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House Bill 1614

House Transportation Committee

Room 327E | February 13, 2025, 10:30 am

Matt Linneman, Deputy Director for Engineering

Greetings, Chair and members of the Committee. I am Matt Linneman, Deputy Director for Engineering for the North Dakota Department of Transportation (NDDOT). I'm here today to oppose House Bill 1614.

The bill mandates that automated truck tractors may not be operated on highways unless an individual with a commercial driver's license (CDL) be physically present in the automated vehicle.

Automated vehicle and platooning technologies offer a valuable opportunity to enhance safety, stimulate rural economies, and help inform regulatory frameworks for autonomous vehicles – all while addressing the growing driver shortage. In North Dakota, there are 49,591 registered CDL drivers, but with nearly 61% of them age 50 or older, the need for innovative solutions is becoming increasingly urgent. Twenty-nine states have enacted laws to enable and regulate autonomous vehicle deployments.

The North Dakota Century Code 39-10-74 grants the NDDOT, in coordination with the North Dakota Highway Patrol (NDHP), the authority to approve operational plans submitted by a platooning technology provider or commercial vehicle operator to operate in the state. Leader-follower platooning technology is currently being used by two companies, Cenex Harvest States and Minn-Dak Farmers' Cooperative. The autonomous follower vehicle is connected by the technology to a lead vehicle with a driver. Both companies are currently operating with a safety driver in the follower vehicle as required by their operational plan and the approval memo signed by NDDOT and NDHP.

Minn-Dak Cooperative has tested over 50,000 miles of this technology on our state highways for the past three years. Cenex Harvest States has been running dry goods from Minot to Grand Forks to Fargo for the past year.

Seasonal CDL drivers are very hard to find, and agriculture is one of the industries experiencing this shortage and working to advance the technology. This bill will not allow the eventual removal of the safety driver from the follower vehicle, thus none of the gains of the technology will be realized.

The NDDOT is currently testing an autonomous attenuator truck (ATMA). The ATMA is also using leader-follower platooning technology. The autonomous follower vehicle is a snowplow truck outfitted with crash attenuator and is virtually tethered to a lead vehicle with a driver. Currently we drive the ATMA to the work zone independently then set up the technology

connection once on site. The ATMA is designed to absorb impacts in works zones, reducing risk to maintenance team members, and removing the driver offers further protection to our team.

Given that this technology is utilized in NDDOT trucks for maintenance operations and is not a truck-tractor configuration for transporting people or goods, we don't believe our current operations of the ATMA conflict with the proposed legislation.

The NDDOT agrees that this technology should be carefully implemented but not eliminated. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I'm happy to answer any questions.