More commercial trucks, fewer safety inspectors a dangerous mix

Inspection data shows only 29 per cent of heavy commercial vehicles pass a safety inspection

By: Darryl Walker, BCGEU President

If B.C.’s population increased by half in the course of a decade and the number of police officers reduced by more than a quarter during that time, tough questions would be asked about the level of safety in our communities. But that is exactly what is happening on B.C. roads.

B.C.’s Commercial Vehicle Safety and Enforcement (CVSE) inspector corps – which inspects heavy commercial vehicles, staffs weigh scales and oversees private inspection facilities – has declined by more than 26 per cent since coming back into government service from ICBC in 2003. By the end of 2011, 1-in-4 CVSE inspector positions were vacant.

During that same time, ICBC data shows that heavy commercial vehicle traffic increased by 45.5 per cent, not including out-of-province traffic. The same data also shows that reported heavy commercial vehicle crashes increased by 12.5 per cent between 2003 and 2010.

The government’s practice of not filling vacant CVSE positions has stretched the inspector corps to the breaking point. Not only are there far fewer inspectors on the road to enforce truck safety, but weigh scales – which also conduct commercial vehicle inspections – are being shut down and operating hours scaled back due to a lack of staff.

A recent survey of B.C. weigh scale operations revealed that at least two weigh scales have been completely shut down, while three have only sporadic openings, and 16 more are operating with significantly reduced hours. Only three weigh scales across the province are currently operating according to the government’s advertised schedule.

The cuts have simply meant too few trained staff on the ground to provide an effective level of public service. Public safety is being compromised in the pursuit of balancing the budget year-over-year. And the justification for these service reductions often comes in the form of selective or incomplete public reports.

An example of selective reporting can be found in the B.C. government’s annual commercial vehicle out-of-service (OOS) rates, generated from the 72 hour June Road Check Inspection. OOS rates reflect the number of commercial vehicles that are taken off the road for safety violations.

The June Road Check takes place at the same time every year and is heavily promoted in the industry – causing fly-by-night operators to stay off the road during that time, to avoid inspection. In spite of this, B.C.’s 2011 OOS rate still sits at 22.6 per cent – the second highest rate in Canada, after Alberta.
More important though, is what is not publicly reported – in this case, the number of vehicles with safety violations that are ticketed and given a deadline to fix the infraction. A single Pass/Fail rate that combines out-of-service and violation rates would provide a more realistic picture of road safety.

A more accurate overview can be found in the monthly statistics gathered by CVSE inspectors, which are not publicly reported. A review of stats from January to October 2011 shows a 22.5 per cent OOS rate and a 48.59 per cent rate of violations, which combine for an astounding fail rate of 70.84 per cent. Only slightly more than 29 per cent of commercial vehicles passed a safety inspection.

There seems to be a disconnect between what the government tells British Columbians about road safety and the reality that CVSE inspectors witness on our roads every day.

The problem is getting worse, not better. The number of reported commercial vehicle crashes has increased by double-digits over the past decade, while heavy truck traffic rises dramatically and the number of safety inspectors on the road continues to decline.

While talk of a declining rate of vehicle crashes and a slight decline in fatalities may seem to signal progress, the facts say otherwise. A crash rate per 10,000 vehicles hides the fact that crashes continue to increase. Reductions in fatalities can also be due to better vehicle engineering technology.

The issue of road safety has no simple answers. But one thing is clear – we no longer have enough inspectors to ensure that BC’s commercial vehicles operate safely. The very least we should expect is to provide the same number of inspectors as a decade ago, before commercial vehicle traffic jumped by half.

To find out more about commercial vehicle safety, visit www.roadsafebc.ca.

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