Trucks: 'The younger generation isn't looking at trucking as a career'

Continued from Page 1

adhere to safety regulations that restrict driving time. Weather, traffic and road construction all play into that, he said.

"They are making decisions daily. Good drivers are constantly doing calculations and in the back of their minds racing the clock. It's tough for them," he said. "It's a juggling act."

In addition to that stress, there are the long hours, days and even weeks on the road.

"It's a lonely lifestyle out there by yourself," he said.

The biggest issue is mentally being able to push through the "mind-numbingness" of that isolation, he said.

It's also hard on spouses and families and can take a toll. Younger workers don't see it as the quality of life they want, he said.

"The younger generation isn't looking at trucking as a career," he said.

Recruitment woes

The American Trucking Association has long called attention to the shortage of truck drivers, primarily long-haul drivers.

The ATA first documented the issue in 2005 when the shortage stood at 20,000 drivers, Bob Costello, the association's chief economist and senior vice president, said.

"It (the shortage) went away with the recession. Now it's back with a vengeance," he said.

The recession that started in 2008 shrank freight volumes so fewer drivers were needed. Once the economy recovered, the shortage skyrocketed to 45,000 drivers by 2015.

ATA hasn't calculated the latest numbers, but the forecasted shortage for 2018 was 60,000 drivers, he said.

"At the core, it's a demographics issue, an age issue," he said.

The average age of a new driver in training is 30. That's because the age requirement for interstate truck drivers is 21, meaning the industry misses out on the population between 18 and 21, he said.

Those who don't go on to college or join the military "don't just sit around twiddling their thumbs. They go into retail, fast food or construction," he said.

After working in those areas for a while, some might be looking for higher pay or benefits and consider trucking, he said.

"By the time they come to us, they're 30 years old," he said.

In addition to missing younger workers, there's a gender issue. Only 6 percent of all truck drivers are female, while the total U.S. workforce is 47 percent women. The industry needs to do a better job of making trucking more attractive to females, he said.

Attracting more drivers isn't just about raising wages. When there's a shortage of anything, the price goes up, and driver wages continue to

Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Kelly Bangerter, safety manager for the Sunrise Express terminal in Twin Falls, Idaho, reviewing driving logs at his office on Feb. 19.

Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press

Felisa Griffith, a truck driver for Sunrise Express, prepares to hit the road with her Corgi, Sam, at the company's Twin Falls terminal on Feb. 19.

Bob Costello

rise, he said.

"If this was only about pay, it would be easy to solve. It's more than that," he said.

In addition to demographics, driver shortages can be attributed to the demanding lifestyle and driver treatment along the supply chain.

"Companies are getting the message," he said.

They're doing a better job of reducing the length of the haul and providing more time at home. And shippers and receivers are reducing wait times for drivers, who typically incurred extended wait times, he said.

Driver shortages are also a result of more attractive job alternatives and are exacerbated by regulations such as restricted drive times that reduce industry productivity, requiring more trucks and drivers.

Domino effect

Independent Meat — a fifth-generation, family-owned business in Twin Falls — has a small fleet of trucks, delivering its pork products in Idaho, Utah, Nevada and Montana. But it uses other carriers to deliver 60 percent of its production to distributors in Washington, Oregon and California, Kenny Stagmeyer, the com-

Rebecca Brewster

pany's logistics manager, said.

"We've been fortunate that the carriers we do use have been able to take care of most of our needs," he said.

But the driver shortage is affecting all companies, whether they have two trucks or 200. Every company has equipment sitting idle in the yard, he said.

"There's not a trucking company out there that's not hiring drivers (and) it's hard to find good quality drivers," he said.

The ones with experience are staying with their companies, and those companies are paying to keep them. Other drivers may barely have a year of over-the-road experience. Companies are moving to in-house training and offering sign-on bonuses more than ever before, he said.

"It's hard to find guys that want to work. Everybody's trying to attract drivers; it's nationwide," he said.

In addition to the lifestyle, the federal government made life more difficult for companies when it mandated electronic logging devices that track a trucker's every minute and movement, he said.

The ELD rules limit truckers to 11 hours of drive time and 14 consecutive hours of on-duty time in a 24-hour period before they have to pull off the road for 10 hours before driving again.

The rules make no allowances for weather delays or time waiting at docks and tied the hands of a lot of companies, he said.

