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The Lane Ranger; Controversy drives plan for truckers

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The federal government has finally issued proposed new rules governing how long truckers can drive, and the debate is already as hot as asphalt simmering in the summer sun.

The rules --- which now face a 90-day comment period before final rules would be issued --- would allow long-haul truckers to drive 12 hours a day. They also would require 10 consecutive hours off-duty as well as two hours off-duty during the work shift.

Current rules, adopted more than 60 years ago, limit truckers to 10 straight hours on the road. But since only eight hours of rest are required, truckers often legally drive up to 16 hours within a 24-hour period.

By far the most controversial aspect of the proposed new rules is the introduction of technology into the process. Carriers would be required to install electronic monitors --- black boxes, in essence --- that would monitor via satellite truckers' hours on the road.

Some trucking industry veterans admit privately that many drivers have two sets of books --- one that logs their time by DOT rules, and a second that tells the truth. Few deny that abuses of the existing rules are common, and the "black boxes" would figure to make it harder to cheat.

"With mandatory on-board monitoring systems, the government has taken the position that truckers are worthy of a level of scrutiny not applied to convicted felons," said Todd Spencer of the Owner Operator Independent Drivers Association, which is based in Missouri.

The American Trucking Associations, the nation's largest industry group, also opposes the new rules, saying they will require thousands of new drivers and trucks in order to keep current delivery schedules. Largely because of lagging pay and exhausting hours, the industry is already suffering from a chronic shortage of drivers.

Even though Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater claimed the new "science-based" rules would increase safety on the nation's highways, preventing 2,600 crashes and up to 115 fatalities a year, some safety advocates disagree.

"We are stunned that the DOT is proposing a rule that would allow truckers to drive even longer hours than they do under current legal limits," said Daphne Izer, who heads the Maine-based Parents Against Tired Truckers.

Stay tuned. These rules will affect everyone who drives because --- like it or not --- we all share the road.

Viaduct update

The crumbling Depression-era Spring Street viaduct will be rebuilt, but not soon and not by the city of Atlanta.

Frank Danchetz, chief engineer for the state Department of Transportation, said this week the city and the DOT entered into an agreement in March 1999 to allow the DOT to declare Spring a temporary state route so it could manage the project.

Danchetz said DOT agreed to take over the project because the city agreed to commit about \$ 10 million it had earmarked for the viaduct from a 1994 bond referendum to the DOT. The state needed that commitment for matching funds so it could get federal funding for the planned multimodal station in the downtown railroad gulch near the viaduct.

"We can't use our motor fuel dollars for that rail function," said Danchetz, explaining why the DOT needed the money.

Both projects are in the Transportation Improvement Plan prepared by the Atlanta Regional Commission that is currently being considered by the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority. Work cannot proceed on either project until the TIP is approved and federal officials lift Atlanta's Clean Air Act ban on the use of federal highway dollars.

If all that happens, "We would be letting the contract sometime before June 1, 2001," said Danchetz. DOT could possibly begin acquiring right of way and easements for the work within the next few months, he added.

Let's hope the bridge holds up.