

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Has Improved Its Process for Issuing Permits for Oversize Trucks, but More Can Be Done

REPORT NUMBER 99141, MAY 2000

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review of the Department of Transportation's (Caltrans) process for issuing permits disclosed:

- Roadway changes are not always promptly communicated to the permits branch.*
 - Hundreds of field personnel report roadway changes to only two regional liaisons.*
 - Policies and procedures for reporting roadway changes differ among reporting units.*
 - Caltrans is taking steps to improve communication of roadway information.*
 - The process for writing permits is inefficient, labor-intensive, and susceptible to human error.*
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We evaluated the Department of Transportation's (Caltrans) process for approving travel routes and issuing permits that allow oversize trucks to move along specified routes on the state highway system. We found the following deficiencies:

Finding #1: Caltrans' reporting structure has too many individuals reporting to too few liaisons.

Caltrans has too many personnel reporting changes in road conditions via e-mail, fax, and phone to only two individuals working as regional liaisons who have no authority to enforce reporting requirements. The permits branch relies on other Caltrans units—primarily the Construction, Maintenance, and Traffic Operations programs and the Office of Structures Maintenance and Investigations—to provide the required data and information for the routing database. At any given time, hundreds of individuals can be involved in projects requiring them to report changes to only two regional liaisons who have to evaluate all of the changes and update the database promptly so that permit writers have the most current information.

We recommended that Caltrans designate district staff to coordinate communication between the permits branch and personnel working in the field. Caltrans should require communication coordinators to work with the regional liaisons to develop a standard reporting format.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

As of May 11, 2001, Caltrans hired nine truck services managers who serve as a focal point for reporting roadway changes throughout the 12 districts to the two regional liaisons.

Finding #2: Caltrans lacks uniform policies and procedures for reporting roadway changes.

The problem of poor communication of roadway changes is exacerbated by the fact that each of the reporting units—Construction, Maintenance, Traffic Operations and Structures Maintenance and Investigations—has its own policies and procedures governing the reporting of roadway change information to the permits branch. These policies are not uniform and do not always specify who is responsible for reporting roadway changes.

We recommended that Caltrans ensure that its policies clearly and consistently specify the types of roadway information that must be reported to the permits branch, and clearly communicate its policies and procedures to all responsible parties.

Department Action: Corrective action taken.

In July 2000 Caltrans reported that it issued a high-level policy directive that defines roles and responsibilities of various functional areas and various Caltrans functional program policies to strengthen reporting of roadway policies. In addition, Caltrans has contracted with a fax service provider to notify annual permit holders of highway changes.

Finding #3: Programs that report roadway changes have not always followed the policy for reporting such changes.

The procedures for reporting temporary and permanent clearance changes clearly state that those responsible for reporting should notify the regional liaison 15 days in advance. However, those responsible sometimes report these changes to a district traffic manager, but do not report them to the regional liaison. Regional liaisons must gather information from other sources and do not always have enough lead time to update the routing database and ensure that permits are issued for appropriate travel routes.

We recommended that Caltrans establish a process and designate a position with authority to enforce the reporting policies. If personnel do not adhere to the policies and procedures, Caltrans should tie reporting to performance evaluations.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

Caltrans' new truck services managers will play a key role in implementing the new policy, described in the response to Finding #2, that holds accountable personnel responsible for reporting roadway changes.

Finding #4: Caltrans' current permit-writing process is labor-intensive and susceptible to error.

The current permit-writing process requires permit writers to manually process and review most permits by using maps and a roadway information database. This process is time-consuming, and it increases the risk of routing errors from transcription mistakes during the recording process or from a driver misreading an illegible permit. Another labor-intensive aspect of the current system is the practice of double-checking all overweight permits because the system does not have electronic controls that prevent the issuance of erroneous permits. Although this practice reduces the likelihood that Caltrans will contribute to accidents, performing this function manually is an inefficient and costly use of resources.

We recommended that Caltrans develop an automated routing system. If its current request for an automated routing system is not approved, Caltrans should seek approval again in the next budget cycle. In its new request, Caltrans should include an analysis of its staffing requirements and should also identify what the funding source would be.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

Caltrans has received approval for funding a semi-automated routing system and has selected a vendor who will design and implement the new semi-automated routing system. Caltrans plans to have a new system operational by September 2002. Caltrans previously reported that its new system should be operational by April 2002, but several factors delayed the vendor selection process, causing Caltrans to revise its timeline for implementing the new system.

Finding #5: Caltrans does not collect adequate data on permit errors.

Caltrans does not track the number of roadway changes that were reported after the fact by truck drivers, the public, or other Caltrans employees; nor does it track changes that were reported late by those responsible. Moreover, Caltrans' current computer system does not allow it to identify all the erroneous permits and related incidents that may have resulted from late or unreported changes.

We recommended that Caltrans track and compile statistics on permit errors and use the information to identify problem areas.

Department Action: Pending.

Caltrans will incorporate the ability to track and compile statistics on permit errors into its new automated system. Caltrans will use this information to identify and address problem areas. Currently, Caltrans addresses permit errors on a case-by-case basis as it becomes aware that such a problem exists.

Finding #6: Caltrans does not enforce adequate, standardized procedures for requesting and writing permits.

Caltrans is not actively enforcing its policy of requiring permit applicants to use its standard application forms. Mistakes in permits can arise because Caltrans accepts modified permit application forms from its customers. Differences in these forms make them more difficult for permit writers to review. Further, Caltrans does not have standardized procedures for permit writers to use when issuing permits. As a result, drivers and other permit writers may have difficulty understanding permit instructions.

We recommended that Caltrans require that customers use the standard permit application form. We also recommended that Caltrans develop a standard format for permit writing.

Department Action: Pending.

Caltrans currently requires all of its customers who do not use its Web-based permit system to use its standard permit application form. However, beginning in early 2001, Caltrans planned to require all of its customers to use the same application form. In addition, Caltrans' new automated system will produce permits using a standard format.

Finding #7: Caltrans does not provide enough training for its new permit writers, nor does it provide formal ongoing training or a refresher course for its experienced staff.

Caltrans does not train new permit writers in the use of pilot car maps, standard terminology for writing a permit, and the routing database. Pilot car maps help a permit writer determine when a pilot car is needed. In addition, not all permit writers use the same abbreviations and wording to describe an approved route on a permit. Consequently, drivers and even other permit writers may have difficulty understanding routing instructions. Training will become even more important for the permit writers if Caltrans' new routing system is approved.

We recommended that Caltrans expand training for new permit writers to include instruction in standardized permit writing, use of pilot car maps, and use of the routing database, and develop an ongoing training program for experienced permit writers. In addition, Caltrans should assess the training needs of experienced permit writers and develop an ongoing training program.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

Caltrans applied for additional resources through the budget process to hire a full-time employee to develop formal training for the permits branch staff. This request was unsuccessful, but Caltrans will apply for the funding again in the next budget cycle. Caltrans will continue to use a former permit writer to train staff on a continuous basis until a permanent trainer position has been secured.

Finding #8: Caltrans uses a job classification for permit writers that is no longer appropriate.

One internal factor that might be contributing to high turnover may be a job classification that is no longer appropriate. Permit writers are classified as transportation engineering technicians, a category that requires certain technical skills and knowledge of transportation engineering principles that do not appear necessary for permit writers.

Department Action: Partial corrective action taken.

Caltrans reports that it completed an analysis of skill requirements for permit writers and within the next two years plans to develop options to create or modify existing civil service classifications that best fit the necessary skills for permit writers. Completion of this process depends on the skills and knowledge necessary to operate the new system.

