

Shortage of Log Truck Drivers

Rob McLagan

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The timber industry's current "quiet phase" is believed to be giving operators a respite from the effects of a looming shortage of log truck drivers.

However, forestry interests expect the problem of an aging workforce and too few younger people entering the industry will become only too apparent when log prices move back toward the high side of their cycle.

A report commissioned by the Log transport Safety Council estimates that New Zealand has around 21,000 truck drivers, but needs another 1250 to meet the demands of the logging industry nationwide.

Forest Owners Association head Rob McLagan says the big increase in the expected log harvest, especially in Northland and Tairāwhiti will increase demand for drivers, and could even delay some log harvests until transport is available.

Big rig drivers must be 18 or over, and the job is not always well paid, with wages starting at around \$13 per hour. Hours are limited by law to 70 per week.

However Mr McLagan expects the laws of supply and demand could improve wages and conditions for drivers. "There's a lot of skill involved in driving a logging truck. Besides handling a heavy vehicle, drivers have to cope with a lot of off road driving, perhaps on poorly formed roads, including some district roads, which were never intended to cope with heavy trucks and trailers."

Log Transport Safety Council secretary Bruce Nairn puts the driver shortage down to a number of factors, including the time and costs involved in getting the Class five licence needed to drive a truck and trailer over 25,000 kilograms.

"The graduated licence system means a driver takes from nine to eighteen months to move from a Class Two to a Class five licence," says Mr Nairn.

Then there's the problem of finding a truck to learn on. Many years ago, a young person could sit beside dad or an uncle to watch and learn, and perhaps take the wheel on a quiet stretch of road.

"These days, OSH regulations and transport laws mean Dad can't do the training, and operators don't want to put youngsters into rigs worth up to \$450,000," says Mr Nairn.

However, the industry is working on the problem. A number of driver training schemes are starting up around the country, emphasising putting young drivers in the cab with the more experienced operators.

Charlene Kerr, of the Road Transport Associations Rotorua/Hamilton/Tauranga

office says the association approached Bay of Plenty polytechnic in Tauranga, the polytechnic investigated the idea of a course and decide to offer a driver training and licensing course, kicking off in 2004.

When the polytechnic and road transport association industry representatives got feedback from the log truck operators, they were clear about their needs. “Operators want experience, experience, experience,” says Ms Kerr. “Training has to be tops, or they don't want to know.”

Secondary schools careers days brought out some keen interest from youngsters interested in a driving career. “Student loans will be available for the course,” says Ms Kerr. “The youngsters will start by getting their Class Two licence, then work their way up to Class Five. After that they can specialise into their chosen industry.”