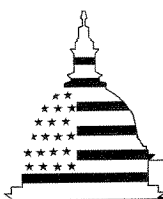


December 2005

LARGE TRUCK SAFETY

Federal Enforcement
Efforts Have Been
Stronger Since 2000,
but Oversight of State
Grants Needs
Improvement



G A O

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability



Highlights of GAO-06-156, a report to congressional committees

LARGE TRUCK SAFETY

Federal Enforcement Efforts Have Been Stronger Since 2000, but Oversight of State Grants Needs Improvement

Why GAO Did This Study

About 5,000 people die and more than 120,000 are injured each year from crashes involving large trucks. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) has several enforcement programs to improve truck safety and funds similar enforcement programs in states through its Motor Carrier Safety Assistance Program (MCSAP). Following concern by Congress and others in 1999 that FMCSA's enforcement approach was ineffective, the agency committed to take stronger actions.

This study reports on how FMCSA's enforcement approach has changed, how it makes decisions about its enforcement approach, and how it ensures that its grants to states contribute to the agency's mission of saving lives.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes several recommendations to improve FMCSA's ability to determine the effectiveness of its enforcement approach and strengthen the agency's oversight of MCSAP, such as measuring the effectiveness of its civil penalties and ensuring that existing planning and oversight mechanisms are carried out.

GAO provided a draft of this report to the Department of Transportation for its review and comment. The department generally agreed with the report's findings and agreed to consider our recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-156.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or siggerudk@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

FMCSA has made considerable strides in strengthening its enforcement programs and actions. For example, it almost doubled the number of on-site safety reviews (called compliance reviews) at carriers' bases of operations, from approximately 6,400 in 1998 to 11,300 in 2004. Further, it has increased the average civil penalty by about 75 percent (from \$820 to \$1,400) over the same period. FMCSA generally maintained its firmer approach to enforcement at a time when it took on the additional responsibilities of conducting homeland security-related reviews of hazardous materials carriers and safety reviews of new carriers.

To a large extent, FMCSA follows key effective management practices in making decisions about its enforcement approach. For example, its enforcement approach addresses major risk areas that contribute to (or cause) crashes, and targets its enforcement resources at the motor carriers with the greatest crash risk. FMCSA also has a broad range of enforcement goals and performance measures that it uses to provide direction to—and track the performance of—its enforcement programs. Furthermore, FMCSA is working to obtain additional information on crash risk factors and on the costs and effectiveness of its enforcement programs, as well as alternative approaches that it needs to further refine and set priorities for its programs. However, because FMCSA does not measure the effect that one of its key enforcement tools—civil penalties—has on carriers' compliance with safety regulations, it lacks the information needed to make sound decisions about any changes to its use of civil penalties.

MCSAP is designed to improve safety by employing a performance-based approach; however, FMCSA's oversight for these grants is inadequate. In reviewing the 61 program goals set by the seven states that received the largest MCSAP grants, we could not determine whether states substantially met almost two-thirds of these goals due to missing performance information, among other reasons. Further, although FMCSA requires that its various offices periodically review grant activities for adequacy of oversight, few of these reviews are being completed. For example, in the past 3 years, FMCSA's service centers have assessed only 15 of the agency's 52 field division offices (29 percent). FMCSA did not conduct these reviews for various reasons, including a curbed oversight role for service centers and markedly reduced headquarters staffing for MCSAP.

FMCSA's progress on initiatives to improve truck safety enforcement

Element	Progress
Strengthen enforcement programs and actions	●
Understand the causes of crashes and implement cost-effectiveness programs	○
Implement a performance-based MCSAP grant program and conduct oversight reviews of grantee and agency program activities	○

● Fully incorporated ○ Partially incorporated

Source: GAO.

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