In those instances, the driver is still on the clock. If he's paid by the mile — and a lot are — it cuts into his time and into his pay, he said.

"The driver situation has been ongoing now for five or six years, but it's really started to hit home," he said.

Backed-up trucks cause a domino effect that affects everyone from start to finish, he said.

The stakes

While truckers do have to pass routine physicals required by the Department of Transportation, there is no maximum age limit that kicks them out of the cab.

But with a median age of 49 for long-haul drivers in 2017, the truck driver shortage will be amplified by a growing number of retiring drivers as well as by industry expansion.

The trucking industry will need more than 897,500 new drivers over the next decade, nearly 90,000 per year on average, Costello said in his 2017 analysis.

Retirement accounts for 49 percent of future needs, and industry growth accounts for at least 28 percent through 2026. If nothing changes in the trend line, the driver shortage could surpass 174,000 by 2026.

Because trucks account for nearly 71 percent of all freight tonnage moved in the U.S., it is highly unlikely the driver shortage could be reduced significantly by shifting to other modes of transportation such as rail, he said.

"If the trend stays on course, there will likely be severe supply chain disruptions resulting in significant shipping delays, higher inventory carrying costs and perhaps shortages at stores," he said in the report.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in its September 2018 working paper titled "Is the U.S. Labor Market for Truck Drivers Broken?" countered that nothing in the available evidence suggests there will be an actual shortage of drivers that will bring about Costello's scenario.

That report noted a tight labor market for the industry since 2003 but also found that no special constraints prevent entry into the occupation and no reason the driver supply should fail to respond to higher price signals.

It did note, however, that drivers in the long-distance trucking sector were not addressed in its analysis.

That's exactly the sector ATA is focused on. The BLS report is looking at the broader industry, where there's no shortage of local drivers. Of the roughly 3.5 million truck drivers today, the ATA is concerned about the 500,000 to 600,000 long-haul tractor-trailer drivers, he said.

On radar

While the American Transportation Research Institute, a not-for-profit research organization, doesn't track quantitative data on driver shortages, it has studied the issue at least since the early 1990s, Rebecca Brewster, ATRI president, said.

"Certainly over the years it's been a bigger or lesser issue, depending on the economy," she said.

For example, it wasn't a top industry issue during the recession because there was less demand for freight and consequently less demand for drivers, she said.

But a driver shortage was the top-ranked issue in ATRI's annual Top Industry Issues report in 2017 and 2018 and has been a top-three issue in 12 of the 14 years ATRI has conducted the survey.

Part of the driver shortage is related to increased freight demand due to the economy, a growing population and the increase in e-commerce — where customers order online and want the product today, she said.

"That is certainly driving up the need for additional truck transportation," she said.

But the shortage is also due to drivers retiring and the lack of success in recruiting younger workers to fill those spots, she said.

One of the challenges is the lack of vocational-technical education at the high school level that would let youths know about career opportunities in trucking.

One response by employers to address the shortage has been to increase wages. They've also added bonuses for such things as signing on, safe driving performance and on-time delivery.

And they've added benefits, such as health insurance, retirement plans and financial assistance for training, she said.

Driver wages, paid either by the mile or hourly, and bonuses have steadily increased over the last several years, according to ATRI.

From 2012 to 2017, wages across the industry rose from an average of 41.7 cents per mile to 55.7 cents per mile and from $16.67 to $21.97 an hour.

Benefits also rose, from 11.6 cents per mile to 17.2 cents per mile and $4.64 per hour to $6.78 per hour.

Bonuses in 2017 averaged $2,542 for on-time delivery, $1,401 for signing on, $1,317 for safety and $974 for retention.

The median annual wage for heavy truck and tractor-trailer drivers in 2017 was $21.16 hourly and $44,020 annually, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

However, an internet job search for long-haul drivers revealed many employers offering significantly higher wages, bonuses and salaries.

The industry is also addressing the lifestyle issue and the long stretches of time away from home, giving drivers more time at home or routes closer to home so they can be home more often. Some have set up hub-and-spoke systems or established team operations that can go farther for less total time away, she said.

Other strategies the industry is looking at include recruiting more women and military veterans and reducing to 18 the age for an interstate CDL in concert with safety assessments of those younger drivers and on-the-job-training.

