UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES: WHAT IS TRUCK PLATOONING?

The rise in new transportation technologies has required many states, including Oklahoma, to change their laws to accommodate such technologies. One example of this is the development of truck platooning technology. Semi-autonomous truck platooning is a new technology that allows multiple vehicles in a group (“platoon”) to synchronize their speed, acceleration, and braking in order to operate more efficiently. Platooning works through a system of sensors and automated communication that allows connected trucks to follow each other at a much closer, but still safe, distance than they would be able to if they were each independently controlling their speed. Decreasing the distance between trucks allows the platoon to take advantage of improved aerodynamics to reduce fuel consumption. Studies show that platooning technology can increase fuel efficiency 5-10% at highway speeds.

Platooning technology takes advantage of new technology to coordinate between trucks to increase efficiency. However, unlike fully automated vehicles, each driver in the platoon maintains control over the vehicle’s steering and can take control of the speed again when necessary. Platooning technology is similar to cruise control technology, just on a larger scale.

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WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Trucking is an industry that has a large economic impact on Oklahoma by itself, but an even larger one if you consider all the other industries it supports and affects. The trucking industry employs more than 75,000 Oklahomans at more than 11,000 in-state businesses. Taking advantage of new technologies to save money allows these local businesses to flourish and grow, increasing their positive economic impact on the state. Additionally, trucking is the link between manufacturers, the agriculture sector, retailers, importers, and exporters. Increasing efficiency in trucking allows the shipping industry to pass savings along to their clients, multiplying the positive economic impact across various sectors of the economy.

WHAT HAS OKLAHOMA DONE?

Because truck platooning technology is a new transportation innovation, many states have had to change their laws in order to accommodate new driving behavior. Most states have traffic laws known as “following too close” laws (FTC laws). These laws prohibit motorists from following other motorists at an unsafely short distance, or tailgating. FTC laws have been interpreted by most states
to prohibit multiple trucks from using platooning technology to decrease the distance between them, negating the impact of this new technology. In response to this concern, many states have altered their FTC laws to exempt trucks using platooning technology from the prohibition on tailgating. During the 2019 legislative session, the Oklahoma Legislature passed Senate Bill 189 to create an exception for platooned trucks in the state’s FTC law. This law change should allow more truckers to take advantage of platooning technology in order to reduce costs on their businesses. As new technology in the transportation industry continues to emerge, the state must ensure its laws stay up-to-date in order to allow businesses and entrepreneurs to take advantage of technological advancements.

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