

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Safety First

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When you Google statistics about truck drivers, the search results are grim:

- “Truck Crash Facts”
- “Most Deadly Occupation: Truck Driver”
- “Truck Driver is One of the Most Deadliest Jobs in the U.S.”
- “Workplace Hazards of Truck Drivers”

Yikes. It makes you wonder why anyone in their right mind would want to drive a truck, regardless of the size.

But, unfortunately, there's some truth to these sensational headlines. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), truck driving is one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States. Their data from 2009 shows that truck drivers experienced 16.8% (303 out of 1,795) of all transportation-related fatalities even though they only make up 1% of the U.S. workforce.

Obviously, there are a number of factors on why any driver, regardless if they're in a car or tractor trailer, gets into an accident: bad weather/road conditions, distractions (like talking on the phone or texting), being under the influence of drugs or alcohol, etc. But the most common issue that many truck drivers deal with is fatigue. The BLS states that truck drivers spend an average of 41.5 hours behind the wheel—that doesn't include when they're actually taking the product out of the truck when they reach their destination.

But it's a valued occupation—one that's often taken for granted. The companies that these men and women drive for are responsible for training them in all of the safety and highway rules in order to avoid becoming a liability, or worse—a statistic.

Following the rules

In 2011, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), which is a branch of the Department of Transportation (DOT), issued new rules for hours of service, which include a stipulation that had never been put in place before—the driver must take a 30-minute break every eight hours of continuous drive time (see

sidebar). These hours-of-service rules apply to any type of commercial property-carrying vehicles (trucks and tractor trailers) and passenger-carrying vehicles (like buses and RVs).



Pictured: Midwest Groundcovers holds an annual Driver Safety Rodeo, when drivers participate in a friendly competition to win gift cards and bragging rights. One of the challenges is to conduct a truck inspection.

Matt Sweeney is the Shipping & Logistics Manager for Midwest Groundcovers in St. Charles, Illinois. He's only been with the company since December, but he has more than 10 years of experience in dealing with federal DOT regulations. Within the last few years, the DOT has been really cracking down on companies that use commercial trucks to deliver their products, especially at the federal level, said Matt.

Midwest Groundcovers has one of the largest fleets in the Chicagoland area for their type of business, which consists of 15 trucks—six tandem axles, five semi tractor-trailers (four of them they lease only during peak shipping season) and four single-axle box trucks. Their plants are shipped to customers around Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan and Indiana, so their drivers do drive some long distances.

Matt said, that according to DOT rules, if the driver is operating a vehicle under 26,000 lbs., he/she does not have to keep a daily log if they're within a 150-air mile radius of their home domicile. A driver operating a vehicle over 26,000 lbs. is limited to a 100-air mile radius before they have to use a daily log.

Safe, not sorry

Regardless of how many trucks and drivers you have, the rules have to be followed. It's even more imperative if you have a very large fleet, like Metrolina. Michael Van Wingerden is in charge of shipping and logistics for both of Metrolina's locations (North and South Carolina), which includes 285 trailers and 300 drivers. Metrolina ships to a wide range of states, with the longest round trip totaling about 1,900 miles.

In February, before the peak of spring shipping, Michael and his team hold a meeting for all of their drivers to go over Metrolina company policies and how to operate their vehicles. They don't focus too much on current and new regulations because their drivers get that training elsewhere.

"All the drivers own their own company or work for someone else that owns the truck they are driving that keep them up to date on the highway rules," Michael explained. "As far as safety, we put things out in our driver lounge as reminders to look out for cars, watch for people when using the liftgate, etc."

Michael said the meeting runs for about two hours and they use that time to show training videos that show the drivers how to do a wide range of topics—from how to use the liftgate to processing a delivery and the paperwork that goes with it to handling the plants and more. (You can see some of them on Metrolina's YouTube channel.)

A few times a year, Midwest Groundcovers does the same thing, holding safety meetings before the start of

each season. They cover all of the topics required by law, said Matt, from safe driving practices to company policies and procedures, and vehicle maintenance.

For the last several years during the fall, Midwest Groundcovers has held their annual Driver Safety Rodeo. Sponsored by the company that leases their trucks, drivers participate in a friendly competition to win gift cards and bragging rights. Each driver is given two different challenges to complete: the first is a truck inspection, where the driver has to identify the issues that were purposely disabled; second, they maneuver around an obstacle course.

Midwest Groundcovers uses the event to make sure their drivers are following best practices and are up to date on their vehicle inspection knowledge, but also to recognize and thank them.

"The guys do a lot of hard work throughout the year," said Matt. "We do go over some safety rules, but it's also a fun day to relax and appreciate them for all of the hard work that they do for us."

As regular drivers on the road, sometimes we think of trucks as gigantic nuisances that slow down traffic. But we take for granted that, if it wasn't for trucks and their drivers, the stores would mostly be empty. According to the American Trucking Association, trucks move about 70% of the nation's freight by weight, so it's vital that the good men and women behind the steering wheels of these vehicles get proper safety training.

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration Hours of Service Rules

(For property-carrying vehicles, finalized December 2011)

- **11-Hour Driving Limit**—May drive a maximum of 11 hours after 10 consecutive hours off duty.
- **14-Hour Limit**—May not drive beyond the 14th consecutive hour after coming on duty, following 10 consecutive hours off duty. Off-duty time does not extend the 14-hour period.
- **Rest Breaks**—May drive only if 8 hours or less have passed since end of driver's last off-duty or sleeper berth period of at least 30 minutes. Does not apply to drivers using either of the short-haul exceptions in 395.1(e). [49 CFR 397.5 mandatory "in attendance" time may be included in break if no other duties performed]
- **60/70-Hour Limit**—May not drive after 60/70 hours on duty in 7/8 consecutive days. A driver may restart a 7/8 consecutive day period after taking 34 or more consecutive hours off duty.
- **Sleeper Berth Provision**—Drivers using the sleeper berth provision must take at least 8 consecutive hours in the sleeper berth, plus a separate 2 consecutive hours either in the sleeper berth, off duty or any combination of the two. **GT**

