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◆ WSJ NEWS EXCLUSIVE

Trucks Hauling U.S. Mail Frequently Violate Safety Rules. Crashes Killed 79 People Since 2020.

USPS, under pressure on costs, contracts trucking companies at cut rates and pushes them to meet aggressive delivery schedules

By *Christopher Weaver* [Follow](#)

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For years, the U.S. Postal Service has faced competition from the likes of United Parcel Service Inc. and FedEx Corp. To fight them off, it hired outside trucking companies at cut-rate prices, required them to meet aggressive schedules and then looked the other way when they ran afoul of highway safety rules, a Wall Street Journal investigation found.

The result has been deadly. Postal contractors have been involved in at least 68 fatal crashes that killed 79 people in the past three years, according to police crash and inspection records.

Nearly 50 long-haul trucking contractors that moved mail for the Postal Service had safety records so poor that another arm of the federal government, the Transportation Department, put them on probation, DOT data show.

Particularly common among the postal contractors were violations of DOT rules meant to guard against fatigue by limiting how many hours truckers can drive. About 39% of trucking companies that hauled U.S. mail busted those limits and related rules at a rate DOT says raises red flags, compared with 13% of for-hire trucking firms that were inspected during the time period, a Journal analysis of DOT scoring data covering 2021 and 2022 found.

USPS tolerated the violations, and according to industry representatives, set unrealistic expectations for speedy deliveries that at times led the truckers to skirt the rules. The Journal identified dozens of cross-country trips listed in postal contracts with deadlines that would require drivers to stay on the road longer than allowed, unless companies cut into their profits by using multiple drivers.

The Postal Service paid more than \$115 million to a Murfreesboro, Tenn.-based trucking group in 2021, making it one of USPS's biggest vendors. Two sister companies in the group paid fines in 2017 over safety violations, including failing to ensure drivers complied with the driving hour limits, which led DOT to put them on probation.

Between 2017 and December 2022, the trucking group was caught breaking the rules limiting drivers' hours more than 200 times, DOT enforcement data show.



A Caminantes truck hauling mail near Denver hit a car carrying members of the Godines and Everts families, killing five of them, including a baby. The truck's driver was distracted and lacked a valid commercial license, according to police records.

PHOTO: 9NEWS/KUSA

In June, a truck operated by another Postal Service contractor slammed into a Ford Edge as the Ford slowed in traffic on Interstate 25 near Denver, killing five people including a baby. The truck's driver was distracted and lacked a valid commercial license, according to police records. The company had a history of similar violations stretching back across its decade of work with USPS, DOT inspection records show.

The record shows "this company really doesn't seem to be that safe," said Abby Godines, 19, whose parents, her brother Aaron, his fiancée and their 3-month-old child were killed in the crash. "It is just a disappointment that the Postal Service would even hire a company like this. It is just not fair," she said.

In February, USPS said it would end its contracts with the company, registered with DOT in the name of Caminantes Trucking, based in Long Beach, Calif., after a Colorado television station, NBC's 9News, reported on the driver's licensing status.

An attorney for Caminantes declined to comment.

The Postal Service plans to revamp its contracting process later this year, said USPS spokeswoman Sue Brennan. She said the Postal Service will begin requiring contractors to meet specific DOT requirements, including for safety and maintenance, to get work and will monitor their performance.

Ms. Brennan declined to answer additional questions about the planned changes and what prompted them.

Cutting costs

Under pressure for years from falling revenue due to reduced volume of first-class mail while it simultaneously struggled to meet consumer demand for door-to-door package delivery, the Postal Service has slowed some deliveries and raised prices, among other cost-saving measures. It has also increasingly turned to private trucking to move mail between distribution centers.

USPS reported a loss of about \$1 billion in the quarter that ended Dec. 31, after losing money on operations every year for more than a decade. USPS makes most of its money by selling postage but receives some funds from Congress.

Many of the private trucking companies work exclusively for the agency, which spends about \$5 billion annually on trucking contracts, making it one of the biggest U.S. purchasers of shipping services.

During the pandemic, the trucking industry was pummeled by a combination of rising e-commerce, a shortage of drivers and chaotic swings in the supply chain.

The Postal Service, which operates as an independent agency, was forced to further stretch its network to keep packages moving. In one sign of the strain, its spending on emergency and add-on trucking contracts more than doubled from 2019 to 2021.

“The Postal Service has been hit across the board,” said James O’Rourke, a professor of management at the University of Notre Dame.

Under postal rules, contract officers must award business to the vendor that offers the agency the “best value.” Contract terms can stretch across several years and don’t keep up with market prices.

