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There are eight major research and technology focus areas: regulatory evaluation and reform; compliance and enforcement; commercial driver performance enhancement; driver alertness and fatigue; driver physical qualifications; car-truck proximity; HAZMAT safety and cargo tank integrity; and crash causation and profiling.

*Commercial driver performance enhancement* includes research on driver recruiting, selection, training, testing, licensing, and safety performance management.



Office of Motor Carrier Research and Standards  
400 Seventh Street, SW  
HMCS-30; Room 3107  
Washington, DC 20590

# Commercial Driver's License Effectiveness Study

## Introduction

Congress enacted the Commercial Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1986 (CMVSA) to improve the safety of commercial motor vehicle (CMV) operations throughout the country. With this legislation, Congress also established the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) program to ensure that only one CDL is issued to an individual and that all driving convictions are reported to the licensing State and made part of a driver's record.

Prior to the CDL program, many States did not have a classified license system and any person licensed to drive an automobile could also legally drive a CMV. Even in States that did have a classified licensing system, driver's skills were not necessarily tested in a representative CMV. As a result, many drivers were operating vehicles that they may not have been qualified to drive. In addition, many drivers were able to obtain licenses from multiple States, allowing them to hide or spread convictions among several driving records.

The Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Office of Motor Carrier and Highway Safety (OMCHS) initiated this CDL Effectiveness Study to examine the implementation of the CDL program and to assess its effectiveness and benefits to highway safety. The study has three volumes: Volume I provides an executive summary; Volume II is the technical report; and Volume III contains the data collection tools and compiled results developed for the study and an appendix of references. This tech brief summarizes the three volumes.

## Purpose

The principal purpose of this study was to provide the FHWA with measures to evaluate and assess if the CDL program has been effective in:

- addressing problems that led to the enactment of the CMVSA; and
- reducing the incidence of CMV crashes.

## Methodology

The study considered the intent of the CDL program from the perspectives of different stakeholders. The CDL Effectiveness Technical Review Panel of federal and state practitioners, along with staff from the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) and AAMVANet, Inc., participated in developing the components to be used in evaluating the CDL program.

The study identified five short-term objective areas that the provisions of the CMVSA were intended to address:



***Prior to the Commercial Driver's License Program, a person licensed to drive an automobile in most States could legally operate a CMV, without having his skills tested in a representative vehicle. Now, CMV drivers must pass knowledge and skills tests related to the type of vehicle to be operated.***

- Limiting each CMV operator to one CDL.
- Implementing standard CDL testing and licensing practices.
- Harmonizing the States' laws and adjudication practices regarding the treatment of a driver convicted of one set of the violations listed in the CMVSA.
- Consolidating all CMVSA convictions in one comprehensive record maintained by the current licensing State.
- Supporting the needs of law enforcement through the adoption of license standards, harmonized laws, and consolidated records, to enable law enforcement officers to make knowledgeable decisions about the legality of CMV operators.

If the program accomplished these objectives, it would be reasonable to conclude there had been positive movement toward improving highway safety by reducing the incidence of CMV crashes.

In addition, the FHWA requested the study include development of recommendations to address any areas of concern, if any such area was identified. Researchers were to include recommendations that would enhance program effectiveness or efficiency.

## Findings

### CDL Program — State Implementation

The CDL program has been in full operation for 5 years, and has made significant progress toward resolving the preexisting safety problems that led to the enactment of the CMVSA in 1986. The study final report contains 48 conclusions and 31 recommendations regarding the States' implementation of the CDL program. Some findings included:

- The incidence of CDL holders possessing multiple licenses of any type has been vastly reduced. By limiting CMV operators to one license, the CDL program has limited the practice of spreading convictions among driver records maintained by multiple States.
- The testing requirements associated with obtaining a CDL eliminated many problem drivers who had been operating CMVs. Motor carriers and CMV drivers stated that, in many cases, drivers who retired or found other work when the CDL program was implemented were considered poor or dangerous drivers.
- State CDL compliance reviews conducted by the FHWA indicated that all States revised their laws to harmonize them with the set of violations listed in

the CMVSA. The harmonization effort accomplished legal equivalency among the States concerning convictions for CMVSA violations.

