

Commentary: The Debate on 'Black Boxes'

By David Barnes, Staff Writer

Political pressure to force trucking companies to install electronic data recorders in their vehicles is increasing, and trucking needs to be an active player in the debate.

Both the National Transportation Safety Board and the Department of Transportation support installing "black boxes" on trucks to monitor compliance with hours-of-service laws. While some trucking companies are using recorders voluntarily, many others oppose a mandate for legal, privacy and cost concerns.

Some carriers fear that the data collected may be used against them in lawsuits. Others worry about their competitors getting access to confidential data. Unionized carriers say their records show they comply with federal limits on driving hours, making the recorders unnecessary. Small trucking companies worry about the cost of the technology.

These are all actual hurdles, but they are not insurmountable.

One need look no further than Europe for an example of the type of technology that may soon be mandated. According to NTSB Chairman James E. Hall, the European Union is requiring the installation of electronic recorders on trucks beginning in September 2002.

The technology is similar to equipment manufactured by Accident Prevention Plus, a Long Island, N.Y., company whose recording devices are used by school bus and ambulance operators in the United States to track fleet movements.

APP's recorder takes data from sensors throughout the truck, recording it for future use or transmitting it to the carrier's offices for immediate use. Engine and fuel data can be tracked to improve maintenance efficiency and fuel consumption. The data cards allow carriers to record which driver is operating the truck at a given point or to allow drivers access to secured areas.

Four test units are also being used to monitor fatigue levels of drivers involved in a pilot project conducted by the ATA Foundation for the Federal Highway Administration. The foundation is testing data recorders and other pieces of hardware on truck drivers who are making revenue-generating trips to see how the equipment works in the field. The recorders collect data from cameras aimed at the road lane indicators and at the driver's eyes to determine whether the driver is fully awake if the truck swerves or deviates from its path.

Another pilot project involves the use of on-board recorders to verify compliance with hours-of-service regulations. Werner Enterprises, which developed its own software in 1998, has been testing the recorders for 18 months, but FHWA has yet to find other companies willing to participate in the field trials.

DOT has made no secret of its desire to use technology to improve safety. The motor carrier safety bill that the agency sent to Congress in 1999 included a proposal to mandate on-board recorders for trucks. DOT's soon-to-be-released proposal to modernize hours-of-service regulations will include black boxes, according to Deputy Transportation Secretary Mortimer L. Downey.

Let's face it; data recorders are coming whether trucking likes it or not. The only questions to be resolved are how much information will be collected, what type of equipment will be mandated and whether it will have to be installed on older trucks.



Trucking convinced Congress not to take up the issue in the 1998 highway funding bill and was successful last year in keeping DOT's black box proposal out of legislation creating the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. That was before the National Transportation Safety Board spent a year examining truck safety and Congress created a new agency devoted strictly to truck and bus safety.

The new Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration will have to take a strong stand on something to show it is not a lackey of trucking, as critics of the old Office of Motor Carriers used to claim on a regular basis. What better way to show its independence of trucking than by advocating something opposed by the industry?

By

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