In practice, industry insiders say this has driven down contractors' rates to well below industry averages.



The Postal Service headquarters in Washington, D.C.

PHOTO: ERIN SCOTT/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Prices for trucking services are often about 15% to 20% below standard industry rates, said John Sheehy, the president of the National Star Route Mail Contractors Association, a trade group for trucking and transportation-related postal contractors.

USPS's contracting manual's only specific safety requirement is that trucking contractors must have a DOT safety rating that is better than "unsatisfactory."

At that rating, DOT bans a company from driving.

Large commercial shippers such as RXO Inc. and Schneider National Inc. generally refuse to hire trucking companies with DOT's probationary rating, called "conditional," which is higher than unsatisfactory, according to their websites. RXO and Schneider declined to comment.

USPS worked with dozens of companies with the conditional rating. It even continued doing business with contractors accused of defrauding the agency, for instance by double billing it for gas, according to investigative reports from the Postal Service's Office of Inspector General.

The Journal reviewed investigative records from the inspector general over the past decade that show USPS continued contracting with at least seven major contractors for years after investigators accused them of fraud, misappropriating funds, billing for dummy routes or manipulating contracts. Some of the investigations were settled with monetary payments and at least one resulted in a criminal conviction.

Limited contractor oversight

USPS recently told the office of a member of its congressional oversight committee that it didn't track serious crashes by its trucking contractors, according to an email from February reviewed by the Journal.

"They're not even taking the time to find out," said Zach Cahalan, the executive director of the Truck Safety Coalition, an advocacy group, which had coordinated with the congressional office on the inquiry. "There's no reporting mechanism they have asked their [contractors] to have in place to be notified when a large truck in their service results in injury or death," he said in an interview.

Ms. Brennan said the Postal Service reviews safety incidents with contractors as they happen and frequently discusses safety efforts with them.

The agency's inspector general in 2016 said the agency employed only 18 contract officers to oversee its commercial-trucker network, saying that allowed for just four hours of annual oversight work per trucking contract.

Ms. Brennan declined to comment on whether that staffing level had changed. She said about 1,078 USPS "administrative officials" helped oversee contractors on a day-to-day basis. The inspector general's report said such officials are post masters, facility managers and others whose primary duties are unrelated to trucking contractors.

The company involved in the June crash in Colorado, Caminantes Trucking, secured its first postal contract in April 2011, a USPS official said.

Mr. Sheehy, of the trade group for trucking and transportation-related postal contractors, said the company, like many new entrants, undercut the bids of contractors that previously served its routes.

Public inspection records, which cover routine checks, such as at weigh stations, and traffic stops, show the Colorado crash was at least the 16th time Caminantes's truckers were caught without the necessary commercial driver's licenses since 2017 and the second time that week.

Later last year, Caminantes paid a \$21,460 fine to settle allegations by DOT that it violated safety rules, including requirements to ensure drivers are qualified.

The driver in the Colorado highway crash was charged with vehicular homicide and other crimes in December. James Colgan, an attorney for the driver, Jesus Puebla, said his client

disagrees with the prosecution that he was at fault. Mr. Colgan said Mr. Puebla's medical certificate required for his commercial driver's license had expired but that he renewed it in the days after the crash.

Desiree Everts, whose daughter and granddaughter were killed in the crash, said learning about Caminantes's safety record "makes me sick."

The crash took place as the Godines family and Ms. Everts's daughter Halie were driving home to Gillette, Wyo., from a birthday weekend in Denver. Halie and Aaron Godines took their 3-month-old baby, Tessleigh, to the Denver Zoo for the first time over the weekend, according to Ms. Everts and Ms. Godines.

The Godines family has sued Caminantes and Mr. Puebla for wrongful death, court records show.

Pushing 'to the limit'

The Postal Service requires contractors to fulfill schedules that veteran trucking company operators said would be seriously challenging in light of DOT rules restricting driving hours.

One route in a contract reviewed by the Journal requires a trucking contractor to leave Salt Lake City with a load of mail at 3:30 a.m. and arrive in San Francisco at 5:30 p.m. the same day—15 hours after accounting for the time change from Mountain to Pacific Time. That is more than the 11 hours of daily driving permitted under safety rules, and an hour longer than the 14-hour limit on overall time worked by a driver, including stops and loading time.

Representatives of postal contractors said companies sometimes try to arrange for drivers to tag-team on such trips, but that the relays can easily break down, for example if a driver is late to the rendezvous point.



Ms. Everts made a curio cabinet with items from her family members killed in the crash.
LAUREN MILLER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



A family photo of Aaron Godines with his baby, both of whom were killed.
GODINES FAMILY

“If something goes wrong, there’s a lot of pressure to get the job done at any cost,” said industry representative Mr. Sheehy, himself a former USPS trucking contractor. The Postal

Service is “pushing these people to the limit,” he said.

