



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

*...from the
director's chair*

Hate to say we told you so

Although I'm still slogging my way through the Transport Canada studies on the implications of mandatory speed limiters, I have yet to read a single compelling argument for any jurisdiction go down the road of mandating speed limiters. Indeed, the long-awaited studies suggest there are as many risks associated with speed limiters as benefits.

Transport Canada made the six studies public late in the afternoon on Friday, July 4; it's the oldest trick in the media relations playbook – release the bad news when nobody's looking.

The feds, under fire for failing to come up with a workable national framework for climate change, alluded to possible environmental gains claimed by one study and took the opportunity to encourage provinces to get on-board and support a “national approach” to greenhouse gas reduction.

Interestingly, the press release accompanying the unveiling of the studies mentioned only potential environmental gains.

Transport Minister Lawrence Cannon's announcement contained not a word about the now-quantified safety risks or the difficulties and expense likely to be incurred enforcing the law.

The studies bear out what we've been saying all along: there is no evidence to show that safety is well-served by government-mandated speed limiters, and indeed, safety can be compromised in a number of situations; there are significant issues with tampering, trade, and competitiveness; enforcement costs are high and relatively ineffective; and truck and engine manufacturers are cautioning against government interference.

In fact – and one of the studies says as much – the only real benefactors of mandatory speed limiters are the fleets.

They gain, according to a study called Learning from Others: An International Study on Heavy Truck Speed Limiters, from 3-11% lower fuel consumption, lower maintenance costs (tires, brakes, engine), and on reduced insurance premiums.

That bit comes from an assessment done by the European Commission.

I'm not sure when fleet profitability became a government priority, but it seems that Transport Canada and the Ministries of Transport in Quebec and Ontario have given themselves a new mandate.

The safety implications must remain first and foremost in this discussion. Originally, safety was touted as one of the benefits of restricting truck speed to 105 km/h. Transport Canada contracted the University of Waterloo to conduct a computer-based traffic modeling study, called Safety Implications of Mandated Truck Speed Limiters on Canadian Highways. Using real-world data to create a model of how traffic moves along a section of highway, technicians modified the simulated speeds of certain vehicles within the flow of traffic to show what impact speed-limited trucks would have on the potential risk of a collision.

The results showed limiting truck speeds to 105 km/h had a positive impact on safety on straight, rural stretches of divided highway – Ontario's Hwy. 401 between Port Hope and Brockville, for example.

But as traffic volumes and the percentage of trucks within the traffic flow are increased, “the safety gains associated with mandatory limiters set at 105 km/h become less pronounced.”

And in tighter quarters, such as busy sections of the QEW, as traffic volume nears capacity (2,000 vehicles per hour per lane), “more vehicle interactions take place and this leads to a reduction in safety especially for those segments with increased merging and lane-change activity, such as, on- and off-ramp segments. In these instances the introduction of truck speed limiters can actually reduce the level of safety when compared to the non-limiter case.”

Of greater concern, because of the large number of rural non-divided highways in Canada – such as most of the Trans-Canada in the west, and on Ontario's Highways 11 and 17 – the study says that “implementation of mandatory speed limiters on rural two-lane highways may lead to an increase of passing maneuvers onto the opposing traffic lane. The possibility for increased

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unsafe passing maneuvers poses special safety challenges where trucks are subject to a maximum speed set by limiters for two-lane undivided rural highways.”

While the authors of that study recommend further examination before any definitive conclusions can be drawn, Ontario's own safety statistics show that 85% of car/truck collisions in the province take place on those types of highways.

These findings are also consistent with experience in the United Kingdom and Sweden, as reported in the international study.

The study notes that overseas officials are concerned with speed-limited trucks passing each other on divided highways and causing traffic backlogs.

Other road safety issues identified in the U.K. include convoys of trucks blocking the on- and off-ramps on highways. Under U.K. law, all speed-limited trucks are relegated to the inside lanes on highways of three or more lanes.

For my money, that should be enough to halt this foolishness in its tracks. If one life is put at risk by this policy, it's one life too many.

And so we're left with the environmental benefits of good speed management, which seems to be the only bright spot the Minister could find.

But a trip to the fuel pump should give the Minister a clue: smart fleets and owner/operators are already reducing speed, and using other best practices, to lower fuel consumption and maintenance costs.

And for those still on a learning curve, incentive programs – reward rather than punishment – would be a far more effective use of government resources.