Why GAO Did This Study

FMCSA's primary mission of reducing crashes, injuries, and fatalities involving large trucks and buses is critical to the safety of our nation's highways. However, with more than 500,000 active motor carriers operating on U.S. roadways, FMCSA must screen, identify, and target its resources toward those carriers presenting the greatest risk for crashing in the future.

FMCSA has recently taken some steps in this direction by, among other actions:

- Establishing its oversight program—the CSA program—based on a data-driven approach for identifying motor carriers at risk of presenting a safety hazard or causing a crash, and

- Establishing a vetting program designed to detect potential "chameleon" carriers—those carriers that have deliberately disguised their identity to evade enforcement actions issued against them.

This testimony provides information on both of these programs, based on two recent GAO reports on the oversight challenges FMCSA faces in identifying high risk motor carriers for intervention (GAO-14-114), and chameleon carriers (GAO-12-364), respectively.

View GAO-15-433T. For more information, contact Susan A. Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

MOTOR CARRIER SAFETY

Improvements to Data-Driven Oversight Could Better Target High Risk Carriers

What GAO Found

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) has taken steps toward better oversight of motor carriers by establishing the Compliance, Safety, Accountability (CSA) and chameleon carrier vetting programs; however, FMCSA could improve its oversight to better target high risk carriers. The CSA program oversees carriers' safety performance through roadside inspections and crash investigations, and issues violations when instances of noncompliance with safety regulations are found. CSA provides FMCSA, state safety authorities, and the industry with valuable information regarding carriers' performance on the road.

A key component of CSA—the Safety Measurement System (SMS)—uses carrier performance data collected from inspections and investigations to calculate safety scores for carriers and identify those at high risk of causing a crash. The program then uses these scores to target high risk carriers for enforcement actions, such as warning letters, additional investigations, or fines. However, GAO's 2014 report identified two major challenges that limit the precision of the SMS scores and confidence that these scores are effectively comparing safety performance across carriers.

First, SMS uses violations of safety-related regulations to calculate a score, but GAO found that most of these regulations were violated too infrequently to determine whether they were accurate predictors of crash risk. Second, most carriers lacked sufficient data from inspections and violations to ensure that a carrier's SMS score could be reliably compared with scores for other carriers. GAO concluded that these challenges raise questions about whether FMCSA is able to identify and target the carriers at highest risk for crashing in the future. To address these challenges, GAO recommended, among other things, that FMCSA revise the SMS methodology to better account for limitations in available information when drawing comparisons of safety performance across carriers. FMCSA did not concur with GAO's recommendation to revise the SMS methodology because it believed that SMS sufficiently prioritized carriers for intervention. Therefore, FMCSA has not taken any actions.

GAO continues to believe that a data-driven, risk-based approach holds promise, and efforts to improve FMCSA's oversight could allow it to more effectively target its resources toward the highest risk carriers, and better meet its mission of reducing the overall crashes, injuries, and fatalities involving motor carriers.

GAO's 2012 report found that FMCSA examined only passenger and household goods carriers as part of its chameleon carrier vetting program for new applicants. GAO found that by modifying FMCSA's vetting program, FMCSA could expand its examinations of newly registered carriers to include all types of carriers, including freight carriers, using few additional staff resources. GAO recommended that FMCSA develop, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of a data-driven, risk-based vetting methodology to target carriers with chameleon attributes. FMCSA concurred with GAO's recommendation and has taken actions to address these recommendations.

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