Owner-Operator's Business Association of Canada
Association professionnelle des routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the director's chair

Good for the goose, but not the gander?

Joanne Ritchie: OBAC executive director

Sometimes numbers are good, sometimes not. Like when Ontario Environment Minister, Laurel Broten, announced a ban on waste oil-fired heaters. From the front steps of a waste-oil recycling company, the Minister offered not a shred of evidence that there were any quantifiable risks associated with approved heaters. Unless of course you're a waste oil recycler. Those furnaces burn about seven million litres of waste oil from that industry's revenue stream each year.

Lots of carriers use waste oil heaters to reduce shop heating costs and to keep waste oil disposal fees down. So the OTA cries foul on behalf of its members, saying, as reported in this magazine last month: "We're concerned this is being done for political reasons and not sound environmental reasons."

OTA manager of government relations, Doug Switzer, was further quoted as saying, "We are unaware of any scientific research…that supports this policy change, unless there is evidence available to the government which (they) will not or cannot share with stakeholders."

Hmm…Can we have a little chat about unsupported initiatives and a decided lack of scientific evidence brought forward when advancing certain agendas?

When OTA first pitched its speed limiter policy back in 2005, it offered precious little in the way of hard evidence that regulating truck speeds through governed engines would actually enhance road safety. Yet, in a move that stands to put hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars in carriers' pockets, OTA was asking the trucking industry, the public, and governments, to accept the proposal on their good word alone that speed limiters save lives and significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

It's a given that lowering speed reduces fuel consumption and greenhouse gas emissions; so it's obvious that limiting speeds to 105 km/h would provide fuel savings for the portion of trucks that do travel above that speed. But the numbers being thrown around to make an environmental argument for speed limiters were based on assumptions that all trucks are going over 105 km/h all the time, and we know that simply isn't the case.

I think OBAC and OOIDA did a good job countering OTA's safety argument. So good a job in fact, that now speed limiters have morphed from a life-saver to the next great green hope. What happened to the safety argument? Heard much on that front lately?

Governments looked carefully at the information OBAC and OOIDA put before them on a myriad of safety issues related to speed limiters. For example, we pointed out that not only do comprehensive studies on speeding in Canada show that trucks consistently exhibit lower average speeds and less extreme speeding than light vehicles, we showed them the evidence that in accidents involving heavy-duty trucks, speeding by the other driver is a much more frequent causative factor than speeding by the truck driver.

We directed them to research that shows reduced speeds promote safety only if all vehicles are moving at reduced speeds. It is established that the safest conditions on the road are when all traffic is moving at or about the same speed and that deviations from the mean speed of traffic, both up and down, contribute significantly to accidents. In other words, speed differentials have a greater causative impact on accidents than speed itself. We also showed them US studies on truck size and weight that found when two vehicles travelling in the same direction were moving at speeds that varied by 10 mph, they were nearly four times more likely to collide than they would be if travelling at the same speed.

We pointed out that forcing heavy-duty trucks to drive slower than the flow of traffic, while other vehicles on the road continue to speed, will lead to frequent lane changes, passing and weaving maneuvers, as well as tailgating by faster-moving vehicles.

We also pointed out existing research that shows whatever the environmental gains may actually be, they're smaller than those possible from other initiatives. For example, far higher gains are possible from technology improvements and driver training in fuel-efficient driving techniques. And aerodynamics, low rolling resistance tires and synthetic engine oils can reduce emissions to a greater degree than mandating lower speeds for truckers who are already doing it anyway – with their bottom line in mind.

The federal government is about to embark on a large and important aspect of speed limiter research: traffic modeling, a scientific study that involves a risk assessment based on the overall impact to traffic safety if trucks are speed-limited to 105 km/h. The process involves gathering real-time data, then doing all manner of scientific stuff with models and virtual speed limiters for a complete assessment.

That study, to be completed in about nine months, should produce some interesting numbers. Good numbers. But as I said earlier, some numbers are better than other numbers. Just depends on whether they help your case or hurt it.

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