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# DOT called out for gaps in truck safety, COVID-19 leadership

John Gallagher, Washington Correspondent • Thursday, April 30, 2020 644

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GAO wants FMCSA to improve how it ID's "high-risk" carriers. Credit: Jim Allen/FreightWaves



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A new report from a government watchdog agency urges more action from the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) on truck safety oversight and in responding to pandemics such as COVID-19.

The two issues are among 16 new or existing “open priority recommendations” published by the [U.S. Government Accountability Office \(GAO\) on April 30](#). Such recommendations are those GAO considers needing the most attention from heads of key departments or agencies.

According to GAO, “they are highlighted because, upon implementation, they may significantly improve government operation, for example, by realizing large dollar savings; eliminating mismanagement, fraud, and abuse; or making progress toward addressing a high risk or duplication issue.”

One of those recommendations, initially made in 2014, was to improve how the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) accounts for carrier safety – an issue that has [also been raised by the DOT’s Office of Inspector General \(IG\)](#).

While FMCSA did not agree with the GAO’s conclusions on revising the FMCSA’s Compliance, Safety, Accountability (CSA) program to improve how it identifies high-risk carriers, the agency has asserted that a new model it is testing (called “item response theory”) which it informed the IG it plans to deploy in September, could address GAO’s concerns.

“However, we continue to believe that addressing Safety Measurement System (SMS) methodology limitations has merit and could help the agency better target FMCSA’s resources to the carriers that pose the highest risk of crashing,” GAO asserted.

“For example, we found FMCSA requires a minimum level of information for a carrier to receive an SMS score; however, this requirement is not strong enough to produce sufficiently reliable scores. As a result, FMCSA identified many carriers as high risk that were not later involved in a crash, potentially causing FMCSA to miss opportunities to intervene with higher risk carriers.”

Another high priority recommendation listed by GAO – initially made in 2015, and with obvious ramifications for the COVID-19 pandemic – was meant to “help improve the U.S. aviation sector’s preparedness for future communicable disease threats from abroad.” GAO had recommended that the Secretary of

Transportation lead in developing an inter-agency “national aviation-preparedness plan” for disease outbreaks.

However, while DOT agreed such a plan is needed, it contends that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security are responsible for communicable disease response and preparedness planning, asserting that these departments “should lead any efforts to address planning for communicable disease outbreaks, including for transportation,” according to GAO.

Regarding COVID-19, DOT said it had facilitated conference calls among agencies and had collaborated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to update guidelines for airline crews.

GAO pushed back, however, asserting that despite those efforts, “we continue to believe that DOT is in the best position to work with its relevant stakeholders to develop a national aviation-preparedness plan, which could guide preparation for communicable diseases nationally and for individual airlines and airports, as well as establish a framework for communication and response for the next communicable disease outbreak.”

Tags

- airline safety
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Compliance safety accountability program
- Coronavirus Freight Industry
- COVID-19 pandemic
- DOT Office of Inspector General
- Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration
- truck safety
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- U.S. Department of Transportation
- U.S. Government Accountability Office