



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

The cost of speed

The volume of mail produced by the recent speed-limiter debate is staggering, making it possibly the hottest debate I've witnessed in years. It's clear most of you are against the idea of mandated governors on your trucks, and for all the right reasons – I'm happy to report. I haven't read any mail suggesting speeding is a good idea, nor have I heard from anyone – thank goodness – claiming a God-given right to do what they damn well please out on our highways.

The debate has also generated some interesting discussion on truck speeds, and why some drivers opt to go a little faster (or slower) than the rest of the pack. What drivers have been telling me is interesting – though not exactly earth-shattering.

Overwhelmingly, the preferred speed is "at or about" the flow of traffic, which, by the way, is what all the research shows to be the speed at which safety is best served. The risk of crashes is lowest, that is, when all vehicles in the traffic stream are travelling at or about the same speed.

Under certain conditions, many drivers also showed a preference for going "a bit slower than the flow of traffic," or "a bit faster than the flow of traffic." The thinking was along the same lines, but for slightly different reasons.

The slower crowd said it was safer and less stressful to let traffic flow around the truck, and that it was easier to maintain a constant speed. The drivers who preferred to go a bit faster said they felt more in command of the traffic dynamics when they were running slightly faster. The faster drivers also said the act of leading the way through traffic kept them more alert,

and reported that slow speeds sometimes lulled them into a state of mental laziness.

Company drivers were more likely to tell me that speed was money in the bank, while owner/operators were split on that one. Most agreed that speed was costly, while others agreed with the company drivers: more miles in a day equaled more money.

It's that point I want to dig into here.

Driving at 75 mph for 11 hours will get you about 750 miles down the road, on paper, if you're out in Nevada or Wyoming where traffic is non-existent. And for company drivers, getting there sooner, or just turning more miles in a day is a pretty compelling reason to keep the hammer down. For owner/ops, however, that speed comes at a great cost. If one were to do the math, I think you'd be hard pressed to show that you were money ahead at the end of a long high-speed day.

Sure, you got there sooner, or you made more miles, but with margins between cost and profit being so thin, the excess fuel burned would easily eat up whatever "extra" revenue was earned by going faster.

So, if company drivers perceive that they gain by going faster, what's their buy-in to lower speeds? No much, I'll tell you. And that's where some carriers could make improvements.

They're aware of the high cost of speed, and they're trying to limit their costs by using technology like speed limiters to "level the playing field" rather than doing some serious investigation of how to improve driving habits. The level playing field reference speaks to the recruiting of drivers, by the way. It's said that car-



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riers who run governed trucks have a harder time recruiting drivers than carriers who don't. Go figure.

But happily, a few carriers I'm aware of actually pay their drivers a substantial premium to drive governed trucks. The fuel savings, I'm told, is funneled back into higher wages. Makes sense to me. I can't for a minute imagine why a carrier with that competitive advantage would want the playing field leveled.

And, the very same technology some carriers are prepared to turn to for a solution to their speeding problem is equally capable of revealing who the speeders are so remedial action can be taken. Anyone who has ever looked at an engine ECM download will tell you there's a goldmine of information in there just waiting to be plucked out and applied.

The ECM will tell you what the top speed of the vehicle was, how long the truck was run at that speed, what the fuel economy was, how heavily the driver accelerates, and more. If fleet owners took the initiative to check their drivers' on-road performance via an ECM download, the bad drivers would become immediately obvious - and so would the good ones. Discipline and rewards could be meted out accordingly. A 1-mpg gain at today's fuel prices could translate into a savings of about \$8,500 per truck, and the smarter carriers are starting to share those savings with their diligent drivers.

For owner/ops, of course, the case for more fuel-efficient driving should be plain. It's money in your pocket – no money down, no monthly payments, and nothing to install.