I’m part of a team working on mural projects on the sides of some of LA’s freeways. We are working behind K-rail, so we are safe, but let me tell you, it’s not a healthy place. The air is foul — diesel particulates, car fumes, odors you don’t even want to guess the source of, and muck. And noise.

One of my goals was to make sure that everyone working on the project was as comfortable, safe, and healthy as was possible given that they are working on the side of an LA freeway. And while I’m not 100% satisfied with our level of comfort, it’s pretty darn good and worth passing along.

Our environmental cocooning is made possible by two complementary devices: a PAPR and noise canceling headphones.

PAPR stands for Powered Air Purifying Respirator. We are using the 3M “Breathe Easy.” It consists of three respirator cartridges (HEPA combined with organic vapor), a belt carried “Turbo Unit” (a small fan that pulls the outside air through the cartridges and blows it gently to the wearer), a rechargeable battery pack that also mounts on the belt, and a helmet. The beauty is in the helmet. There is a dazzling array of options to take the filtered air and deliver it to your face, but I love my “Breathe Easy” helmet. It’s a hard hat, it’s a face shield, it’s (reasonably) comfortable, and it works on any face – bearded or clean shaven, bespectacled or of any sound vision, large or small, sporting a dueling scar or just wearing makeup.

The air is taken from the “Turbo Unit” via a “Breathing Tube” (yes a separate purchase that looks like a short piece of black vacuum cleaner hose) to the helmet. The “Breathing Tube” connects to a coupling at the back of the helmet. And here’s the beauty, the filtered air is blown over the top of your head, down your face and gently made available for your breathing comfort. There is a Tyvec gusset (or “Protective Overlay”) that bridges the gap between the face shield and the sides of your face and neck.

The “Turbo Unit” provides enough airflow under positive pressure that when you inhale there is still filtered air blowing past the gusset keeping your breathing space uncontaminated. And perhaps the most subtle design element is in the balance: the weight of the hose on the back balances the weight of the face shield in front, giving this bulky head piece a very neutral feeling when worn.

Compared to working with a half mask respirator, wearing this get-up is a charm, a pleasure, a (cool) breeze. The rechargeable battery packs seem to last their stated 8 hours (we have only worked 5 hours at a go thus far).

The system is not inexpensive by any means. The full get-up with battery charger will run just under $1,200.00. But if you’ve got a big, yucky job and value your comfort, or if you really, really like your beard, this is the way to go.

To make this little piece of respiratory heaven even better, we’ve fitted the helmets with noise canceling headphones.