SD Motor Carrier Services Customer Satisfaction Assessment

Study SD2003-03
Executive Summary

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DISCLAIMER

The contents of this report reflect the views of the authors who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the data presented herein. The contents do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the South Dakota Department of Transportation, the State Transportation Commission, the South Dakota Highway Patrol, or the Federal Highway Administration. This report does not constitute a standard, specification, or regulation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The work was performed in cooperation with the United States Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration.
This report summarizes by truck operator segment and Motor Carrier Services enforcement zone perceptions of Motor Carrier Services performance in enforcing federal and South Dakota trucking regulations. It also assesses service areas relating to information requests, trucking safety and MCS prevention activities. The study identifies key factors underlying formation of perceptions of MCS organization and its staff. Key user segments surveyed included agricultural truck operators, business truck operators and carrier operating registered commercial vehicles for hire. In addition Motor Carrier Services staff perceptions are included.

The study includes opinions of 456 truck operators residing within South Dakota. Equal representation is reflected in the operator segments and across enforcement zones. 60 MCS staff participated in the study.

Key objectives that guided both the qualitative (one-on-one executive interview & focus group) and quantitative (telephone interview) components of this research were: to assess perceptions regarding the importance of motor carrier enforcement services and satisfaction with their delivery within the trucking industry and the South Dakota Highway Patrol’s Motor Carrier Services unit, to identify underlying causes or factors that shape these perceptions, and to recommend solutions that will enable the trucking industry and Motor Carrier Services to improve working relationships while maintaining highway safety. This research provides the framework for developing an action plan to strengthen the work relationships between the trucking industry and SDHP Motor Carrier Services.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DISCLAIMER</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TECHNICAL REPORT STANDARD TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PURPOSE OF STUDY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBJECTIVES</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESEARCH APPROACH</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provision of Regulatory Information</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniformity of Regulation and Enforcement Activity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of Regulation and Level of Enforcement</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of Regulatory and Enforcement Benefits</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motor Carrier Services Staff Traits Important to Operators</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Assessment of Motor Carrier Services</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with Motor Carrier Services</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to Improved Relations</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCS Staff Interest in Internal Initiatives</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 1: RESEARCH PROCESS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGURE 2: REPOSITION AND COMMUNICATE BALANCE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE OF STUDY

During the 2003 session of the South Dakota State Legislature, motor carrier enforcement issues were the subject of considerable discussion. Some commercial carriers and certain elected officials characterized the Motor Carrier Services Unit of the South Dakota Highway Patrol as unprofessional and overzealous. Although their comments were reported by the news media, it is unclear how representative these comments are compared to a true random sample of truck operators across South Dakota.

The importance of this study cannot be overstated. The trucking industry is vitally important to South Dakota residents, because commodities and virtually all retail products are transported by truck. Likewise, proper enforcement of safety and weight regulations is essential to protecting the public’s welfare and capital investment in the state highway system.

The desired outcome of this study is a clearer understanding of perceptions among both motor carriers and staff of the Motor Carrier Services Unit. With an accurate documentation of perceptions, one that is reliably gathered and mutually accepted, decision makers and interested industry groups have the basis for cooperative efforts to improve working relationships and address important concerns.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study were to:

- Assess perceptions regarding the importance of motor carrier enforcement services and satisfaction with their delivery within the trucking industry and the SD Highway Patrol’s Motor Carrier Services unit;
- Identify underlying causes or factors that shape these perceptions; and
- Recommend solutions that will enable the trucking industry and Motor Carrier Services to improve working relationships while maintaining highway safety.
**RESEARCH APPROACH**

The process for this customer satisfaction assessment relied heavily on gathering input from a diverse cross-section of stakeholders representing the Department of Transportation, Motor Carrier Services, trucking and agricultural associations, business operators and independent drivers. At each and every step of the process shown in the diagram below, issues were identified, clarified and documented for use in the telephone survey—the final step in the formal assessment. At each successive step in the process, more and more perceptions were expressed and reviewed for use in developing lines of inquiry at the next step of the process.

![Research Process Diagram]

1. Members of the project’s technical panel defined the research need, clarified the problem description as outlined in the request for proposal, and provided insight based on their personal perceptions. In addition to providing references to media articles on Motor Carrier Services enforcement activities, a starting list of interested parties available for phone interviews was given to the research team.

2. About ten phone interviews with diverse industry representatives helped to further define issues important to association, business, and operator groups. These first two steps provided the necessary insight for development of discussion guides used in focus groups—step 3.

