

# Trucking Industry Continues Drive To Hire 18-Year-Olds

Critics Call Proposal  
"A Risky Experiment"

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**San Jose, Calif.** - Security priorities Since September 11 have stalled a trucking industry pilot program that would put 18-year-olds behind the wheels of big rigs.

Nonetheless the three year plan is being considered by the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration, which collected and evaluated public reaction last year.

Federal rules require truckers to be at least 21 to haul cargo across state lines.

The Truckload Carriers Association, which represents long haul carriers, seeks to show that qualified 18-20 year olds are mature and safe enough to handle the jobs demands.

The plan sparked a national debate that pits a growing industry's severe shortage of drivers against the grim statistics of teenage motorists.

"It would turn truck drivers and American motorists into guinea pigs on the road," said Michael Scippa, executive director of San Francisco-based Citizens of reliable and Safe Highways.

Trucking Industry Pilot programs have a history of undermining safety in trying to address needs, Scippa said.

"They create regular exemptions, which make Swiss cheese out of uniform truck safety," he said.



Tribune file photo by COLIN HACKLEY

According to a recent Gallup survey, the trucking industry must hire 80,000 drivers a year to keep up with a rapidly growing demand, a demand in part driven by e-commerce.

## 48 Weeks Of Training Required

Trucking officials propose a program in which only the most qualified and skilled young drivers would be selected to participate.

Drivers would undergo 48 weeks of classroom instruction, in the cab training and apprenticeship. No driver would be able to climb behind the wheel alone before the age of 19.

"There are a lot of 18 year olds doing far more complicated jobs than driving trucks," said Virginia DeRoze, director of education and training for the Virginia based trade association.

DeRoze said 18 year olds drive big rigs up and down U.S. highways in 40 states, including California.

"It is interesting to note," the association's petition states, that an 18 year old in Texas can drive a commercial vehicle from Houston to Abilene in interstate commerce, a distance of 419 miles, but not an adjoining city separated by a state line."

Roger Ury, director of American Truck School in San Pablo, said about 16 young men every month enroll in his three to four week program.

The rigors of the industry, he said, always will chase potential drivers away because the job demands a certain type of personality.

"You need to be footloose and fancy free," said Ury, who has directed the school for seven years. "No girlfriend, no marriage, no family. Just someone looking forward with great vengeance, to see the world."

The plan could pave the way for permanently lowering the age requirement for truckers, a possibility that makes safety advocates and insurance agents bristle.

"This amounts to a risky experiment," said Russ Rader, spokesman for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "We know that young drivers, whether in passenger vehicles or large trucks, are riskier drivers." Studies have shown large-

truck drivers younger than 21 are four to six

times more likely to be involved in fatal crashes, Radar said.

Although large trucks account for 4 percent of registered vehicles nationwide and 8 percent of the miles driven, they were involved in 12 percent of fatal vehicle accidents in 2000.

## DOT To Get Recommendation

The numbers don't support safety advocates' fears, said Robert Hirsch, President of the Truckload Carriers Association.

"Our position all along has been that we're not looking at all young drivers."

The Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration has not indicated when it would make a decision. It would happen "soon," said agency spokesman Dave Longo. He would not elaborate.

In any case, the federal safety agency will make its recommendation to the Department of Transportation.

The proposal was put together by the carriers' association to expand the pool of drivers in a field that continues to grow although interest in trucking has waned nationwide.

According to a recent Gallup survey, the trucking industry must hire 80,000 drivers a year to keep up with a trade made increasingly larger by e-commerce.

In addition, the government's new "hours of service" rules will require the industry to hire an additional 49,000 drivers a year, according to the trucking association.

Trucking Officials argue that, other than lowering the age requirement for commercial drivers' licenses, no alternative exists to recruit more people.

"By the time a young person reaches 21," the petition states, "he or she has most likely already chosen another career."