

Compared to all commercial carriers, log truckers have better safety record

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A truck is loaded with logs. Photo: Larry Mason/University of Washington

A report on the log truck industry just delivered to the state legislature indicates that the number of traffic accidents involving log trucks declined 11 percent while collisions for all commercial trucks increased by 15 percent in Washington between 2004 and 2006.

"This safety record has been built by drivers who have been in the business a long time," says Ken Casavant, Washington State University professor of economics and an author of the report. "A log trucker in this state is generally a seasoned driver with a lot of knowledge. Log

truckers may not know everything about the business side of their work, but they sure know how to run their trucks."

But that safety record could be jeopardized in the future, the report from the University of Washington's College of Forest Resources and WSU's School of Economic Sciences says.

A survey of log truckers in Washington revealed an experienced but aging workforce with an average age of 55 and an average of 27 years experience in log truck operations. Fifty-one percent reported plans to retire or diversify out of the logging industry and nearly everyone surveyed said skilled drivers are harder to find now than 10 years ago. From 1998 to 2006, the number of log trucks registered in Washington declined by 36 percent.

The business side has been tough in recent years. The report found that in 2006, 28 percent of log-trucking companies lost money, 50 percent broke even and 21 percent made a profit. No such figures are available for 2008 but the price of diesel this year has jumped 80 percent, increasing the total cost of operations by 20 percent.

Problems for log haulers could also have implications for Washington's forest industry, which employs 45,000 people and generates \$2 billion in wages and \$16 billion in gross business revenues a year.

"These guys are doing everything they can to make it under difficult circumstances. They're not buying new trucks. They work long hours," says Larry Mason, a researcher with the UW College of Forest Resources and lead author of the report. Concerns about costs and safety, he says, prompted the legislature, led by Sens. James Hargrove and Brian Hatfield, to commission the study.

"Analysis of accident data provided by the Washington State Patrol and

the Washington Department of Transportation for all collisions involving log trucks for years 2002 through 2007 showed no trend of increasing safety hazard to warrant public concern," the report says. A review of Washington Department of Labor and Industries data for on-the-job injuries and fatalities of log truck drivers also showed no trend indicating worsening safety problems.

Of the 129 log truck companies that responded to a survey conducted as part of the investigation, nearly 65 percent are owner-driver operations with a single truck and trailer. In 2006, a trucker on average made \$33,000 a year and worked 69 hours a week.

"These are men and women who have worked all their adult lives in the forest product industry and love being in the trucking business," Casavant says. "Many are like small farmers -- they like to run their own businesses."

Loading logs is often assumed to be the most dangerous part of log truckers' work, Mason says. Loading involves backing trucks up to log landings -- sometimes up steep, winding logging roads slick with mud or snow -- securing loaded logs with cable binders and making one's way along logging roads back to the highway. However, only 11 percent of surveyed log truckers said that was the most dangerous part of their job. The other 89 percent indicated that increasing traffic congestion and worsening road conditions are the biggest dangers they face.

In addition to rising costs, aging drivers and long hours of service, other factors that could affect safety and economic viability include the ongoing effects of deregulation, poor driver recruitment and an influx of out-of-state log trucks, all of which should be monitored, the report says.

"There is ample evidence to suggest that the sustainability of log trucking businesses is in question and such uncertainty is a legitimate

matter for private and public concern," the report says. Changes to business and occupation taxes as well as state-sponsored programs to assist truckers making investments to reduce fuel consumption and pollution were cited as possibilities for relief.

See the report "The Washington Log Trucking Industry: Costs and Safety Analysis" at www.ruraltech.org/pubs/reports...log_trucks/index.asp . Other authors of the report are Bruce Lippke, UW professor of forest resources; Diem Nguyen, WSU research assistant; and Eric Jessup, WSU assistant professor of economics.

Provided by University of Washington

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