



The problem that confounds us most is short-term thinking

JOANNE RITCHIE

It was 1997, I think. The Canadian Trucking Association under the leadership of Gilles Belanger was holding its annual convention in Quebec City. The 'buzz' at the convention concerned hours-of-service and the driver shortage.

The concept of fatigue management was the rage at the time. The Australians and the US Army were playing around with it, and some of their experts came to Quebec City to share their research. However, it's only recently that the concept has begun to be talked about by more than a few 'forward-thinkers' in this country.

As for the driver shortage, well, it seemed a long way off back in 1997. We were told then that we'd need 50,000 more drivers over the next 10 years. Now they're talking about needing half that many drivers every year for the next 10 years.

As 2005 draws its final breath, these two issues are still hot topics. Day in and day out, my conversations with drivers and owner-operators confirm that not many of the issues we're dealing with today are really new.

How is it that in the space of a decade, so little has happened in this industry? Having said that, I shouldn't ignore what has transpired with the US EPA and its emissions regulations over a similar time frame.

Today's diesel engines are different machines entirely from those put into service a decade ago. Faced with a court-imposed deadline, the engine makers moved heaven and earth to bring 2004 standards to the street 14 months early (the 'why' is less important here), and it looks like they will meet the 2007 target too.

Why? They had a deadline. Why are our problems not yet resolved? The answer: because we *don't* have a deadline. And

given the glacial pace of progress, I wonder how badly this industry really wants to see things changed?

We're saddled with a dysfunctional HOS regime in the US, and by the time you read this, Transport Canada will have published its final revisions for our new HOS rule in the Canada Gazette – a rule more than a decade in the making. When you see the final rule, you will wonder, as I did, what the heck took them so long. We could have had – should have had – new HOS in place five years ago.

The driver shortage – now slightly redefined by the preface 'qualified' – continues to worsen.

Carriers all know the challenges associated with hiring and retaining good drivers and owner-operators, yet we hang back, waiting for some far-off power to decide what might work for us. To be fair, I must give some credit to the tenacity of a hand-

ful of carriers in Western Canada that are embracing immigrant drivers as a partial solution. They pushed their elected officials for a solution, and they got one.

We should have started planning for the driver shortage a decade ago. Even now, we have no real plan in place. Demographers saw this one coming long before anyone in trucking started losing sleep over it.

I think the problem and the solution both face the same obstacle: short-term thinking. This is something we should all start worrying about, and pretty darn soon. **TR**

Joanne Ritchie is Executive Director of OBAC, an innovative, responsive, and results-oriented organization, dedicated to improving owner-operators' prospects for success through education, advocacy, and communication.

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