



GEORGE PLAVERN/CAPITAL PRESS

Harold Worth, an instructor and assistant manager at Western Pacific Trucking School, guides Jason Nord during a driving exercise.

Driver shortage frustrates trucking industry

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**
Capital Press

Jason Nord poked his head out the window of a hulking Freightliner 18-wheeler as he practiced backing the rig between rows of orange cones at the Western Pacific Truck School in Portland.

The exercise required the rookie driver to use skillful maneuvers to coax the truck and its trailer into a slot that simulated a warehouse loading dock. One by one, students took their turn behind the wheel while instructors on the ground offered guidance.

After previously working in construction, Nord, 41, said he can make more money as a trucker. He enrolled in the school to get the hands-on experience and training necessary to apply for his commercial driver's license.

"Everybody knows we're short truck drivers,"

Nord said of the industry.

For years, the trucking industry has suffered a debilitating shortage of drivers. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, that shortage has mushroomed into a crisis. The American Trucking Association estimates the driver shortage peaked this year at 81,000 — up from 51,000 pre-pandemic.

With fewer trucks on the road and port bottlenecks plaguing the supply chain, agricultural producers and exporters face spiraling transportation costs.

Sara Arsenault, director of federal policy at the California Farm Bureau, said exports that once cost \$2,500 to \$5,000 per container to ship overseas are now \$12,000 to \$30,000 per container. Increasingly, agricultural exports are being left behind as ocean carriers send empty containers back to Asia, where they are loaded with more lucrative U.S. imports.

The setbacks are vexing, Arsenault said. In one

case, she said a producer was forced to make 12 trips delivering a shipment of dried fruit from the Central Valley to the Port of Oakland due to scheduling that can change suddenly and without warning.

"Our producers are certainly feeling it," Arsenault said. "We are having huge frustrations and huge concerns."

The truck driver shortage is a major component of the larger crisis, Arsenault said. In addition to a shortage of long-haul truckers traveling between cities, there is a shortage of local delivery drivers and even drivers who handle the chassis that shuttle containers to and from West Coast ports.

Driver shortage

Demand for drivers is so high that some companies are offering signing bonuses of up to \$20,000

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