- The States have essentially accomplished the objective of maintaining a single record of all CMVSA convictions. This has been effective in identifying CMV operators with multiple convictions and in allowing the States to impose disqualification penalties.
- Most officers at the state level have received sufficient training and information so that they are familiar with CDL requirements and know which types of vehicles require a CDL and endorsements. County and municipal officers, however, are generally less trained.

### CDL Program — National Implementation

This study also examined the effectiveness of the CDL program as implemented on a national level. Researchers found:

- States are not uniform in the administration and operation of the States' segment of the national CDL program. Some of the variation between States can be traced to the lack of written guidelines for the program; judges, prosecutors and law enforcement officials may not understand CMV violations to be materially different from other traffic violations. States do exchange information by way of the Commercial Driver's License Information System

(CDLIS), a clearinghouse of information related to all CDL holders.

- A formal process for the ongoing review of the States' operation of their segments of the CDL program has not been implemented on the national level. While helpful, the recently instituted FHWA/AAMVA quarterly review of the CDLIS central site statistics is insufficient for a program as large and as complex as the CDL program. A more detailed process of oversight and management of States' activities may be required at the federal level.
- The trucking industry was actively involved with government in the initial CDL effort to get CMV drivers retrained and CDL tested. The CDL program was the catalyst that caused many motor carriers to implement or strengthen safety departments and employee training programs. However, once the effort to relicense existing CMV drivers was completed, industry and government seemed less united in their activities. Although both remain concerned about driver safety, the coordination and common focus is no longer so apparent.

### Recommendations

This study suggests that the FHWA develop a formal process for ongoing review, assessment, correction, and continuous improvement of the States'



***The CDL program has resulted in the disqualification of an estimated 871,000 CMV operators from April 1992 through June 1996. With multiple licenses, many of these drivers would have escaped detection by States, law enforcement officials, and employers.***

## Researcher

This study was performed by TML Information Services, Inc., 116-55 Queens Blvd., Forest Hills, NY 11375, with assistance from AAMVAnet. Contract No. DTFH61-95-X-00029.

## Distribution

This Tech Brief is being distributed according to a standard distribution. Direct distribution is being made to the Resource Centers and Divisions.

## Availability

Volumes I (PB99-139792) and II (PB99-139800) of the study final report are available from the National Technical Information Service, Telephone: (703) 605-6000.

## Key Words

commercial motor vehicle, Commercial Driver's License, compliance, enforcement, Commercial Driver's License Information System, licensing agency, technical review panel, Commercial Motor Vehicle Safety Act, harmonization.

## Notice

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implementation of the CDL program. OMCHS should consider training staff in its national, regional, and state offices as CDL program specialists to provide ongoing oversight and assistance to the States. The implementation of a peer review process, with state and federal participants, could provide the functional forum for States to analyze each other's CDL program, offer feedback and improve operations.

Researchers recommend that the FHWA implement periodic measurement of each State's compliance with the *CDLIS System Specifications* and *CDLIS State Procedures*. Similar manuals for other areas of the CDL program should be developed. The study also advises the FHWA to raise the minimum standards for CDL testing. The current federal minimum standards for CDL are less stringent than testing implemented by most States.

The study urges the FHWA to seek the necessary authority to establish a range of gradual sanctions for use with States that have a problem complying with program requirements. It recommends that the FHWA seek discretionary authority for the use of each additional sanction to allow the agency to respond appropriately to each individual case.

Finally, this research suggests that the FHWA explore alternatives to expand the trucking industry's active participation in the CDL program in order to develop a joint industry and government plan to address CMV operators who continue to operate during a disqualification period.