



Towing the Line

Do you have a tow truck? Do you use it to pick up customers' vehicles? If so, you have a commercial vehicle, and Department of Transportation requirements apply. Those are written by the federal Department of Transportation and the state. The Minnesota Department of Transportation and the State Patrol enforce them.

Begin by getting a USDOT number. You can find the application form at <http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/forms/print/r-l-forms.htm>. Put your company name, city and state on your trucks. If you pick up cars in neighboring states, put that USDOT number on your truck, too.

As you're transporting cars for hire, you also need to register as a For-Hire Motor Carrier of Property. That's a relatively simple form, available from MnDOT on its website for commercial vehicle operations, <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/cvo/index.html>. You are required to attend a training seminar on the requirements, but that can be done online, at no charge, at MN/DOT's website. You also have to submit proof of insurance.

Make sure your drivers are qualified. Set up a file for each one, to keep track of the documentation. You need to check with their previous employers, going back three years, and you need to check their driving records. They need to have health cards, showing that they are physically qualified to drive. You also need proof that they can operate your vehicle safely and correctly. For guidance on this and a sample driver application form, see <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/cvo/applications/dqFile.pdf>.

Your drivers have to hold the correct driver's licenses, of course. They don't need commercial driver's licenses unless you tow larger rigs – if the combined gross vehicle weight rating of your truck and anything it tows exceeds 26,000 pounds. If your vehicles are rated that high, your drivers also must participate in a drug and alcohol testing program. Don't forget to periodically confirm that your drivers' licenses are valid. If a driver loses his license for any reason, he better not drive for you.

Inspect your vehicles. Drivers are required to do documented post-trip inspections at the end of each day the vehicle is operated. At the beginning of each day, the driver needs to check the previous post-trip inspection report, to verify that any problems were corrected. And the driver needs to check the vehicle, to ensure it is in safe operating condition. Don't forget to have the driver check for the required emergency equipment (spare fuses, a 5BC fire extinguisher, and at least three warning triangles).

You don't need certified annual inspections, unless you cross the state border or are rated over 26,000 pounds.

There are limits to how many hours your drivers can work. They can't work shifts longer than 14 hours, and they can't drive more than eleven hours per shift. You need to keep accurate records of their work time, but if they stay within 100 air miles of your home base, they don't have to keep a log book. There are exemptions to the hour limits for emergency service – if you're picking up a disabled vehicle or police ask you to tow someone, you can send your driver out for that, even if it is at the end of a long shift.

Your drivers are required to stop at weigh stations. While they may get waved through, they should always be ready for an inspection. That means making sure that each one always carries his driver's license, health card, vehicle registration, proof of insurance, the previous day's inspection report, and emergency equipment. Making sure everything on the truck (especially lights and brakes) is in good working order is always needed.

One more critical requirement: secure the load. A car loaded onto a flatbed must not move at all, particularly if the tow truck has to brake sharply. Chains, slings, and wire ropes used to secure the vehicles have to be in good condition and rated for the load they'll handle. A shifting load can cause a driver to lose control. A lost load can kill others.

Mn/DOT has extensive information about its requirements on its website, <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/cvo/index.html>. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration also has information, at <http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/>. And if you don't like the online approach, call Mn/DOT, at 651-215-6330.

Complying with the legal requirements for tow truck operation isn't that complicated.

- Get a US DOT number.
- Make sure your drivers are qualified.
- Verify that your trucks are always in good working condition.
- Require the loads to be secured.

One final, important point. Your drivers are out in traffic. As soon as they step out of the truck's cab, they need to wear high visibility clothing. But that alone doesn't protect them. Remind them to try to position their trucks to give themselves some protection. Never trust that other drivers will see them.

This article is intended to provide general information (not advice) about current safety topics. To discuss your specific concerns and how CHESS may help, please contact CHESS at CHESS@CHESS-safety.com or 651-481-9787.