

More big trucks mixing with cars worries officials

By Fred Bayles
USA TODAY

Faced with a growing number of tractor-trailer trucks on already crowded roads, state and local highway officials are looking at ways for trucks and cars to better coexist.

Some state are considering truck-only lanes along major interstates. Others are exploring ways to limit truck travel to non-rush hours.

According to a study by The Road Information Project (TRIP), a coalition of transportation groups, the new strategies grow out of concerns about increased danger of crashes between trucks and more-vulnerable cars.

Although truck-related fatalities have dropped nearly 11% since 1990, an average of 4,500 motorists and their passengers lie each year in truck-car accidents. "It's a systemwide prob-

lem," says Leo Penne, a freight expert with the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. "When you have trucks and autos operating on increasingly crowded highways, you're going to see more accidents."

Among the possible solutions being studied:

- Eight states on the Interstate 10 corridor from Florida to Texas are considering adding segregated truck lanes.

- Virginia is looking at a proposal to build truck-only lanes along its 325-mile portion of Interstate 81. The highway was designed for 15% truck traffic; trucks now account for up to 40% of traffic.

- Some Florida cities want to restrict trucks' rush-hour operations. Although trucking officials are tepid about the plan, it may get support if it shows trucks can move more quickly after midnight.

Large-truck fatalities at a glance

Large trucks, with a gross weight of 10,000 pounds or more, make up 4% of all registered vehicles.

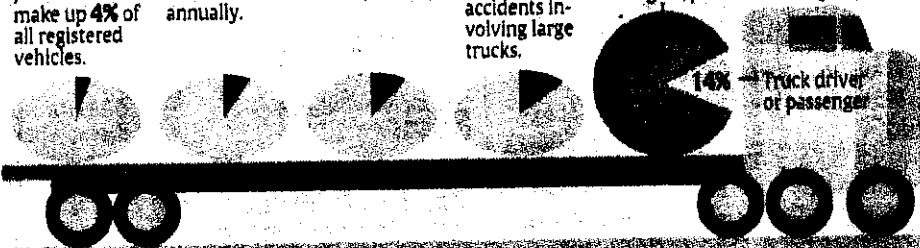
Large trucks account for 7% of all vehicle miles traveled annually.

8% of the vehicles involved in fatal accidents are large trucks

12% of all people killed annually in traffic accidents are in accidents involving large trucks.

Who's killed in accidents involving large trucks (based on 1998-2002):

Other vehicle's driver, passengers, pedestrians, bicyclists



Source: The Road Information Project (TRIP) analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data

By Sam Ward, USA TODAY

► States and counties are building passing lanes, straightening curves and installing better intersection signals and lighting on two-lane rural roads, the scene of a majority of truck-car accidents.

"The point is there isn't enough highway capacity. You have to think about operating it more efficiently," Penne says.

Over the past two decades, the number of long-haul trucks has doubled to 2.6 million. By 2020, the number of trucks and miles traveled by those trucks is expected to double again. In 1998, the Federal Highway Administration estimated about a quarter of interstates in urban areas saw

10,000 or more trucks a day.

By 2020 the highway agency expects that volume to spread to 69% of urban highways.

The increase is a result of a shift in the economy. Retailers from Amazon.com to Wal-Mart have grown dependent on next-day delivery of goods. Manufacturers use the same strategy to avoid storing materials in warehouses.

"Just about every company is using the highway system as a rolling warehouse. It puts a lot of pressure on surface transportation," says Harry Caldwell, former chief of freight policy at the highway agency.

Truck traffic has moved to smaller roads in the suburbs

and beyond as trucking companies and their customers flee urban congestion. This has increased the mix of cars and trucks on the road, raising the risk of accidents, especially on smaller roads where motorists have less margin of error.

Federal data blame car drivers for 90% of fatalities in head-on crashes between trucks and cars. A study by AAA blamed a majority of interstate truck-car accidents on car drivers.

"Motorists make the mistake of behaving the same way around trucks as they do around cars," says Mantill Williams, a spokesman for AAA. "Trucks can't stop on a dime or change lanes quickly."