

Highlights of GAO-11-198, a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

January 2011

COMMERCIAL MOTOR CARRIERS

More Could Be Done to Determine Impact of Excessive Loading and Unloading Wait Times on Hours of Service Violations

Why GAO Did This Study

The interstate commercial motor carrier industry moves thousands of truckloads of goods every day, and any disruption in one truckload's delivery schedule can have a ripple effect on others. Some waiting time at shipping and receiving facilities—commonly referred to as detention time—is to be expected in this complex environment. However, excessive detention time could impact the ability of drivers to perform within federal hours of service safety regulations, which limit duty hours and are enforced by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA).

This report discusses: (1) How regularly do truck drivers experience detention time and what factors contribute to detention time? (2) How does detention time affect the commercial freight vehicle industry? (3) What federal actions, if any, could be taken to address detention time issues? GAO analyzed federal and industry studies and interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of truck drivers, as well as other industry stakeholders and FMCSA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FMCSA examine the extent to which detention time contributes to hours of service violations in its future studies on driver fatigue and detention time. We provided a draft of this report to DOT for review. DOT officials provided technical comments, which we incorporated into the report, as appropriate.

View GAO-11-198 or key components. For more information, contact Susan Fleming, 202-512-2834, flemings@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

While there are no industry-wide data on the occurrence of detention time, GAO interviews with over 300 truck drivers and a number of industry representatives and motor carrier officials indicate that detention time occurs with some regularity and for a variety of reasons. About 59 percent of interviewed drivers reported experiencing detention time in the past 2 weeks and over two-thirds reported experiencing detention time within the last month. Drivers cited several factors that contribute to detention time. About 43 percent of drivers identified limitations in facilities, such as the lack of sufficient loading and unloading equipment or staff. These limitations can occur when facilities overschedule appointments, creating a backlog of vehicles. Another factor cited by about 39 percent of drivers was the product not being ready for shipment. Other factors include poor service provided by facility staff, facility scheduling practices that may encourage drivers to line up hours before the facility opens, and factors not under the control of the facility, such as drivers filing paperwork incorrectly. Some facilities are taking steps to address these factors, such as using appointment times.

Detention time can result in reduced driving time and lost revenue for drivers and carriers. For those drivers that reported previously experiencing detention time, about 80 percent reported that detention time impacts their ability to meet federal hours of service safety requirements—a maximum of 14 hours on duty each day, including up to 11 hours of driving—by reducing their available driving time. About 65 percent of drivers reported lost revenue as a result of detention time from either missing an opportunity to secure another load or paying late fees to the shipper. Some practices can mitigate these economic impacts, such as charging detention time fees and developing relationships with facilities so drivers become familiar with a facility's process. According to industry representatives, carrier companies are better positioned than independent owner operators to use such practices and are better able to handle logistical challenges that may result from detention time.

While FMCSA collects data from drivers during roadside inspections, which provide information on the number of hours of service violations, the agency currently does not collect—nor is it required to collect—information to assess the extent to which detention time contributes to these violations. Agency officials stated that FMCSA does not identify the factors that contribute to hours of service violations, and detention time could be just one of many factors. To date, FMCSA research has focused on an overview of freight movement, but not the extent to which detention time occurs or how it may impact hours of service violations. FMCSA plans to conduct a 2012 study to better understand the extent to which detention time occurs. Obtaining a clearer industry-wide picture about how detention time contributes to hours of service violations could help FMCSA determine whether additional federal action might be warranted. However, any additional federal actions to address issues associated with detention time beyond hours of service would require careful consideration to determine if any unintended consequences may flow from federal action to regulate detention time.