

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PROPOSES NEW RULES REGULATING TRUCK DRIVERS' HOURS ON AND OFF THE ROAD; PROPOSAL IS CRITICIZED FROM BOTH TRUCKING INDUSTRY AND HIGHWAY SAFETY ADVOCATES

LINDA WERTHEIMER, host: The federal government is proposing new rules for truck drivers that would allow them to drive more consecutive hours, but would also require them to get more rest. The new regulations are being met with criticism from both the trucking industry and highway safety advocates. Keith Shortall of Maine Public Radio reports.

KEITH SHORTALL reporting: In announcing the proposal, the Clinton administration cites statistics linking fatigued truck drivers to hundreds of fatalities on the nation's highways each year. Truckers are currently allowed to drive 10 straight hours, then must take eight hours off. The new proposal would allow up to 12 consecutive hours behind the wheel, but require 12 hours' rest. It would also mandate installation of electronic monitoring devices to document the number of hours driven.

At Howell's Truck Stop in Kittery, Maine, truckers can refuel their rigs and themselves before heading back out onto the highway. It's also a popular place for drivers like Manuel Velasquez to compare notes on how the federal government regulates their work day.

Mr. MANUEL VELASQUEZ (Truck Driver): That's an issue that's always been here in this industry, and it always will be here, no matter what you do, because there are always going to be drivers that push it to the limit and then some and don't know when to say, 'I'm sleepy,' go to bed.

SHORTALL: Velasquez, a long-haul trucker from Ft. Worth, Texas, is sitting across from driver John Hilton of upstate New York. Hilton generally takes one-day trips in the Northeast. He's only been driving for a year, and he doesn't believe that the log books currently required by the government are effective.

Mr. JOHN HILTON (Truck Driver): And I think there's too many regulations. And like you say, when you're tired, I mean, it don't matter whether you drove 10 hours or two hours. I mean, you're still tired and, you know, you should pull over.

SHORTALL: But safety advocates say new rules are needed, and they don't think the government's proposal goes far enough.

Ms. DAPHNE IZER (Founder, Parents Against Tired Truckers): Twelve hours driving is putting everybody on our nation's highways at risk.

SHORTALL: Daphne Izer founded Parents Against Tired Truckers after her son and three other teen-agers were killed by a trucker who fell asleep on the Maine Turnpike.

Ms. IZER: The risk of crashes go up after eight hours. Studies have proven that. It's just outrageous that they would do something like this.

SHORTALL: In fact, the DOT estimates that the new rules would prevent as many as 2,600 crashes, 3,000 injuries and 115 fatalities each year. The trucking industry is equally displeased with the so-called 12-12 proposal. American Trucking Association spokesman Dave O'Shecky(ph) says the change won't do that much to improve safety on the highways.

Mr. DAVE O'SHECKY (Spokesperson, American Trucking Association): Let's face it, the truck driver fatigue is not a huge problem in the industry. It does play a role. But the department is defining it as a very significant factor in all truck crashes. It is simply not.

SHORTALL: The industry claims it will be forced to place more trucks on the road and that consumers will pay more for goods that arrive in their communities by truck. The ATA wants truckers to rest for 10 hours a day but be allowed to work up to 14 hours. The DOT sees its proposal as an attempt to find the middle of the road.

Ms. JULIE ANNA CIRILLO (Department of Transportation): We've concluded that we've really done a very good job because nobody's very happy with us.

SHORTALL: Julie Anna Cirillo of the DOT says the agency based the proposal on a scientific analysis of safety and productivity in the trucking industry.

Ms. CIRILLO: Productivity stays about the same under the new rules as it does under the old rules, but that safety is greatly enhanced; the quality of life of drivers is greatly enhanced.

SHORTALL: Word of the DOT proposal is just now making its way around truck stops like Howell's. Leon Paine(ph) is getting ready to hit the road for Nevada with a load of paper. But he stops to add his thoughts to the discussion in the TV room. Paine says the tired trucker issue is getting too much attention at the expense of other factors that affect safety. Take, for example, the poor condition of some highways.

Mr. LEON PAINE (Truck Driver): Put them road commissioners in the cab of a truck and let them ride for state line to state line. Try to drink a cup of coffee in there.

Unidentified Truck Driver: On Louisiana on Highway 10 on the bottom, ooh, my Lord.

Mr. PAINE: Well, they straightened up 10 and 20 across Louisiana. But put 'em across 40 across Arkansas. If you drive a truck three years across 40 across Arkansas, I guarantee you, you couldn't sell that truck unless you'd sold it to a logger or a dirt truck company or something like that, 'cause the rivets are shot plumb out of that truck. It's that bad.

SHORTALL: The agency is planning to hold seven public hearings on the proposal throughout the US over the next three months. For National Public Radio, this is Keith Shortall in Portland, Maine.

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WERTHEIMER: Improving the accuracy of the global positioning satellite system--that's coming up on NPR's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED.