



Noah Berger/AP Photo

Trucks line up to enter a Port of Oakland shipping terminal in Oakland in November.

US to allow young semitruck drivers in test program

Aimed at reducing supply chain backlogs

By TOM KRISHER
Associated Press

DETROIT — The federal government is moving forward with a plan to let teenagers drive big rigs from state to state in a test program.

Currently, truckers who cross state lines must be at least 21 years old, but an apprenticeship program required by Congress to help ease supply chain backlogs would let 18-to-20-year-old truckers drive outside their home states.

The pilot program, detailed Thursday in a proposed regulation from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, would screen the teens, barring any with driving-while-impaired violations or traffic tickets for causing a crash.

But safety advocates say the program runs counter to data showing that younger drivers get in more crashes than older ones.

They say it's unwise to let teenage drivers be responsible for rigs that can weigh 80,000 pounds and cause catastrophic damage when they hit lighter vehicles.

The apprenticeship pilot program was required by Congress as part of the infrastructure bill signed into law Nov. 15. It requires the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, which is part of the Transportation Department, to start the program within 60 days.

The American Trucking Associations, a large industry trade group, supports the measure as a way to help with a shortage of drivers. The group estimates that the nation is running over 80,000 drivers short of the number it needs, as demand to move freight reaches historic highs.

Under the apprenticeship, younger drivers can cross state lines during 120-hour and 280-hour probationary periods, as long as an experienced driver is in the passenger seat. Trucks used in the program have to have an electronic braking crash mitigation system, a forward facing video camera, and their speeds must be limited to 65 mph.

After probation, they can drive on their own, but companies have to monitor their performance until they are 21. No more than 3,000 apprentices can take part in the training at any given time.

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration must reach out to carriers with excellent safety records to take part in the program, according to the Transportation Department.

The program will run for up to three years, and the motor carrier agency has to turn in a report to Congress analyzing the safety record of the teen drivers and making a recommendation on whether the younger drivers are as safe as those 21 or older. Congress could expand the program with new laws.

The test is part of a broader set of measures from the Biden administration to deal with the trucker shortage and improve working conditions for truck drivers.

In a statement, Nick Geale, vice president of workforce safety for the trucking associations, noted 49 states and Washington, D.C., already allow drivers under 21 to

drive semis, but they can't pick up a load just across a state line.

"This program creates a rigorous safety training program, requiring an additional 400 hours of advanced safety training, in which participants are evaluated against specific performance benchmarks," Geale said. The program will ensure that the industry has enough drivers to meet growing freight demands, he said.

But Peter Kurdock, general counsel for Advocates for Highway & Auto Safety, said federal data shows that younger drivers have far higher crash rates than older ones. "This is no surprise to any American who drives a vehicle," he said.

Putting them behind the wheel of trucks that can weigh up to 40 tons when loaded increases the possibility of mass casualty crashes, he said.

Kurdock said the trucking industry has wanted younger drivers for years and used supply chain issues to get it into the infrastructure bill. He fears the industry will use skewed data from the program to push for teenage truckers nationwide.

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