

Is technology the answer to getting tired truckers off the road?

By **Andrea Rumbaugh** | December 20, 2017 | Updated: December 21, 2017 9:39am

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Photo: Michael Wyke, Freelance

IMAGE 1 OF 7

Jurgen Morales installs an electronic logging device that tracks driver hours into the cab of a semi-truck at Transafe in Houston, TX, Dec. 15, 2017. A pigtail plug device connects to a terminal under the dash ... [more](#)

Business could hardly be better for Gorilla Safety. In less than a year, the Houston software company has nearly quadrupled its workforce, ballooning from 14 to 54 employees.

Propelling this growth is a new federal regulation requiring truck drivers to install an electronic device that tracks the number of hours they are behind the wheel. The regulations went into effect this week, but demand for the Gorilla software that runs the electronic device has hardly slowed.

"We continue to bring on more and more people," co-founder and president Tommy Johnson said. "The phones are going crazy."

The new rules aim to improve highway safety by keeping tired commercial truck drivers off

the road, but they have proved controversial in the industry. Drivers are prohibited from working more than 14 hours in a day or driving more than 11 hours.

Until now, drivers have only been required to keep paper logs, which make it easier to fudge the occasional 15 minutes or outright lie about hours behind the wheel. Proponents say the devices, called ELDs, for electronic logging device, will eliminate cheating and reduce fatigued driving. Opponents, however, say it's

per vehicle- on drivers. Some also argue that to-the-minute enforcement of driving limits enabled by the technology lacks flexibility, which could ultimately make the roads more dangerous.

Driving while fatigued is the cause of only a small portion of truck accidents; the most common causes are speeding and distraction, such as using a cellphone. Of the nearly 4,000 drivers of large trucks involved in fatal crashes in 2015, just 55 were reported as fatigued, according to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

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"Just because it's not a major cause doesn't mean it's not a cause worth addressing," said Sean McNally, spokesman for the American Trucking Associations.

A 2014 federal report from that group found that trucks equipped with electronic hours-of-service recorders had an 11.7 percent lower total crash rate. Noël Perry, partner and transportation economist at freight transportation forecasting company FTR Transportation Intelligence, argues that ELDs would become an industry standard even without the federal mandate because it provides valuable data to trucking companies.

Trucking companies, for instance, now know which customers make drivers wait hours before picking up a load. They can use this data to push for higher rates or to find new, more time-conscious customers.

"ELDs are becoming very rapidly a cost of doing business," Perry said. "A necessary part, a very important part of a trucker's equipment."

Ultimately, he believes ELDs will be connected throughout the entire supply chain - a feat Gorilla Safety is already working on.

In the short term, analysts and trucking companies expect the ELDs to reduce efficiency, as drivers adjust to the technology and lose time on the road that they might have squeezed in with paper logs. This will probably mean higher rates for truck companies' customers.

Daseke, an Addison company with more than 5,000 flatbed trucks, also expects ELDs to

contribute to higher rates. The company phased in ELDs over the past several years and found that initially drivers' efficiency dropped by 5 to 8 percent.

But over the long term, company officials said, insights gained from the data could improve operations. "If you do it right ... you have a more efficient company because you have more information," said Scott Wheeler, executive vice president and corporate chief financial officer.

But Danny Schnautz, vice president of Pasadena-based Clark Freight Lines, which has 177 trucks in its fleet, said the devices make the limits on driving hours too tight. Already unhappy with the hours of service laws, Schnautz said the ELDs add a new layer of rigidity. Paper logs allowed drivers to round to the nearest 15 minutes.

Schnautz provided a few examples on how ELDs could affect drivers. In one scenario, Schnautz said, a driver might not feel well and want to take a quick nap. The hours of service rule, now enforced more strictly by the ELDs, doesn't allow drivers to stop their clock to nap for a few hours. Sick drivers may feel pressured to keep driving.

ELDs, he added, can't tell if drivers begin their shifts tired. It simply follows a clock and assumes drivers are good during that period.

Officials will not put trucks without an ELD out of service until April 1. In the meantime, drivers may receive violations or citations, but those won't count against Safety Measurement

System scores, which are used to quantify on-road safety performance, according to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

Mike Honeycutt, president and co-owner of Houston consulting company Transafe and flatbed trucking company Tran-safe Carriers, said it takes drivers six months to get used to the technology and to not feel negative about it.

Ultimately, some drivers end up liking the devices because they dramatically reduce their paperwork. Filling out paper logs cuts into driving time, Honeycutt added.

"Once they got used to the device, it was simple to use," he said. "... They could spend more time driving."

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