



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada

Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

Will trucking get thrown under the bus?

Our friends in the motor coach business south of the border are in the unenviable position of being tops on FMCSA's hit list these days. A rash of nasty bus crashes over the past couple of years has prompted the US Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration to laser focus on passenger carriers.

In recent months, FMCSA has shut down more than a dozen charter bus operators for various and flagrant safety violations.

Mechanical defects do not appear to figure prominently in several recent high profile crashes. Instead, many involve drivers apparently asleep at the wheel or demonstrating extremely poor judgment. And administrative, recordkeeping, and driver credentialing violations that often go unnoticed until the inevitable happens don't cause crashes, but they are harbingers of the quality of the operation.

Bus safety has become such a priority for the agency that it now issues a press release each time a major enforcement action is taken against a motor coach operator. Whether a justifiable response or one driven by political expediency, it shows that FMCSA is taking this pretty seriously. Today it's the motor coach industry; could it be us tomorrow?

Take hours-of-service. In Canada, our bus industry lives under the same scrutiny as trucking, but I remember in 2004 when FMCSA made a major change to HoS, its bus industry got a bye. FMCSA's reasoning? Publicly, they said the industry didn't have the same pattern of HoS violations as trucking, and was, by and large, safer than trucking.

In reality, the "new" rules were just too restrictive. Taking away the ability to stop the clock during the workday would have devastated tour operators whose stock in trade was delivering a load of people to a venue, sitting around all day, and then driving them home. Bus operators can still stop the clock, and let the driver continue the

trip hours later in the day.

Given the number of recent crashes where fatigue was determined to be a critical factor, my guess is the bus people will soon be grappling with a new set of HoS rules. But, I'm straying a bit from my point, which is this: despite an otherwise enviable safety record, the bus industry has come under intense scrutiny because of the actions of a handful of poor drivers.

Just like trucking, the whole industry suffers whenever a few bad apples get into the barrel. Safety groups and the regulators, however, tend not to discriminate. When their political spidey senses start tingling, they get busy making rules that generally apply to everyone.

What has me worried is not so much the performance of the bus operators, but the future safety of trucking if the predicted labour crisis materializes and carriers start grabbing people off the street and throwing barely trained and highly inexperienced drivers into the trucking barrel.

Carriers large and small are already gearing up to deal with what could be an unprecedented driver shortage, and there's some evidence that attitudes toward recruiting and retention are slowly changing. There's a better understanding of the demographic make-up of the Canadian workforce and the variety of attitudes and values out there with respect to careers; there's a refreshing discussion underway about jobs and workplaces that promote better work-life balance. And yes, there's even some talk that driver pay and benefits need to be re-evaluated if we hope to compete with other professions.

At the same time, there are still those cheap, lazy, and greedy carriers out there willing to do anything to make a buck. Some will pick up the driver dregs that good carriers won't hire, others will set up lease-to-own programs for new hires and hook people on the attraction of owning their own truck (which seldom actually happens in such cases). New motor carriers will spring up



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to meet capacity demands, and among them will surely be carriers – and drivers – who won't meet the safety requirements.

When demand for drivers goes up, more training schools are needed, and we could also see an increase in the number of licence mills churning out poorly trained drivers.

And remember, it will take only a few of these bad apples to taint the whole barrel. I can't think of a better pre-emptive strike against an FMCSA-bus-type scrutiny of trucking than getting our training-and-licensing-standards house in order.

The Canadian Trucking Human Resources Council (CTHRC) is working with industry to address the priority of a good supply of qualified truck drivers. Under its "Closing the Gap" initiative, the licensing requirements of each jurisdiction were analyzed for gaps between these requirements and the National Occupational Standard for entry-level drivers. As a result, many jurisdictions are reviewing their driver licensing standards. Perhaps there's never been a better time to push provinces to look seriously at apprenticeship and mentoring programs to finish driver entry level training to a standard the industry can live with.

With this country's fragmented, multi-jurisdictional responsibilities for training and licensing, it's probably a pipe dream, but I would truly love to see a mandatory driver training requirement in place – before a potential driver ever steps through the door of a testing facility – even if it means additional cost to bring these people into the industry.

We simply can't afford to have an influx of less-than-capable drivers these days – these are the drivers that will end up throwing trucking under the bus.