

the big picture

The Other Side of Speed Debate

RICK CRAIG • GUEST COLUMNIST

Proponents of a government-mandated speed limiter setting on heavy duty trucks have been hawking the idea as a cure-all to improve highway safety, save fuel and protect the environment. The debate has been under way for some time in both Canada and the U.S., legislatively in Ontario and Quebec, and on a national level within the regulatory process in the U.S.

But the experts tell a much different story than the big carrier interests behind this ill-conceived effort.

Take safety. Instead of improving safety, speed limiters set at the proposed levels (the equivalent of about 65 mph north of the border and 68 mph to the south) will make our highways an even more dangerous place for all highway users. Limiting the maximum speed of trucks to a speed lower than the posted speed limit increases vehicle interaction. Studies too numerous to cite show that the resulting interaction between faster- and slower-moving vehicles on the same roadway increases the chance for accidents, especially side-swipe and rear-end crashes.

Stephen Johnson, professor of industrial engineering with the Mack Blackwell National Rural Transportation Study Center at the University of Arkansas, sums it up when he concludes it is logical that the safest speed would be for all vehicles to travel at exactly the same speed.

The U.S. Department of Transportation says the number of speed-related fatalities is the highest on arterial roads, followed by local/collector roads and finally interstates. They report that 74.1 percent of truck-involved fatal crashes occur on non-interstates – where speed limits are much lower than the proposed speed limiter setting. Furthermore, exceeding the posted speed limit is not the culprit. The feds say zero percent of rural interstate and only 2.8 percent of all other roadway truck-related fatalities occur because of speeding. The stats show that driving too fast for conditions – not exceeding the speed limit – is the problem. An arbitrarily mandated speed limiter setting will not remedy that.

Slowing down will save fuel and provide a corre-



Put good drivers
in trucks, not
speed limiters.

sponding reduction in engine emissions, right?

Not always. Some proposals call for retrofitting existing trucks with speed limiters. But pulling a random speed setting out of the air and imposing it on existing trucks simply will not work. Today's diesel truck engines are designed for optimum fuel efficiency within a relatively narrow operating range. Fall too far outside that range and fuel efficiency suffers, often to the point of causing frequent shifting.

Another petitioner wants all newly manufactured heavy duty trucks speed-limited at the factory. Specifying other truck components to match the fuel-efficient engine operating range would solve the aforementioned problem.

But for those truck owners who hate speed limiters, this proposal, too, could

backfire. Equipping the truck with bigger tires or a longer-legged rear-end after purchase comes to mind. Or, just keep rebuilding the old smoke-belching engine. That's enough to make the OEMs and environmentalists wring their hands.

Then there's the additional effect on other traffic. Due to a multitude of variables, few speed-limited trucks will be traveling at precisely the same speed, resulting in trucks passing each other slowly over long stretches of highway. Congestion is already bad enough. There are a lot more other vehicles on the road than trucks, and they'll be decelerating and accelerating, often in a rage, sucking up more gas and spitting out more emissions than will be saved by slowing down the big trucks.

Out of all the things that go on or in a truck, the safest and most efficient possible component is a well-trained, experienced driver. Instead of chasing after the newest gadgets and begging the government to solve their recruiting and retention problems, carriers should consider paying and treating drivers better.

Rick Craig is director of regulatory affairs for the Owner Operator Independent Drivers Association.