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Opinion: A Double Standard for Crash Accountability

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In 2010, the National Tank Truck Carriers, American Trucking Associations and other trucking groups identified a serious shortcoming in the Compliance, Safety, Accountability system administered by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration — the inclusion of all crashes, regardless of responsibility.

Not only does the information fail to help prevent future crashes, it paints a misleading picture of the trucking industry as lax on safety and a danger on the roads, when the reality is far different.

In the CSA system, the crash-indicator score does not recognize fault, so crashes in which a carrier was at fault are counted the same as those in which the carrier was not.

In February 2012, FMCSA pledged to begin resolving the issue by including crash-accountability data in the system and implementing an appeals process. Disappointingly, the process came to a standstill one month later. The industry still is waiting on resolution of this matter, despite having put forward any number of reasonable proposals to help address the problem.

Recently, FMCSA published results from its Crash Weighting Analysis and determined that implementing measures to account for crash accountability would be time consuming and expensive, and would not improve the agency's ability to identify those carriers most at risk for future accidents.

This makes no sense.

CSA is primarily an enforcement-prioritization tool, and the lack of crash data contributes to poor use of scarce enforcement resources. As for the expense, as Vigillo's Steven Bryan pointed out in [his recent column](#), time and money are being invested in a flawed program that won't generate useful data.

Labeling carriers unsafe based on crashes they did not cause makes good guys look like bad guys.

"Preventable accidents on the part of the motor carrier" is an officially defined term, and there are other safety-measurement efforts, such as speeding or maintenance, in which FMCSA emphasizes crash accountability. Failure to include crash accountability in CSA is a dangerous double standard that does nothing to help the industry further its mission of preventing accidents.

Instead, this double standard unfairly penalizes smaller carriers, which constitute the majority of our industry. A single accident in a smaller fleet can lead to a high crash rating despite data suggesting the carrier likely was not at fault. Data from the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute have shown driver factors for the truck driver are cited in about a quarter of crashes, whereas driver factors for car drivers are cited in more than 80% of crashes — statistics verified by FMCSA's own analysis.

In addition, the crash indicator doesn't allow for identification of carriers that are more likely to cause future accidents, which is contrary to the intent of the crash indicator. By including appropriate crash-accountability data in the mix, we have a better way of knowing where we can focus our efforts to prevent accidents.

Finally, the scores present a misleading picture of our industry. While scores aren't yet public, the data currently are used by shippers, brokers, insurers, etc., to make safety-based business decisions. The data also are used by the media, the public and plaintiff's attorneys filing civil suits, to present a picture of our industry that's inaccurate, all of which indirectly contributes to one of our toughest challenges — the recruitment and retention of qualified drivers.

And that's where these continued delays in resolving the issues with CSA are really damaging — in their deleterious and dehumanizing effects on our professional drivers. With FMCSA, you're guilty until proven innocent.

Our professional drivers have tough jobs and face significant challenges and variables with every pickup and delivery — including traffic, construction, weather, equipment concerns, parking difficulties and other motorists. Treating preventable and nonpreventable accidents the same is discouraging to millions of highly trained, professional drivers who deliver the vast majority of North American freight safely.

For the past year, I've served as chairman of NTTC. I've had the privilege of traveling the country, frequently with James Starr, NTTC's 2014 Professional Tank Truck Driver of the Year. Our carriers and drivers are working to cultivate a culture of personal accountability for safety at every level of trucking. This is particularly important on the tank truck side of the business.

Safety has been the focus of my tenure as NTTC chairman, and it will continue to be my personal mission to support the future of our industry. True commitment to safety is what sets us apart, allows us to continue to reduce the number of accidents and is the key to bringing our drivers home safely every night.

In its current form, CSA does not support a culture of professionalism, personal accountability and safety. I urge FMCSA to consider the proposals put forward by the industry and public to improve CSA and help it become a vehicle for service by providing reliable indicators of carrier safety.

The CSA program has the potential to continue to help improve our safety record, one that already is impressive and will continue to remain our top priority. But in its current form, the crash indicator is simply not an accurate measure of a carrier's safety.

It's time to end this dangerous double standard and focus on meaningful safety measures and programs that support our mission and benefit everyone using our roads.

NTTC has represented the interests of the tank truck industry since 1945. K-Limited Carrier Ltd., in Toledo, Ohio, is a nationally recognized liquid bulk carrier.