



Owner-Operator's Business  
Association of Canada  
Association professionnelle des  
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the  
director's chair

## Oversized loads, undersized rules

If Heather Murray's fluorescent safety vest and flashing traffic wand didn't catch your attention when she walked to the podium, it would have been hard to nod off during her presentation, which included some astonishing video footage and snippets of truckin' tunes. Heather, who operates Saskatoon-based Sparrow Piloting Service, and heads up the newly formed Saskatchewan Pilot Vehicle Association, is one of the regulars at meetings of the Task Force on Vehicle Weights and Dimensions, and a longtime advocate for standards, training, and harmonization of regulations affecting the people and vehicles who escort oversized loads.

Oversize and overweight loads on our roadways have become a fact of life in trucking, and with these loads comes the potential for some frightening consequences if they're not moved properly.

Each Canadian jurisdiction has rules for signage, lighting, and other equipment requirements for escort vehicles, and these are generally found, along with permit information, wherever each province or territory hides its information on commercial vehicle weights and dimensions.

Which brings me back to the Task Force on Vehicle Weights and Dimensions mentioned above. This national committee, made up of officials from the federal, provincial and territorial transportation departments, has the daunting task of trying to bring uniformity to the policies, regulations and enforcement practices for truck size and weight limits within Canada.

The group has been around since the late 1980s, when transportation ministries across the country signed on to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that set national standards for weight and dimension limits of heavy trucks used in interprovincial transportation.

The MoU has been expanded and amended over the years, and it's not the only game in town: there are a number of side deals, ie., an agreement

among the Atlantic provinces, others between New Brunswick and Quebec, Quebec and Ontario. And most recently, the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, and Saskatchewan agreed to agree under the New West Partnership signed in 2010.

Navigating the minefield of confusing, inconsistent, and sometimes conflicting weights and dimensions regulations just to get a truck across the country makes you want to scream. Make it an oversize load, throw in a few bridges, and, well, you get the picture. And pictures are what Heather used to draw attention to some of the issues faced by pilot car drivers. The variety of mistaken, and sometimes creative, interpretation of the rules for vehicle signage and lighting makes you wonder: 'where's the DoT when you need them?' Indeed, for many pilot car drivers I've spoken to, lack of enforcement of existing regulations is a very big issue. But inappropriate or inadequate escorting is only part of the problem. Heather's images of some of the biggest, ugliest, and scariest loads goin' down the road with no escort at all are astounding. It gives a whole new meaning to the song 'Give me 40 acres (to turn this rig around).' Yet incomprehensibly, penalties for infractions of this type are low, or in some cases, non-existent. For example, the fine in Saskatchewan for "not having a pilot or escort when required" is eighty bucks. I mean, really.

And then there are Self-Propelled Implements of Husbandry – SPIH in government-ese – farm equipment to the rest of us. In some provinces, SPIH don't require an escort at all, or are subject to minimal requirements for escorts and permits; in other jurisdictions, there are no requirements for pilot vehicles to accompany any type of farm equipment that is being towed or hauled by a commercial vehicle. But as Heather pointed out, "18 feet is still 18 feet, even if it's farm equipment, and it makes you just as dead when you hit it." I



Joanne  
Ritchie:  
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believe she's got a point.

Another priority for the Saskatchewan Pilot Vehicle Association and other more informal networks of pilot car drivers is training and certification.

Clearly, pilot cars are an integral component of overdimensional vehicle movements; they hold the responsibility for warning road users of the oversize load, while keeping the public, the load, and the truck driver safe.

Yet unbelievably, there are no training, certification, or special licensing requirements for the drivers of escort vehicles in any Canadian jurisdiction. Some 'best practices' handbooks suggest they take a defensive driving course, and there are a handful of obligatory industry-driven certificates, mostly related to workplace safety and first aid, but as far as the regulators are concerned, you're good to go with a regular driver's licence.

A dozen or so US states have pilot car certification programs, and anyone operating an escort vehicle in those states needs to be certified. But mostly, the top-notch pilot car drivers, like good truck drivers, get their education from years of experience and millions of miles of real-world trucking with safety always top of mind.

With increasing pressure being put on governments to modify truck size and weight regulations to keep pace with the demand to move longer, wider, higher, and heavier loads, the call by drivers for better and harmonized rules for loads requiring an escort, or more enforcement of existing regs, is often met with surprise. But clearly, when loads that take up two or more lanes are wandering free with no escort and inadequate warning devices, common sense just isn't enough.