

Transportation 2000

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The Big Black Box

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One large fleet operation, U.S. Xpress has installed the on-board recorders into its big rigs. Freightliner Corp. has come out in support of black boxes and has incorporated the recording technology into its new trucks. Electronic Recording Devices, commonly referred to as black boxes, is becoming a hotter topic among federal officials involved in trucking safety issues. Regulators see them as a useful tool in monitoring hours-of-service rules, as well as reconstructing accidents involving large trucks and have included the boxes in their recent hours of service proposal.

At the same time there is plenty of resistance in the trucking industry to black boxes as concerns over how the government might use data collected from the devices. Everything from the "big brother syndrome" to privacy issues have been raised.

At Associated Truck Brokers Inc., Yakima, WA, Randall Ward, who is a small fleet owner, does not support use of black boxes, for fear of the product being "badly abused by the powers that be." Those powers could be attorneys involved in lawsuits, or "some power hungry DOT man trying to swing his weight around." Ward just feels it is the wrong thing to do, despite his desire to have some of the information the black box provides for his own personal use.

In fact, he is receiving some data of that type already. He spoke of electronic control modules in the computer that manages the fuel data, etc. as an example. "It will tell you six ways from Sunday what the engine and vehicle has been

doing as it relates to speed, internal operating conditions, idling time, average miles per gallon, average speed, top speed, loaded speed. It gives us all kinds of information for management purposes."

Ward said his truck brokerage, which has five trucks on a lease-purchase plan with drivers, as well as four owner operators under lease, normally obtains a print out of this type data from the garage when the equipment is serviced. While it is possible to have this information forwarded right into your computer, Ward is currently not set up to do this.

Newton Bayless, who is head of Century Truck Brokers Inc. in Salinas, CA, feels that black box regulations should encompass all motor vehicles utilizing the nation's highway system. He believes it would cast a lot of light on some of the safety issues that are clouded; especially a lot of accidents involving over-the-road equipment. People would see that it is not necessarily the truck that is creating many of the highway safety hazards.

At Cool Runnings Ltd. of Kenosha, WI, Fred Plotsky opposes black boxes because "it's too much big government." He doesn't buy into the sales pitch by those claiming it is needed to determine what has happened in an accident. Plotsky said there are witnesses, people at the scene in many cases. There also are tire skid marks, damage to signs, railings, and the vehicle itself.

"We don't need anybody watching us. There's enough watching as it is. Why don't they tighten up the regulations on cars and make sure everyone has adequate insurance?" he asked. While most automobile drivers have insurance, he said it usually is not enough. Plotsky observed that a number of federal studies have revealed in crashes involving big trucks and automobiles, the driver of the auto is proven at fault the vast majority of the time.