

Safety blitz targets semi-trucks, drivers

'It gives a good 72-hour snapshot'

Gwendolyn Richards, with files from Sherri Zickefoose,
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Transport officers are taking a thorough look at semi-trucks and their drivers -- examining everything from mechanical infractions to driver fatigue.

The 72-hour safety blitz is part of the annual Roadcheck campaign -- a joint operation involving Canada, the United States and Mexico.

Tractor trailers passing through the inspection station at Balzac, about five kilometres north of Calgary on Highway 2, were selected randomly Tuesday for the inspections, which took about 20 minutes on average, said Matt Zazula, Alberta Transportation's commercial vehicle enforcement branch regional manager.

"It gives a good 72-hour snapshot of exactly what the condition of commercial vehicle safety is across North America," Zazula said.

Officers did mechanical checks, looking at steering, brakes, tires and suspension, as well as examining loads to ensure they were secured properly.

Zazula said the most common issues are brakes not working properly and improperly secured loads.

"Driver fatigue is a big issue," he added. "Some find themselves under the gun to make hay while the sun shines."

During the first few hours of inspections, officers found a truck whose trailer connection had cracked and could have broken apart.

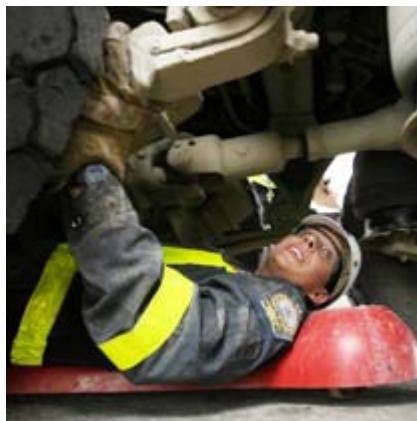
Minor infractions resulted in written warnings for items to be fixed.

Vehicles found unsafe were parked until they could be repaired.

Chris Phoenix, a driver for 22 years who was on his way to deliver drill pipe to Edmonton, said he was happy to take part in the inspection.



CREDIT: Grant Black, Calgary Herald
Transport officer George McLennan inspects the underside of a flatbed truck Tuesday near Balzac during a three-day commercial vehicle inspection.



CREDIT: Grant Black/ Calgary Herald
Transport officer Melissa Clark inspects the underside of a dump truck during a three-day commercial vehicle inspection blitz. Officers are checking trucks for loose loads, bad brakes and other mechanical and safety problems.

"It gets all the junk off the road. If it helps to clean up the trucking industry, it's a good thing," he said.

Another driver with only 18 months of experience, however, had to park his trailer because his load -- two massive spools of metal tubing -- was not properly secured.

Timbers wedged under the spools were not braced and could have dislodged, endangering other drivers and taking stability away from the spools, which could also become loose, Zazula said.

The truck's driver, who did not want to give his name, had picked up the load in Houston, Texas, and was only about an hour from his destination in Red Deer when the infraction was discovered. Still, he said, "it's good they found it. Safety is safety."

Unlike a targeted campaign, such as one held in Calgary last month, where transport officers look specifically for commercial vehicles with problems, this 72-hour blitz selected vehicles at random.

In the Calgary checkstops last month, 62 per cent of trucks checked during the three-day blitz were deemed out of service.

The checks, conducted May 15 to 17, found 74 vehicles had defects. Of those, 26 vehicles required more thorough inspections, 16 vehicles were placed out of service and 10 vehicles required attention.

The checkstops -- set up on Glenmore and 18th Street S.E., Highway 8 and 69th Street S.W., and Beddington Trail and Country Hills Boulevard N.W. -- used thermal technology that sees what officials can't.

Calgary is the first city in Canada to use the thermal eye imaging technology to figure out which trucks should be pulled over and inspected.

Alberta's Thermal Eye Technologies out of Edmonton designs the systems.

The thermal eye detects overheated brakes, springs, loose shocks and even overweight loads.

"If the load's heavy, those tires are going to glow," said Karl Samuel, a transport officer for the province's commercial vehicle enforcement. "Chances of catching a lot of these that are not safe to be on the highway is a lot higher with the thermal eyes."

So far, the technology is proving to be nearly 100 per cent reliable.

grichards@theherald.canwest.com

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