

Truck crashes declining across Oregon

Inspectors aim to educate

By SAM STITES
Oregon Capital Bureau

Gagandeep Singh was traveling south on Interstate 5 near Woodburn when smoke started boiling up from under his Volvo tractor-trailer and filling his driver's cabin.

He pulled to the shoulder and was out investigating when a Freightliner tractor-trailer driven by Rex Hollopeter, 51, of Salem, sideswiped Singh's.

Hollopeter's truck came to a stop blocking southbound traffic as both trucks burned furiously.

The wreck, which hospitalized Hollopeter, closed the freeway for hours.

Then, another truck accident in the northbound lanes snarled traffic even more.

The high-profile crashes in October raised fresh questions about the safety record of an ever-increasing number of commercial trucks rolling down Oregon's highways.

Yet state data shows that despite the increasing miles put on by truckers, their accidents rates have held steady and even dipped in recent years.

In 2008, Oregon saw 2,113 truck crashes, according to state Department of Transportation data. In 2018 — the most recent year for which data is available — there were just 1,408 crashes. That number is surprising given that the number of miles traveled by trucks throughout the state grew by 181 million miles over the decade.

Between 2015 and 2018, data shows there were 5,934 truck crashes. That's an average of four crashes a day. The highest annual total during that period — 1,608 crashes — came in 2017 when a January blizzard buried and closed roads across the state.

Truck drivers were at fault in 50% of crashes, while mechanical issues with the truck were at fault in just 2% of cases, data shows.

That means 2,849 crashes were caused by outside factors, such as other drivers or brutal weather conditions. ODOT uses police reports to establish where to place fault. Police put the blame on drivers for a number of reasons, but at the top of the list are speeding, failing to remain in their own lane, following too closely, improperly changing lanes and failing to pay attention.

ODOT won't release numbers for 2019 until all investigations are finalized to determine fault, but the agency does report its year-to-date numbers to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration halfway through the year.

According to federal data, there were 858 truck crashes in Oregon through June, with 23 fatalities and 289 injuries. The early numbers are on track to meet or slightly exceed Oregon's average over the previous five years.

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Admin-



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Weighmaster Tom Avila weighs a Freightliner tractor-trailer as it moves across the scales located at the Woodburn port of entry.

istration also rates Oregon for its response to crashes and inspection of trucks. The agency gave the state a "good" rating on its last assessment, with a score of 90% or better in all 10 criteria, including inspection timeliness, accuracy and completeness. "I think that rating reflects the importance that safety has in Oregon. It's our No. 1 priority across all of ODOT," said David House, spokesman for ODOT's Motor Carrier Division.

According to House, Oregon's rating isn't about comparing itself to other states, rather looking at where it can do better in efforts to educate, train and inspect motor carriers across the state.

'IF SAFETY IS YOUR PRIORITY, THEN ENFORCEMENT ISN'T ABOUT PUNISHMENT, IT'S ABOUT EDUCATION.'

David House | spokesman for ODOT's Motor Carrier Division

A seven-year low

While truck miles traveled continue to climb, increasing by 10% between 2008 and 2018, Oregon's truck crash rate is declining, the state data showed. From 2005 to 2008, Oregon averaged 1.13 crashes per million vehicle miles traveled. Between 2015 and 2018, the state's average dropped to 0.80. Oregon's crash rate reached its lowest in a decade at 0.73 in 2018 with more than 1.93 billion miles traveled by trucks in the state.

All truck at-fault crashes reached a seven-year low in 2018 of just 0.36 crashes per million vehicle miles travelled.

"It's encouraging that the (crash) rate isn't going up in proportion to vehicle miles traveled, that doesn't mean we can't make it better and improve things through enforcement,

education, engineering of roadways and emergency response," House said.

In 2016, ODOT adopted a new transportation safety plan that envisions zero deaths on Oregon's roads by 2035. The Motor Carrier Division is responsible for three of the four areas crucial to ODOT's vision: education, enforcement and emergency response.

