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Trucking rules tackle a serious issue

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The Jan. 1, 2007, amendment to the number of hours that professional truck drivers can legally work has, without a doubt, forced our industry to make significant adjustments.

The changes Ottawa introduced reduce the number of hours that truckers can work in a 24-hour period to 14 hours from 15. Truckers are paid by the mile, so these new rules, with their reduced window of driving time, will mean fewer miles, and therefore, lower income.

What is forgotten amid the carping over these new hours of service rules is that they were introduced to tackle the serious and sometimes deadly issue of driver fatigue.

The amendments require drivers to take better, continuous breaks between their on-duty shifts -- a total of 10 hours every 24 hours. Previously, continuous blocks of rest time were not mandated. Drivers were required to rest just eight hours every 24 hours. Those eight hours could be broken into two groups of no less than two hours. So a driver could take a two-hour break, then another six hours later. That's hardly a way to recharge the batteries after a long, tiring day on the road.

Complaints arose recently over the issue of time lost when truckers ride ferries. But the argument to designate drivers' hours on board a vessel as some sort of off-duty status is hardly valid. This is work time -- no different from the time truckers spend waiting in traffic or at a border crossing.

Would the truckers prefer that once the ferry docked, they should act as if the hours did not happen, and that now their shift was just beginning?

Certainly, under the old rules, drivers could declare themselves off-duty when they weren't driving. But to what end? They could then "start the clock again" but would likely be exhausted. And what good would that do anybody to have tired drivers of huge rigs on our highways? It's hazardous for the drivers and the travelling public -- all of us.

There is much about the new regulations that need improving. But so-called "lost time" due to a ferry ride isn't one of them. If critics want to complain about the new legislation, they might look at the 14-hour total work day. This long shift could go for days on end

without any violation of the new rules. Is there any other industrialized nation on earth with such labour conditions?

Trucking brings high risks to professional drivers and the vehicles driving alongside their rigs if it is not done with skill and proper attention to detail -- and especially if the trucker is not properly rested. Would we ask our airline pilots to work back to back for days in a row?

It is high time that truckers got a continuous period off duty to rest, and Coastal Pacific Xpress applauds that part of the new legislation. Perhaps one way to make the new hours of service legislation more palatable is for trucking companies to pay their drivers more per mile to make up for lost revenue.

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