Mr. Sheehy said in recent years USPS has terminated or elected not to renew contracts with companies that fall below 95% in their on-time rates. As a result, postal contractors can struggle to meet the demands of their customer and comply with safety regulations, he said.

USPS spokeswoman Ms. Brennan declined to comment.

In the two years ended in December, DOT flagged 466 Postal Service trucking contractors for high rates of violations related to driving hours, according to the Journal’s analysis of DOT’s internal scoring system, which the agency uses to prioritize investigations. The Journal identified the companies hauling mail through inspection records.

In February, DOT proposed an overhaul of its scoring system, which industry groups have criticized, saying it can unfairly overstate risks at some companies. The new system is more accurate, according to DOT.

The Postal Service’s own fleet, which includes mail-delivery vehicles, bigger box trucks and tractor trailers operated by its own employees, are excluded from DOT’s safety regulations. That means the overall safety of that portion of its operation can’t be evaluated using DOT’s records. USPS has said it voluntarily complies with DOT requirements.

About 70% of Postal Service spending on transportation goes to trucking contractors, according to USPS data published in an inspector general report.

Winning new contracts

The Murfreesboro USPS contractor with a record of safety violations, a group including McCormick Trucking Inc. and Tracie McCormick Inc., works exclusively for USPS, DOT records show. McCormick Trucking has been hauling U.S. mail since the 1970s.

“Each day, these motor carriers are dedicated to improving their safety and compliance processes to achieve service excellence, while working within the parameters of shipper requirements,” Marty Kirschnick, executive director of McCormick Trucking Inc., said.

He declined to answer specific questions about the group’s safety record and work with the Postal Service.

The McCormick group faced a criminal investigation by the Postal Service’s inspector general in part over its safety record starting in 2010, an inspector general report shows.

Investigators found evidence that the company purposefully instructed drivers to violate the rules capping their on-the-road hours, violated legal requirements governing drivers' pay and double-billed USPS by \$1.14 million for gas, the report says.

The Justice Department didn't bring a criminal case after a senior prosecutor said it was unlikely to win because it lacked "any juror appeal," according to the inspector general's investigative report. The DOJ official, Jack Smith, who is now the special counsel overseeing DOJ's investigations into former President Donald Trump, declined to comment.

The McCormick group settled civil fraud claims by the government for \$750,000 in 2018 without admitting wrongdoing to resolve the double-billing allegations.

Mr. Kirschnick declined to comment. The Postal Service didn't comment publicly at the time, and Ms. Brennan, the spokeswoman, declined to comment.

After the settlement, the Postal Service awarded little new business to McCormick Trucking Inc. and Tracie McCormick Inc. but continued to extend contracts the firms had already won, contracting records reviewed by the Journal show.

A third McCormick company, McCormicks LLC, formed after the investigation began, continued bidding on and winning new USPS contracts. The new company's manager is the daughter of McCormick Trucking Inc. founder Robert McCormick, according to business filings and social media. The three companies share an address, contact information and at least some trucks, DOT records show. The companies are separately owned, Mr. Kirschnick said, although he said he served as spokesman for all three companies.



Headquarters of the McCormick group of trucking companies in Murfreesboro, Tenn., shown in March 2021.

PHOTO: PICTOMETRY

Ms. Brennan declined to comment on USPS's contracts with the McCormick companies.

Meanwhile, DOT took action against McCormick Trucking Inc. and Tracie McCormick Inc. for violations of its rules for monitoring vehicle maintenance and drivers' hours on duty, fining the companies about \$57,000 in 2017 and downgrading the companies' safety ratings to the conditional status. Tracie McCormick Inc. was fined an additional \$14,730 in 2018 for unsafe operations.

A spokeswoman for DOT's Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration declined to comment on the case.

The two companies have continued to violate safety rules. Tracie McCormick Inc.'s rate of violations of the rules limiting drivers' hours on the road surpassed a threshold DOT considers high risk every month in 2021 and 2022, according to a Journal analysis of DOT data. McCormick Trucking Inc. did so for 15 straight months through December.

In one crash, a driver for McCormick Trucking Inc. drifted out of his lane and killed an Orlando, Fla., street-sweeper driver, who was standing on a sidewalk waiting for a tow truck to load his disabled vehicle. Police determined the McCormick driver was responsible for the crash and charged him with careless driving. The driver of the McCormick truck didn't respond to requests for comment.

The allegation was dropped when a witness to the incident failed to show up for a court date.

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