Those functions are administered from 173 inspection and weigh stations located throughout Oregon, but only a handful are open full time. Those include the ports of entry in Ashland, Woodburn, Klamath Falls, Cascade Locks and Huntington.

The trucking industry is mostly regulated

by the federal government, but licensing and registration are handled by states. That means education plays a huge role in the state's efforts to continually improve safety.

In that effort, ODOT has a partner in the Oregon Trucking Associations, the trade organization of close to 600 members that advocates for Oregon's truck companies and drivers. The organization also provides training and information on new rules and regulations related to safety.

Jana Jarvis, trucking association president, said that clamping down on distracted driving is a top priority.

"We work closely with the Motor Carrier Division and try to give them feedback on what see works and doesn't work," said Jarvis. "Safety is the No. 1 priority for our

organization."

Jarvis and Waylon Buchan, the association's director of government affairs, lobby at the state and federal level.

In recent years, the biggest change they've seen to improve safety was a federal mandate to use electronic log books to better track driver hours and enforce breaks. Before the 2017 mandate, drivers did their logbooks by hand, allowing some drivers to fudge their numbers to continue driving and earning.

Jarvis said the trucking association supported the change.

"We're always going to have safety as part of the calculation whether supporting or not supporting something because ultimately we want our drivers and passengers on the road to get home safely," Jarvis said.

Safety equation

Enforcement of regulations is also an important part of ODOT's safety equation, but the agency's attitude toward enforcement has shifted in recent years from punishing truckers and trucking companies to educating them.

In 2018, the Motor Carrier Division completed 18,549 inspections and issued more than 3,500 warnings and citations. That's down from the 22,573 inspections completed in 2016.

By mid-November, the agency had issued more than 2,900 warnings and citations from 16,516 inspections. Drivers can be cited for improper maintenance of critical systems, including brakes or how loads are secured, weight violations, failure to maintain a medical exam certificate, outdated registration and not carrying chains when required. Most of those citations require the driver to fix the issue within a certain amount of time, others carry monetary penalties.

According to data, 1 in 5 citations is serious enough that inspectors place a truck out of service until fixes can be made on the spot or the truck towed. That's on par with national statistics.

"If safety is your priority, then enforcement isn't about punishment, it's about education," House said. "We don't want to punish you or put you out of business. We want you to do it right."

Jeff Brown, Motor Carrier Division safety manager, agreed. Instead of bringing a heavy-handed approach, he instructs his 105 inspectors statewide to encourage drivers to ask questions.

For Brown, preventing accidents and massive traffic disruption caused by crashes like the fiery Woodburn incident begins with those contacts between inspectors and drivers, where ODOT can be an ally rather than antagonist.

"I would love to be a resource for every driver out there to try to help. I think it's critical that we do that," Brown said. "We have to enforce regulations, and sometimes that's unfortunate, but at the same time, the more informed everyone is out there, the better off we are."

Inspections crucial to state's 'vision zero'

By SAM STITES
Oregon Capital Bureau

WOODBURN — Truck inspections are the primary tool for preventing accidents that disrupt Oregon's highways, hospitalize thousands and leave hundreds dead each year.

The state Department of Transportation raised the bar for safety in adopting a new action plan in 2016. The agency envisions a future with no deaths from traffic accidents on Oregon's roads.

While crashes involving commercial trucks only account for a small portion of the state's annual death toll — only 58 of the 502 fatalities in 2018 involved a truck — ODOT's Motor Carrier Division takes seriously the inspection of trucks as a means of prevention.

The number of vehicle miles traveled by trucks in Oregon has increased by 181 million miles the past decade.

With an increasing number of trucks on the road, state truck inspectors have become smarter about how they carry out their work, using data to target repeat offenders and keep both trucks and drivers with chronic issues off the road.

In 2018, state specialists completed 18,549 inspections and issued more than 3,500 citations and warnings.

Through November, there have been more than 16,500 inspections and 2,900 warnings or citations issued to drivers or trucking companies this year. A majority of those inspections are done at ports of entry at Woodburn, Klamath Falls, Huntington, Ashland and Cascade Locks.

Hundreds of thousands of cars pass the Woodburn truck scales on Interstate 5.

