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William B. Cassidy, Senior Editor | Mar 18, 2020 12:16PM EDT



An array of local restrictions and retail food closings make getting there tougher for truckers. Photo credit: Shutterstock.com.

Social media this week is filled with admonitions to “thank a trucker,” but on US highways, truck drivers aren’t all feeling the love. The closure of some state-operated rest areas, a sudden lack of places to buy food, and the refusal of some businesses to let drivers use restrooms are making it more difficult for truck drivers to deliver essential goods and medical supplies.

That’s led to virulent complaints from truck drivers on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, and public appeals from organizations, including the American Trucking Associations (ATA), the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association (OOIDA), the Small Business in Transportation Coalition (SBTC), and American Logistics Aid Network (ALAN).

The law of unintended consequences — that actions always have effects that are unanticipated or unintended — is hitting not just truck drivers, but all levels of supply chains as an uneven local reaction across the United States to the spread of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) threatens to cramp truck capacity and push up rates and prices.

Truck drivers spending extra time looking for food or a bathroom are truck drivers who aren’t on the road to a delivery. Capacity is being tightened in drive-thru-sized bites. The businesses that help keep truckers on the road are coming under pressure to close or curtail service just as freight demand, driven by consumer spending on essential goods, is rising rapidly.

“In the past two and a half weeks, freight demand just slingshot upward year over year,” Ken Adamo, chief of analytics at DAT Solutions told JOC.com Tuesday. “The seven-day rolling average rates for dry vans so far in March are up 5 to 7 percent no matter how you slice and dice them. It’s not in line with seasonality or any other factor,” except the coronavirus.

That contributed to the strong reaction to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation’s decision Tuesday to shut down 35 rest areas, inadvertently limiting parking options for truckers. A PennDOT spokesperson told JOC.com Tuesday afternoon the agency was reconsidering the decision but was concerned about the health of employees and the traveling public.

“We understand this decision was likely made in an effort to limit passenger vehicle movement, interaction among travelers,” and state employees, OOIDA said Tuesday in a letter to the Pennsylvania state agency. “However, rest areas are vitally important to truckers, who at this time are being heavily relied upon to transport critical supplies across the country.”

Biting into truck capacity

Acting Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) administrator Jim Mullen on Tuesday wrote to the National Association of Truck Stop Operators (NATSO), urging the group to keep truck stops open amid increasing concerns about the closure of restaurants and anyplace where large groups of people gather amid the coronavirus pandemic.

“In the coming weeks and months, it will be critical that these businesses remain open, 24 hours per day, providing America’s truck drivers with food, fuel, showers, repair services, and opportunities to rest,” Mullen said in his letter. “The continuing operation of America’s truck stops will enable truck drivers to confidently transport essential goods.”

But restaurants of all types, under pressure from local and state regulations and orders, are closing their doors to customers, except for take-out orders. That means no self-serve buffets, salad bars, or counter coffee service. Parking lot pickup may be an option for some truck stop restaurants, but are many truck stop eateries set up to offer such take-away service?

NATSO says its members are rushing to create take-out options where they've been prohibited from offering sit-down service. "Truck drivers are depending on truck stops and travel centers," said NATSO president and CEO Lisa Mullings. "As the nation confronts the coronavirus outbreak, the country's travel centers and truck stops are committed to remaining open."

The Iowa 80 Truckstop, at exit 284 on Interstate-80 in Walcott, Iowa, sent out a tweet Wednesday to confirm it is open, but said all food would be available for carry-out only as of noon "to remain compliant with the law and help prevent the spread of COVID-19." Iowa 80 has parking spaces for 900 tractor-trailers and claims to be the largest US truck stop.

NATSO represents 1,700 travel centers offering truckers food and fuel throughout the United States. Even those truck stops can serve only a fraction of the more than three million US truck drivers. Limitations on restaurants, including fast food outlets, are likely to make life on the road increasingly difficult. Take-away in a tractor-trailer is not the same as in a hatchback.

"We have at least a hundred drivers contacting us today advising they can't find food on the road," the SBTC said in an email to members Tuesday. "SBTC has reached out to FMCSA twice and now FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Administration) directly in multiple ways requesting immediate relief for drivers who can't access food and rest rooms."

In a letter sent to US Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao Tuesday, the SBTC urged the Trump administration to order FEMA and the American Red Cross, a non-governmental organization, "to man truck stops around the country to provide food and water to the truck drivers who are bringing food and emergency supplies to people in need."

Local restrictions complicate supply

The rapid escalation of business closures and restrictions on movement and commerce across the country — particularly a "shelter-in-place" lockdown in the San Francisco Bay area, threatens to confuse truck drivers and carriers, leading to delivery delays, ATA president and CEO Chris Spear warned in a letter to President Donald Trump Tuesday.

ATA urged the White House to pursue specific policies, including explicitly exempting truckers delivering essential goods from restrictions. "Guidelines that make clear the role of shipping necessities by truck will ensure smooth resupply and delivery," Spear said in his letter. He also urged the administration to keep rest stops — such as those closed in Pennsylvania — open.

"Commercial drivers (hauling essential goods or medical supplies) have temporary relief from hours of service regulations, but they must manage fatigue as they respond to this emergency," he said. "Rest stops are an irreplaceable component, along with commercial truck stops." Spear also urged the administration to consider providing truck drivers with testing for COVID-19.

Uncertainty about who does or doesn't have COVID-19 is causing some businesses to toss the "shipper-of-choice" playbook and deny truck drivers access to bathrooms. "The lack of access to restrooms at shipper/receiver locations is a barrier to trucking continuity," Kathy Fulton, executive director of aid organization ALAN, said in an email, parts of which were published by OOIDA.

"I know these are very uncertain and scary times, but we are hearing multiple reports that shippers and receivers are refusing access to bathroom facilities for truck drivers due to fears about virus transmission," Fulton wrote in the email, which she sent to associations representing shippers and receivers. She urged them to advise their members to follow Centers for Disease Control hygiene guidelines and to show "informed compassion."

That compassion could determine whether truck capacity is available to a shipper when medical supplies need to get through, or when delayed Chinese goods arrive at US ports.

Contact William B. Cassidy at bill.cassidy@ihsmarkit.com and follow him on Twitter: [@willbcassidy](https://twitter.com/willbcassidy).

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