3. A series of eight focus groups were held in a key city within each Motor Carrier zone of enforcement—Aberdeen (2), Pierre (2), Rapid City (2) and Sioux Falls (2). Two groups were conducted with each of the following interest groups: operators of trucks used in agriculture (2), operators of trucks used by businesses (2), independent carriers with trucks for hire (2), and Motor Carrier Services staff (2). Focus group discussions helped to outline the diverse issues and perceptions of all parties. The discussions provided the needed clarity for developing a survey instrument for use in the final stage of assessment—the telephone survey.
4. A telephone survey was conducted with a random sample of truck operators representing statewide agricultural operators, business operators and independent carriers—a total of 456 operators. In addition nearly all Motor Carrier Services staff (60) was interviewed by telephone.

**SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS**

**PROVISION OF REGULATORY INFORMATION**

1. No single information outlet is available for reaching a majority of operators in all trucking segments. How an operator stays informed of changes in South Dakota trucking rules and regulations varies considerably by truck operator segment.
   - Agricultural operators of trucks are best reached through mass media—particularly newspapers (48%).
   - Business (36%) and carrier (43%) operators are best reached through expert sources such as DOT letters, association newsletters and DOT meetings.

2. Word of mouth is a significant means of obtaining information for nearly one-third of both agricultural and carrier operators. This fact points to the potential for shaping operator perceptions of MCS—whether or not there is basis in fact.

3. Carriers and business operators are more likely to have made a request for regulatory or permit information. For the 4 in 10 operators that have made a request for information from MCS staff, less than half (45%) felt getting consistent information was easy.
   - Consistency varied significantly in Zone 4 compared to other zones. Only one-third of the operators in this zone that made requests stated it was easy to get consistent information.

4. For those operators (184) requesting information of MCS staff, the request was seen as being handled in a friendly and courteous manner by nearly 9 in 10 operators (88%).

5. Only a slight majority of operators (52%) stated that they were familiar with South Dakota and federal trucking rules and regulations. About 5% said they were extremely familiar. This varied widely by operator segment. Only 38% of agricultural operators felt they were familiar compared to 53% of business and 67% of carrier operators.

6. Familiarity with the state’s regulatory handbook is not much better. 55% of operators were familiar with South Dakota’s Motor Carrier Handbook. In addition many operators see the handbook as not very user friendly and easy to understand.
   - Carriers have the highest familiarity with the handbook, but are the most critical of its utility. This is the group that travels the most miles and for which the most regulations in the handbook apply. Only 44% of the carrier segment views the handbook favorably. The most mentioned need was for simplified language and improved layout.

**UNIFORMITY OF REGULATION AND ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITY**

1. A majority of operators (66%) feel truck inspections are fairly to very uniformly enforced across South Dakota. Attitudes vary by operator segment.
2. Three-quarters of all operators (74%) feel weight restrictions are fairly to very uniformly enforced across the state. Agricultural operators are less likely to view enforcement as uniform. 13% of agricultural operators stated they didn’t know if enforcement was uniform. Nearly two-thirds of agricultural operators feel there is uniformity. This compares with 79% of carriers and 80% of business operators that felt restrictions and postings are uniformly enforced.

**AMOUNT OF REGULATION AND LEVEL OF ENFORCEMENT**

1. Responses to eight (8) attitudinal questions dealing with the number of South Dakota motor carrier regulations and South Dakota’s strong emphasis on vehicle safety and weight restrictions were summarized and analyzed for consistency of response. A strong pattern exists. There are three roughly equal sized distinct attitudinal groups. Each group exhibits significantly different patterns of response throughout the survey. Each group reflects differences in attitudes toward the amount of regulation and the level of applied enforcement. Group attitudes on regulation and enforcement are characterized as:

   - Too strict (120 operators),
   - Neutral (122 operators) and
   - Accepting (117 operators).

Note: 97 individuals did not respond to one or more of the eight questions upon which this grouping is based and are therefore not included in this analysis.

2. The strongest underlying factor that shapes perception of MCS is that of attitude toward number and severity of truck regulations in South Dakota. Although staff personal traits as exhibited during interactions were certainly also factors, they were not found to influence perceptions to the same extent as attitude toward regulation.

3. Attitudes concerning the number of regulations and levels of enforcement were correlated to nearly every major measure of MCS organization and staff performance.

4. Attitudes that regulations and enforcement are ‘too strict’ are statewide. The ‘too strict’ group is represented in relatively equal numbers across all enforcement zones: zone 1 (33%), zone 2 (35%), zone 3 (30%) and zone 4 (37%).

