You may recall that in January 2010 the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) announced it was banning commercial truck and bus drivers from texting. The ban was enforced based on an interpretation of existing rules. Today, the FMCSA is beginning to make that interim ban permanent through a proposed rule that will make this prohibition stronger and more durable.

FMCSA Administrator Anne Ferro noted: “We are committed to using every resource available to eliminate the dangers of distracted driving. And this rulemaking to prohibit texting by interstate commercial truck and bus drivers reinforces that commitment.”

Research by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration shows that in 2008 alone, nearly 6,000 people were killed and more than a half million people were injured in crashes involving a distracted driver nationwide. Almost 20 percent of all crashes that same year involved some type of distraction.

But those who text while driving are 20 times likely to get in an accident than non-distracted drivers. FMCSA’s research shows that drivers who send and receive text messages take their eyes off the road for an average of 4.6 seconds out of every 6 seconds while texting. At 55 miles per hour, that 4.6 seconds is enough time to travel the length of an entire football field plus both end zones.

DOT Sets Texting Ban on Commercial Trucks and Bus Drivers

Detour Ahead

An estimated 20% of the National Highway System is under construction during peak construction periods in a normal year, but now with government stimulus funds being used for that purpose, detours will occur even more often. Detours may be temporary and the end results are improved roadways, but they can still cost you time and money. The problem with detours is that they can take you on roadways that might not be ideal for a large commercial motor vehicle.

Plan trips ahead of time to alleviate travel stress:
- Check for detour and road closure information. The Federal Highway Administration’s website at http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/trafficinfo/index.htm has updated detour and road closure information by state. Also check online at your state’s Department of Transportation.

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It is important for drivers to pay attention to where they are and know their vehicle limitations. Issues to watch for on a detour include:

- Narrow roadways with soft shoulders
- Overpass or bridge heights that drivers need to pass under.

Don’t rely on your Global Positioning System (GPS). Check with your dispatcher on routes appropriate to your vehicle size and height. Don’t expect a GPS device to take into account hazardous material routing.

Avoid peak weekend travel hours between 1 pm and 8 pm Fridays and Sundays.

Road weight limitations
- Detours through residential areas that may not permit the transportation of hazardous materials
- Tight turns that could cause a low speed rollover

Planning ahead can help drivers to avoid frustration and maintain schedules.
We are all aware of the cost of fueling and maintaining a vehicle. As a driver, there are things that you can do when operating a vehicle to help reduce those costs. By making sure the vehicle you operate is in good condition and operating it in a manner that gets peak performance, you can help to extend its life, conserve on fuel costs, and reduce emissions.

Keep Your Vehicle in Good Condition

Make sure your vehicle is in good condition by performing a proper pre-trip inspection:

- Check for broken, missing, or damaged parts and make sure parts are repaired or replaced. Damaged equipment operates less efficiently and may emit more harmful emissions.
- Check the tires for any cuts and bulges. Are tire treads showing uneven wear? This could indicate improper alignment or the need for new tires.
- Check tire pressure. Properly inflated tires will travel more smoothly and increase fuel efficiency.
- Check to be sure both the service brakes and the parking brakes are working properly.
- Check the hydraulic system and under your vehicle to be sure there no leaks.
- Check the engine oil level to be sure it is correct. Inspect plugs and filter caps for possible leaks.
- Check the coolant level. Be aware that this level might fluctuate depending on whether the engine is hot or cold.
- Check the belts and hoses for damage, looseness, and excessive wear. Damaged or broken belts and hoses can harm the engine and cause fluids to leak onto the ground.
- Check the suspension, including springs, hangars, and U-bolts. Improper suspension can increase wear and tear on your vehicle.

Drive in the Right Gear

Practice some fuel-saving techniques to save fuel. On hills, don’t accelerate to gain speed to “make it” to the top of the hill. Instead, shift down to the gear you think you will need to be in before you start up the hill. Only accelerate as needed to maintain the speed you are at in that gear. When you reach the top of the incline, upshift your gear, and let gravity take the weight of your vehicle down the hill. Accelerate only as needed to attain the speed you want.

Minimize Fuel Wasted in Idling

Idling is an easy way to waste fuel. A typical heavy-duty truck can burn approximately one gallon of diesel fuel for each hour it idles, generating significant amounts of pollution, wasting fuel, and causing excessive engine wear. Start to drive when you start up the vehicle because most engines will warm up more quickly while in operation than sitting in park to warm up. Shut it off as soon as you finish your tasks and are parked. Restarting an engine will take less fuel and cause fewer emissions than leaving an engine idling for 10 or 15 minutes.

Drive Smoothly

Start, stop, and turn smoothly to reduce wear and tear on your equipment. Jerking the wheel in turns, braking hard, and hitting the accelerator hard and fast consumes more fuel then taking things more smoothly. Imagine that you had a hot beverage in a cup holder right next to you. If you turn too sharply, or start or stop too quickly, you could end up with a spilled drink.

Performing inspections and driving more carefully can pay off in fuel savings, increased life expectancy of your vehicle, and a safer drive. Do your part to conserve fuel and reduce operating costs!
Unsafe Driving - A BASIC to Avoid

A violation in the Unsafe Driving BASIC is one that the FMCSA believes the driver could have avoided. The most common unsafe driving violations are ranked as follows:

1. Speeding.
2. Failure to obey a traffic control device.
3. Following too close.
4. Improper lane change.
5. CMV with radar detector.
6. Having an unauthorized passenger on board.

All of these violations are, in most all cases, the result of the driver’s failure to abide by the rules.

If a violation related to the Unsafe Driving BASIC is noted on a roadside inspection report, the violation will be placed in the driver’s data and will remain there for 3 years. What may seem unfair to some is that the motor carrier will also suffer the consequences of the driver’s violation in this BASIC.

Unsafe Driving violations will be placed in the carrier’s data as well and will remain there for 2 years!

So, why is it that the carrier should be penalized when their driver was clearly identified as the responsible party? The reason is that motor carriers have always been held responsible for any violations that occur under their DOT number. This means that they are also held responsible for the drivers who operate under their DOT number, as they (the motor carrier) hired (or leased) the driver to operate their vehicle.

There is an adage when it comes to drivers, which says, “Companies hire their own problems!” Now more than ever, it is critical that carriers establish hiring standards and screen driver-applicants thoroughly. This should include more than simply requesting the required MVR and safety performance history checks. It should also include utilizing the new Pre-employment Screening Process (PSP), which will show the driver-applicant’s history of violations in this BASIC. Hiring a driver with a history of speeding violations can be a recipe for disaster!

As for current drivers who are not operating a vehicle safely and compliantly, the carrier must have a mechanism in place to retrain the driver before the violations begin to pour in. This retraining could follow the typical model of counsel, retrain, retest, and then track the driver’s improvement.

The Unsafe Driving BASIC in the CSA program uses moving and other traffic violations to determine the safety habits of not only the driver, but also of the motor carrier using the driver. The best means by which the carrier can avoid violations in this BASIC is to use good drivers, train them, stay in communication with them, track their activities, and then retrain them again if necessary.