for 10.7 million to 10.8 million [container units] for [2021]. Port Executive Director Gene Seroka says "he foresees that pace continuing through 2022."

**P/U.S. DOT Secretary:** U.S. DOT Secretary Pete Buttigieg at a January 11, 2022, press conference and tour of the Ports with Port and elected officials, industry and labor: "**One of the reasons why Christmas was not cancelled** is that the Ports of LA and Long Beach moved records levels of goods... this Holiday season."

**R/EA/elected official:** At the same event, L.A. County Supervisor Janice Hahn spoke to the DOT Secretary about efforts to reduce emissions along the corridor that trucks and trains use to transport cargo from the ports to giant inland warehouses. "While the rest of the country counts on our ports to make sure their flatscreen TV is in stock for Christmas, the communities I



represent bear the burden of the congestion, the air pollution,” **Hahn said**. According to a conversation by one of the authors with **a reporter**, there were no community or environmental advocates present at the event.

**Editorial** from *Random Length News*: “Just last week, Gov. Gavin Newsom toured the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach with John Porcari, the White House port envoy to survey the supply chain crisis. They never once noticed, until it was impossible to ignore, that the number of ships waiting outside the breakwater were three or four times as many unloading at berths... Nary a word was spoken about the increase in air pollution caused by these cargo ships waiting outside, nor the impacts on the children suffering from asthma while they are waiting for those presents. Yes, profits from the import supply chain trump public health every time.”

**P: 8 Top CEOs Give Their Predictions for the Wild Year Ahead, TIME magazine:** Gene Seroka: “[Our industry’s] top priority remains getting goods to American consumers and creating a more fluid supply chain.”

**R/EA:** “**Emissions could stay high through the end of this year [2022]** says Chris Cannon, of the Port of LA. ... Adrian Martinez, Earthjustice responds: “The question is: are they [POLA] rising to ... this air quality crisis we’re in?” Martinez says the “will to clean up the air is not as strong as the will to get things where they need to go fast.”

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**P:** **[State of the Port Address](#)**, January 20, 2022. At last, some serious mention by the Port of LA Executive Director about environmental impacts of port pollution, the need for zero emission freight drayage, and impacts on neighboring communities. Gene Seroka concluded: “The future depends on the choices we make today. ... We have to take action... to imagine the kind of port that the future needs. ... a port that is sustainable and environmentally responsible. ... All we have to do is DECIDE [to create that future].” A week later Seroka announced **[a green corridor shipping partnership with](#)** Shanghai and other ports to phase in “low and ultra-low carbon-fuelled ships with the world’s first zero carbon transpacific container ships introduced by 2030.” ... “Environmental groups welcomed the announcement of the Green Corridor, although noted the worded allowed for the continued use of fossil-fuelled vessels, including LNG.”

**LA Times editorial:** “Supply chain problems, a backup of container ships and record cargo volumes have caused a surge in lung-damaging pollution, worsening smog from the harbor area to the Inland Empire. Fine-particle pollution in downtown L.A. in November jumped to levels more than **[40% higher than in previous years](#)**.... Yet City officials who operate the nation’s busiest port complex are showing no urgency to protect people’s lungs from the pollution. We can’t keep waiting.”

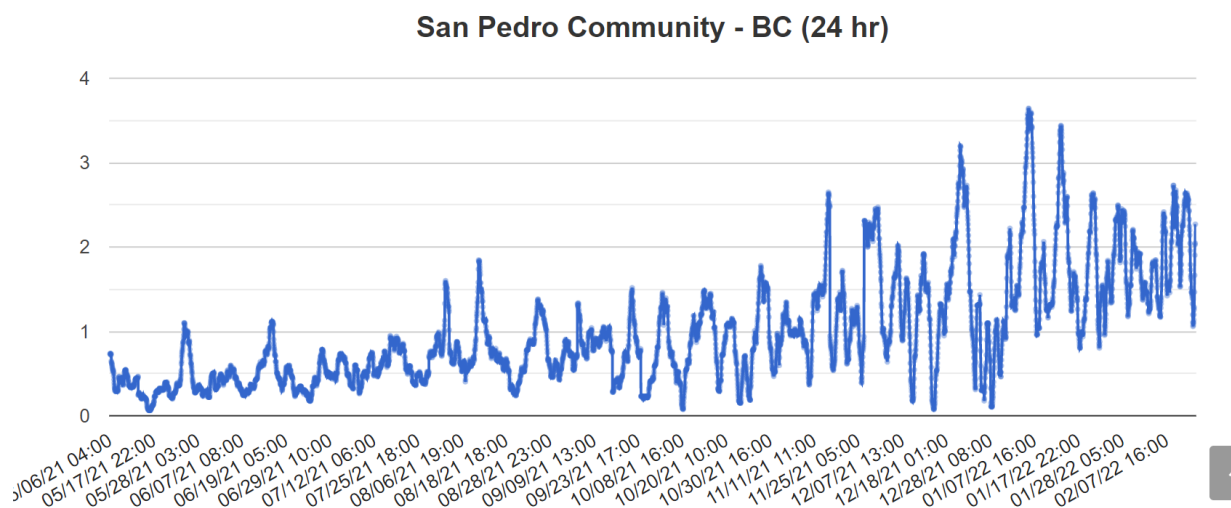
**American Prospect:** All of the elements that made the supply chain breakdown so catastrophic remain in place. COVID continues to snarl production centers in China; its ports continue to close to prevent outbreaks. **[The behavior at American ports remains largely unchanged](#)**; the infrastructure does as well. And the mess is taking its toll; container imports at L.A. and Long Beach actually fell in November, as smaller ships made their way into port while the bigger ones stayed at sea.

Feb 2022

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**P:** By mid-February 2022, the number of logjammed ships had receded. “The number of ships waiting to unload at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach fell this week to the lowest level since November but remains extensive.” The [Wall Street Journal article continued](#): “Although the ship backup is the smallest it has been since Nov. 11, congestion remains severe by historical standards. Container ships are waiting an average of 18 days to unload at the Port of Los Angeles, the busiest of the neighboring gateways. Before the pandemic, it was unusual for ships to have to wait for a berth.” [Industry trade journals reported](#): “Seroka Sees Chance to Ease Ship Backlog by Summer Peak.”

**Authors:** The pollution levels in San Pedro for Black Carbon as a marker for diesel pollution are still high, so it is too early to say what impact the receding number of ships is making. The long wait times to unload ships, of course, add to the pollution burden in communities surrounding the POLA. See graph for BC (24 hr) at San Pedro Community station from May 2021 to the current time, below. Black carbon levels appear dramatically higher in January – February 2022 than in spring and summer of 2021. (Note BC did not start being measured in San Pedro until May 2021).



*Meanwhile, deadlines for reducing pollution loom:*

**EA:** [The Daily Breeze](#) on the Ports’ Clean Air Action Plan update. ‘While early progress in pollution reduction at the ports has been significant, the ports now face more difficult challenges ahead as the zero-emissions deadlines – 2030 for harbor equipment and 2035 for the drayage truck fleet – approach quickly. Heather Kryczka of the Natural Resources Defense Council warned that the deadlines are looming. “The deadlines are less than eight years away,” she said. “There’s still a lot of work yet to be done, and we’re concerned the ports are falling behind on their goals.”



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