5. Operators with ‘too strict’ attitudes are significantly more likely to be carriers (43%) than they are business operators (26%). They are also significantly more likely to have been stopped by MCS in the past 3 to 4 years—73% of the ‘too strict’ group has been stopped. 48% of the ‘neutral’ group and 47% of ‘accepting’ group have been stopped.

6. These attitudinal groups are also strongly correlated to variations in operator opinions of how widely MCS staff traits of importance are demonstrated:

   - The ‘too strict’ group is significantly less likely to feel the majority of MCS staff exhibits desirable work traits—this holds true for 15 of 17 evaluated traits, whereas the ‘accepting’ group is significantly more likely to feel the majority of MCS staff is characterized by the desirable traits. The neutral group consistently rates staff somewhere in between the other groups—differing significantly from both and more often than not closer to the ‘accepting’ group.
Operator position on regulation and enforcement also influences ratings of MCS performance on helping drivers operate safely, consistency in interpreting regulations, ease of getting consistent information and overall MCS Unit performance. Ratings are at opposite ends on the scale—lower if an operator views regulation/enforcement as ‘too strict’ and higher if attitudes on regulation/enforcement are more ‘accepting’.

When asked if the majority of the current MCS staff possesses that trait they viewed as contributing to an ideal MCS representative, significant group differences are seen. The ‘too strict’ group is more likely to believe MCS has ‘few or none’ on staff exhibiting such a trait compared to the ‘accepting’ group (53% versus 30%, respectively). Looked at either way, both numbers are too high—nearly one-third to one-half of these operators find staff lacking in what they see as the most important character trait.

**RECOGNITION OF REGULATORY AND ENFORCEMENT BENEFITS**

1. Benefits resulting from a strong South Dakota regulatory and enforcement program are not strongly perceived. Half of the operators felt efforts have contributed to safer South Dakota highways. Only 37% viewed the efforts as saving taxpayers significant dollars. Fewer than one-quarter (24%) perceived the efforts as contributing to roads in South Dakota being in better shape than several neighboring states.

**MOTOR CARRIER SERVICES STAFF TRAITS IMPORTANT TO OPERATORS**

1. Ninety percent or better of both operators and enforcement staff rated the same 9 of 13 presented attributes as important to extremely important for an ‘ideal’ MCS staff person to possess.

2. Good judgment was the most important trait to operators in all three segments. The top five of 13 job characteristics ranked by all operators in order of importance were:
   - Demonstrating good judgment and common sense
   - Being lenient for honest mistakes
   - Treating operators with respect
   - Being knowledgeable and well trained
   - Interpreting regulations fairly.

   All five of the above traits made the list of top five in each operator segment. “Good judgment and common sense” was number one on every segment’s ranking. Slight segment differences were observed—agricultural and carrier operators were the most similar in rankings.

3. Operators were asked whether a majority of the staff that they have had contact with exhibit that trait they found most important. 70% of operators felt that some (20%) or all (50%) MCS staff possessed the characteristic of most importance to them. Conversely, about 21% found staff lacking. 9% of operators had no opinion.

**PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF MOTOR CARRIER SERVICES**

1. Depending upon the specific issue or operator segment in question, positive assessments are not held by truly large percentages of operators. MCS does not have a strong and sizable base of support. The
numbers of operators who have negative perceptions on most all measures of performance should be of major concern, and these operators reside across the state.

2. Based on the performance measure used, customer satisfaction ranges from 74% to 87%. Conversely, dissatisfaction is judged to be somewhere in the range of 13% to 26% of all operators depending on the topic. Both numbers can be higher when viewed in the context of a subgroup.

3. A majority of operators (63%) rate the overall job Motor Carrier Services does in performing its duties positively. Very few (8%) view performance as extremely good. This overall performance rating varies significantly by operator segment. 55% of carriers, 62% of agricultural operators and 71% of business operators rated overall performance 7 to 10 on a 10-point scale.

4. Business truck operators are generally more positive toward MCS enforcement efforts than are carriers or agricultural operators of trucks.

5. Operators who are the most accepting of the amount of and level of trucking regulation within South Dakota are consistently more positive toward MCS staff, programs and efforts. However the number of ‘accepting’ operators is not at the level one would hope for or expect.

**CONTACT WITH MOTOR CARRIER SERVICES**

1. The amount of personal contact for any reason with MCS staff over the past 3 year period varies considerably by operator segment:
   - Agricultural operators 35% (more likely occurred with a motor carrier enforcement officer)
   - Business operator 68%
   - Carrier operator 83% (more likely occurred at a Port of Entry)
   - 90% of operators who made contact (282) felt staff performed in a professional manner during their most recent contact. A similar proportion of operators (89%) who have received a violation in the past 3 to 4 years (109) state that the reason and cause for the violation was clearly explained to their satisfaction.