It's here that inspectors, called compliance specialists, complete random checks on a variety of criteria from the physical equipment to a driver's documentation.

The process starts with the 75 weighmasters across the state at roadside scales like Woodburn.

Weighmasters

Weighmasters use an automated system that electronically collects data from each truck that passes under a detector located

about a mile up the freeway.

Tom Avila is one of the weighmasters at the Woodburn scales. After 14 years, he's adept at reading dozens of data points on several trucks at once as they file past his little hut at the weigh station. He sits in front of two computer monitors displaying details he needs to know about each truck.

In a matter of seconds, Avila reads who is driving, where they're licensed, how long they've been driving, whether their registration is valid, how much weight each truck axle is carrying and if the weight matches their permit. The Woodburn scales are also piloting a new technology that can tell Avila whether a tire is flat or if there's a problem with an axle so he can alert the driver to pull over.

The Woodburn scales see approximately 6,000 to 7,000 trucks a day. Between pre-clearance and simply not having enough time to weigh every truck, that number is a small portion of the total trucks rolling by.

Avila works with inspectors like Don McCloskey, who pull trucks out of line either by certain type — such as focusing on those carrying hazardous materials — or using a formula.

According to Jess Brown, ODOT Motor Carrier's central safety unit manager, the algorithm is crucial to an inspector's ability to keep Oregon's roads safe.

Instead of randomly checking trucks and stopping drivers who have no violations, inspectors can target trucks most likely to have an issue.

"We want to take those trucks and drivers who are in bad shape off the road," Brown said.

McCloskey will ask Avila to flip a switch that notifies the driver they're going to be inspected and to pull around to a large truck barn located a hundred feet west of the weigh station.

According to Brown, compliance specialists like McCloskey are expected to complete between eight and 10 rigorous inspections a day. That means they give each truck a 360-degree sweep, crawling down into a pit to get underneath, shining flashlights up into critical systems like brakes and load securement, checking the driver's service and medical records and ensuring registra-



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Brakes and lighting are the two most common issues found in routine inspections completed by state compliance specialists

tion is in order.

An inspection can take from 30 minutes to an hour depending on what they find and how long it takes to discuss with the driver what needs to be fixed.

Lights and brakes

According to ODOT data, the most common issues inspectors catch are improper lights and brake problems. Those account for nearly half the violations cited by inspectors.

Some violations are considered critical enough to put a truck or driver temporarily out of service, meaning the problem either has to be fixed on the spot, the truck towed or escorted to a mechanic. Those include any mechanical or load tie-down problems determined likely to cause an accident or breakdown.

Those account for 23% of all violations issued by the Motor Carrier Division, slightly higher than the national average of 20%.

Driver violations severe enough to force them off the road, such as driving over the allotted 11-hours in a 24-hour period or failing to maintain a commercial driver's license, account for 14% of all out-of-service violations.

"Motor Carrier has had a very strong performance for a long time, and we take accidents incredibly serious," Brown said. "It's one of the things that drew me to this job is the ability to prevent people from getting hurt."

But an increasing number of trucks and

the same number of inspectors each year means the Motor Carrier Division heavily relies on technology to make sure they're catching those factors that could cause a crash.

According to Brown, data from ODOT's Crash Analysis Reporting Unit shows that in many cases, driver behavior — speeding, following too close, improper lane change, failing to yield, inattention — accounts for a majority of the truck at-fault crashes throughout that state.

The division relies heavily on the Oregon State Police to catch problems. Many state troopers are trained to inspect trucks, often done on the side of a highway.

Troopers also keep an eye out for impaired truck drivers. In 2016, the most recent year data is available, 90 drivers were caught under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Inspections, however, don't always result in citations, according to Brown. In fact, compliance specialists are inclined to use inspections as teachable moments so drivers learn what they need to fix or how to prevent issues from recurring.

"I encourage all of my folks when they're doing inspections, whether it's a driver from Oregon, Nebraska, Maine or California, to give them their business card so they contact them if they have questions," Brown said. "The more informed everyone is out there the better."

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