



TRUCKING SAFETY FACTS QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Organizations advocating transportation safety have publicized claims, on behalf of accident victims, that increasing truck weight inherently increases risks to highway safety.

Actually, the effect of consolidating loads and allowing more heavy truck traffic onto the U.S. Interstate System will have the entirely opposite effect. This Q&A presents trucking's actual safety record and trends associated with truck weight increases.

What is the safety record of heavy trucks?

Heavy trucks have a safety record of continuous improvement since the mid-1980s, with the introduction of Commercial Drivers Licenses (and driver training requirements), improved trucking safety technology, and most recently with adoption of revised Hours-Of-Service rules for drivers. The rate of truck-related fatalities on U.S. roads has declined from 2.74 fatalities per 100 million truck-miles in 1998 to 2.12 fatalities per 100 million truck-miles in 2007, the most recent year for which statistics have been compiled. *That is a 22% decline in the rate of fatalities in a decade.*

Is it true that the annual total of truck fatalities has remained “about 5,000” for the past decade?

As the U.S. economy and population have grown, the volume of truck traffic has increased in proportion. According to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, from 1986 to 2006, there has been a 49% increase in registered large trucks and a 76% increase in the miles they have traveled. Even so, the absolute number of large trucks involved in fatal crashes during that period declined by 7% during that same period. (<http://ai.fmcsa.dot.gov/CarrierResearchResults/PDFs/LargeTruckCrashFacts2006.pdf>).

From 2006 to 2007, the most recent one-year period for which FMCSA data are available, the number of truck-related fatalities declined from 5,027 in 2006 to 4,808 in 2007.

Aren't big trucks more difficult to control than small trucks are?

Not intrinsically. Obviously, a heavier truck has more inertia, but a heavier truck with additional road contact—more axles and tires—also has more braking capacity. In the case of an 80,000-pound, 5-axle truck compared to a 97,000-pound, 6-axle truck, braking distances are equivalent.

All trucks need skilled, alert drivers, familiar with the handling features of their particular vehicles. Revised federal Hours-Of-Service rules have already been associated with the dramatic 2007 decline in fatal truck-related accidents; stringent rules and strong penalties regulate drivers' use of alcohol or drugs; and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's driver training requirements have had a great effect on professionalizing the driver workforce.

Are you saying that big trucks are safer than small trucks?

Three large trucks are safer than four small trucks. Three 97,000-pound trucks can do the work of four 80,000-pound trucks. Consolidating freight on fewer trucks, in essence, removes opportunities for collisions between trucks and passenger vehicles. Although the large majority (approximately 75%, according to FMCSA accident data) of collisions between trucks and passenger cars are not the truck driver's fault, nonetheless, removing trucks from the road removes them from risk of involvement in accidents, regardless of whether an accident is due to the truck driver's error or someone else's.

In January 2009, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation published a report concluding that if Wisconsin had adopted a six-axle, 97,000-pound configuration in 2006, there would have been 90 fewer heavy truck-related accidents on Wisconsin highways that year. (Visit www.topslab.wisc.edu/workgroups/wtsws.html, and download "Report to Legislature, 01/01/2009.")

Is there any empirical evidence to support the relationship of consolidated freight and lower fatalities?

There is. In 2001, the United Kingdom raised its highways' gross vehicle weight limit from 90,000 to 97,000 pounds for six-axle vehicles, and the results were just as predicted: an immediate drop in total vehicle-miles-traveled and a steady decline in the number of truck-car collisions and passenger fatalities, even as total tons of freight shipped increased. See http://ag-haul.org/uk_report.html

"Every time we've increased truck weights, the total number of trucks has increased, anyway," hasn't it?

This proposition assumes a causal relationship—in which improvements to trucking efficiency simply function to divert traffic from rail onto the road network.

In fact, the increase in the number of trucks on the road in the past few decades has tracked (1) growth in the larger economy and (2) the increasing decentralization in manufacturing. With manufacturing no longer concentrated in a few hubs as it was during the period of rail's rapid growth, trucking's position has grown more rapidly than rail's has. The U.S. economy depends on trucking.

As long as the manufacturing economy grows, and the U.S. maintains a decentralized manufacturing and consumption base, trucking will grow, generating the tax revenues needed for appropriate road infrastructure to support it.

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