2. Not all operators of similar size trucks are being stopped and fined at an equal rate. When the ratio of persons stopped is compared to persons fined over the last 3 to 4 years for operators of large trucks (26 plus ton), a noticeably lower ratio of persons fined to persons stopped was found in the agricultural segment. This point is not lost among business and carrier operators. There is a clear perception on their part that regulations are not applied with equal fairness to agricultural operators.

**APPROACHES TO IMPROVED RELATIONS**

1. Common ground exists for several relationship building initiatives that were viewed positively by a majority of operators and MCS staff. The most widely supported initiatives included:
   - Both parties see a strong need to more widely distribute the South Dakota Motor Carrier Handbook—87% of operators and 88% of staff;
   - A majority of both think it’s a good idea to hold safety programs throughout the state to assist less experienced drivers; and
A majority of both see value in the idea of annual town hall meetings at various statewide locations for the purpose of bringing operators and staff together to share ideas, concerns and information.

2. Face-to-face initiatives were viewed with stronger interest by both parties than were other forms of interaction.

**MCS STAFF INTEREST IN INTERNAL INITIATIVES**

1. Nearly three-quarters of staff (73%) expressed strong interest in communications training and even stronger interest (90%) in development of more internal opportunities for career development and advancement.

2. More than two-thirds felt management should aggressively mount a communications program to define MCS’ mission, organizational goals and accomplishments.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Conclusions of the study may be summarized:

1. MCS needs to rework the current South Dakota Motor Carrier Handbook. Emphasis should be on simplifying the language, improving graphics and illustrations, and organizing the information for more user-friendly reference. In addition, a distribution strategy needs to be identified for getting the handbook to more truck operators in all segments of statewide commerce—particularly agricultural users of trucks.

2. MCS should look to target educational outreach efforts to those trucking segments most unfamiliar with safety and weight restriction regulations. The focus should be on truck drivers in the agricultural sector, drivers who operate trucks on a part-time basis and operators new to the industry.

3. Since perceptions of MCS are not solely driven by interactions, but are also strongly influenced by attitudes related to amount of and level of regulation, MCS administrative initiatives alone will not likely do away with unfavorable perceptions. Legislative review and possible adjustments to regulatory standards may become necessary.

4. Truck operators don’t readily accept arguments that a strong statewide focus on weight restrictions and safety inspections has resulted in safer highways, better road conditions than several neighboring states or significant dollar savings to taxpayers. Education attempts to date—such as the state’s 1999 video on overweight titled *How Much is Too Much*—have not been overly successful in communicating the benefits of a strong regulatory policy.

5. Their limited formal communication skills training, given the sometimes confrontational nature of enforcing regulations, puts staff at a disadvantage. MCS needs to add a communication skills course to its formal training program for newly recruited staff. It should also consider requiring current staff to participate and complete any new communication skills training, i.e., conflict management, negotiation skills training.

6. MCS needs to assess possible staff training deficiencies that may be unique to Zone 4. Operators in this zone (80%) were significantly more likely to view knowledge and training as ‘extremely
important’ than were operators in other zones. At the same time, operators in Zone 4 were significantly less likely to view staff as exhibiting this trait than were operators in other zones. Obtaining consistent information in this zone needs to be looked at. Operators in this zone are significantly more likely to find it difficult to obtain consistent information than are operators in most other zones. This would be a good zone to first test new communication or information efforts.

7. MCS management needs to strongly link staff evaluation policies to customer service—stressing the importance of quality contacts from the perspective of the person stopped and/or inspected. Staff needs to believe that management places the same weight on quality of encounters as it does on frequency of encounters.

8. MCS should leverage and build on the recent change in terms from ‘enforcement’ to ‘service’ in its formal name. MCS needs to reposition itself and communicate a broader mission statement centered on service. Service needs to be defined for truck operators. Service should be aggressively marketed through program initiatives developed in partnership with the larger truck operator associations.

9. MCS needs to find ways to more visibly demonstrate a balanced interest and policy that stresses prevention, a willingness to help operators, and concern for safety in addition to regulatory enforcement. A strong communications effort will be needed to replace a deeply rooted perception that MCS is solely interested in generating revenue through finding operator or mechanical fault when contacts are made.