Strategies also include expanding apprenticeships and other workforce-development programs through the Department of Transportation and the Department of Labor.

Room to grow

At Sunrise Express, Bangerter said his company is concerned about the driver shortage.

The company owns 194 trucks and 600 trailers and employs 190 drivers. Some 25 others are owner/operators, who are paid to haul goods for the company using their own trucks.

"We're constantly looking for drivers," he said.

The Twin Falls terminal runs 50 trucks, and Bangerter would like to bump that to 75 to 100 trucks. But he's found it difficult to get beyond 60 trucks due to a shortage of experienced, high-quality drivers.

"Without these drivers, we can't grow," he said.

Canola: ODA faces tight deadline to devise new regulations for canola

Continued from Page 1

If the committee determines that ODA should have new authority to regulate canola, the existing bill can later be amended to reflect such changes, said Ivan Maluski, policy director for Friends of Family Farmers, a nonprofit concerned about canola impacts.

Lawmakers and legislative committees had until Feb. 26 to submit new bills, which generally must be considered in their chambers of origin by April 9.

The ODA also faces a relatively tight deadline to devise new regulations for canola, which must be ready by early April to have enough time for drafting and public comment.

The concept of an "exclusion zone" with more stringent canola regulations doesn't seem to have gained traction among members of the rules advisory committee, partly due to the potential complexity of rules along the zone's borders.

The Willamette Valley Oilseed Producers Association, which favors canola production, also doesn't believe there's justification for regulations specific to that crop, since a study by Oregon State University concluded it doesn't pose a greater hazard than related species in the Brassicaceae family.

"Picking one Brassicaceae species out of 3,700 species doesn't feel fair and equitable," said Anna Scharf, the group's president, during a Feb. 15 committee meeting. "We need to stop having conversations about one species."

Commodity canola production could increase the valley's total Brassicacea acreage more than other food or seed crops in recent years, thereby raising pest and disease risks, said Greg Loberg of WVSSA during the most recent meeting.

However, other crops haven't received the same amount of regulatory scrutiny despite surges in popularity, said Kathy Hadley, who grows canola. "We weren't sitting around this table three years ago when the radish acres exploded."

A commodity commission for all Brassicaceae crops — including canola and specialty seeds — could raise money for research and promotion while forming an entity that maintains a "pinning map" to prevent cross-pollination, said Jonathan Sandau, government affairs specialist with Oregon Farm Bureau.

"It would be a vehicle to manage conflict resolution," said Sandau, adding that Farm Bureau was not officially advocating for the idea. "The commission becomes a mediating entity."

Slaves: 'This accuses (producers) of slavery and human trafficking'

Continued from Page 1

"I must tell you, this is one of the worst bills I have seen and one of the biggest messes of legislation I have seen in 35 years around the Legislature," Washington State Dairy Federation Executive Director Dan Wood told the committee.

Washington Potato and Onion Association lobbyist Jim Jesernig, a former legislator and state agriculture director, said potato and onion growers were angry, and so was he.

"One of the things I've learned in the 33 years I've been here is that if there is something that's an outright lie, you have to call it that," he said. "The supply chain that feeds you and your constituents are our farmers, ranchers and food processors. This accuses them of slavery and human trafficking."

Washington Association of Wheat Growers lobbyist Diana Carlen said wheat growers were "quite shocked" by the bill and "personally offended."

"They thought it came out of left field," she said.

Carlen warned that legislation linking Washington wheat growers to slavery would be bad for exports. "It puts a black mark on our states," she said.

On Thursday, the labor committee amended the bill to exclude potatoes, onions, wheat and vegetables from the bill's definition of agricultural products. That left dairy and fruit, two sectors that have been accused by labor organizations of mistreating workers. The United Farm Workers endorsed the bill.

Saldana originally proposed letting any Washington resident sue farmers for not complying with the bill, even if the person suing had not suffered any injury or damage. That provision was cut.

Saldana said she wanted to make Washington a leader in informing consumers about farm labor practices.

"There was no mal intent," she said.

Retailers would have to demand labor-practice information from producers of coffee, cocoa and sugar, too.

"This bill basically wants to take our companies and say, 'Well, you're responsible for everything that happens in every foreign country,'" said the labor committee's top-ranking Republican, Curtis King of Yakima. "It's just inconceivable we can put this kind of requirement on our citizens."