10. Both truck operators and MCS staff expressed significant interest in several relationship building initiatives assessed in the survey. MCS needs to review initiatives having the highest levels of interest and explore ways to work with the trucking industry to develop comparable offerings. Programs should focus on initiatives providing face-to-face opportunities for relationship building since these generated the broadest interest in both parties.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the researchers recommend the following to the South Dakota Highway Patrol’s Motor Carrier Services Unit:

1. MCS should communicate the benefits and savings of a strong, but not overly aggressive, program of truck safety and weight restriction enforcement. The message needs to be focused and repeated often. It further needs support grounded in SDDOT cost savings estimates and comparisons to other states with similarly strong programs of protecting their highway investment.

2. MCS and the SDDOT should review the number of regulations, exemptions and levels of fines enforced in South Dakota. The review should make comparisons to other states that also have strong enforcement policies dealing with overweight and truck safety. MCS should work with trucking industry representatives to review enforcement penalties in the context of what constitutes a reasonable deterrent. Where possible, exemptions need to reflect both the needs of special interest groups and the demands for equitable treatment of all truck operators. MCS and industry groups should look for common ground to make joint recommendations for legislative review on these issues.
3. MCS should develop a clear mission statement that communicates both internally and externally a balanced approach to safety, prevention and enforcement—one that is built around delivering quality service to all trucking user groups. The statement should be prominently displayed at all Ports of Entry. And it needs to be reinforced in both external and internal communications whenever appropriate and practical.

4. MCS management should seek outside assistance in developing staff training opportunities in communication skill development, i.e. conflict management and negotiation training. Training needs to focus on the attainment of customer satisfaction and improved service delivery.

5. MCS management should review existing staff performance evaluation policies. The review needs to put in place assessment standards and tools that will foster stronger customer oriented service. Management should examine how other public and private sector organizations recognize employees who consistently provide exceptional customer service. A formal staff recognition program for outstanding customer service should be developed and communicated both internally and externally.

6. MCS should develop and promote a high visibility safety and prevention program. The program needs to both serve to educate truck operators and communicate a MCS commitment to a stronger, more balanced, Mission. An example would be scheduling an unannounced prevention day that stresses operator safety. This would be a day where all enforcement activities result in warnings—warnings that are intended to educate operators and public alike.

A media kit should be prepared. The kit should highlight the types of prevention activities that staff focuses on this particular day and every day. Follow-up opportunities allow for recapping the types and numbers of violations that resulted in warnings. The communications goal of this cited example, or any similarly conceived program, would be to eliminate misperceptions.

The primary misconception is that MCS is solely focused on and interested in revenue generation by over aggressively searching for operator fault. Research indicates this perception is held across the state by significant numbers of operators.

7. MCS management should formally seek to establish and strengthen alliances with truck user associations. A strong beginning effort would establish an advisory panel of representatives from each operator segment and possibly include representation of the general public. Panel framework would encourage all parties to work together to identify solutions to common problems.

An advisory panel might focus on identifying desirable service offerings, best approaches to communications, and the most effective mechanisms for resolving common issues of importance. Initial collaboration could begin with the remake and broader distribution of the South Dakota Motor Carrier Handbook.

8. The new name change from Motor Carrier Enforcement to Motor Carrier Services presents an opportunity and a challenge. If it is to be taken seriously as signaling a shift in management focus, then the word ‘Service’ needs to be given definition. Given the fact the name change has already occurred, timing is critical. MCS should seek outside professional help in developing a statewide media communications plan.
The message should be for both external and internal consumption. The message needs to communicate a newly invigorated commitment to service delivery. Communication efforts should inform truck operators and the general public of existing services and new ones that are envisioned.

The message also needs to clearly define for the citizens of South Dakota the benefits that result from the state’s strong enforcement policies. The plan needs to communicate a Motor Carrier Services strategy for balancing prevention, safety, and enforcement activities. The best strategy would be one that communicates an attitude of willingness to help no matter what the need—service with a helping hand!

**Figure 2: Reposition and Communicate Balance**

9. Motor Carrier Services should evaluate the format and content of its current web site. The review should reflect MCS repositioning efforts. The look and content needs to more clearly and forcefully communicate MCS’ mission and define its service offerings. Consideration should be given to designing a link to an abbreviated edition of any newly developed Motor Carrier Handbook and also provide a user friendly means of ordering a hardcopy.

10. Motor Carrier Services should explore the feasibility of establishing an electronic bulletin board on its web site for operator comments and questions. This feature could allow MCS responses to be posted and consistently made available to all web site visitors. This would be one means of providing consistent information to all interested parties.