

Issued on: May 12, 2003.

Mary E. Peters,

Federal Highway Administrator.

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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration

49 CFR Part 391

[Docket No. FMCSA 1997-2759]

RIN 2126-AA31 (Formerly RIN 2125-AE19)

English Language Requirement; Qualifications of Drivers; Withdrawal

AGENCY: Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), DOT.

ACTION: Advance notice of proposed rulemaking (ANPRM); withdrawal.

SUMMARY: The FMCSA withdraws its advance notice of proposed rulemaking (ANPRM) requesting comments on potential changes to a provision in the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations (FMCSRs) involving the English language. That provision requires that drivers of commercial motor vehicles (CMVs) operating in interstate commerce be able to “read and speak the English language sufficiently to converse with the general public, understand highway traffic signs and signals, respond to official inquiries, and make entries on reports and records.” After analysis and review of the comments, FMCSA has concluded that at this time there is no quantifiable data on which to propose modifying the regulation to require a more stringent or definitive standard, or to require State motor vehicle agencies to administer a specific test for English proficiency.

DATES: The advance notice of proposed rulemaking published on August 26, 1997, at 62 FR 45200 is withdrawn as of July 24, 2003.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mary Moehring, Driver and Carrier Operations Division, (202) 366-4001, Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, Department of Transportation, 400 Seventh Street, SW., Washington, DC 20590.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

On August 26, 1997, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), predecessor agency to the FMCSA, published an ANPRM in the **Federal Register** (at 62 FR 45200) requesting comments on potential changes to 49

CFR 391.11(b)(2) of the FMCSRs. This provision requires that drivers of CMVs operating in interstate commerce be able to “read and speak the English language sufficiently to converse with the general public, understand highway traffic signs and signals, respond to official inquiries, and make entries on reports and records.”

The ANPRM was published in response to a letter from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Office of Civil Rights indicating that this English language requirement may conflict with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. 2000d, *et seq.*, as amended, that prohibits discrimination against applicants and beneficiaries in the administration of federally funded programs and activities based on race, color and national origin. In this letter, the ACLU also alleged that the regulation, as written, is overly broad and subject to arbitrary enforcement, causing potential interference with the constitutional guarantees of due process and equal protection.

In the ANPRM, the FHWA stated that § 391.11(b)(2), as promulgated by the former Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) in 1936, was intended to be enforced through the motor carrier employer. As noted in the ANPRM, the ICC specifically stated that it was the motor carrier employer’s responsibility to evaluate the driver’s proficiency in the English language. In addition, FHWA noted that the regulation was not intended to be enforced at the roadside. The employer was presumed to know what communication skills may be necessary for the type of cargo handled, the route taken, and the public contact required. The FHWA went on to say that it had never made speaking the English language a specific pre-requisite for obtaining a Commercial Driver License (CDL), and in fact proposed, and later authorized, administration of the CDL test in foreign languages.

The ANPRM asked the following 5 questions:

“1. Are there known instances in which a safety problem occurred which could be attributed, in whole or in part, to the driver not being able to read and speak English sufficiently to understand traffic signs or written or verbal instruction relating to the operation, loading or unloading of the vehicle? * * *

2. Do any of the States require drivers who operate commercial motor vehicles exclusively in intrastate commerce to read and speak the English language? * * *

3. How do States typically determine whether or not a driver or motor carrier is in violation of § 391.11(b)(2) or an equivalent

State provision? Are there particular English phrases or terms that are used to test the driver’s comprehension of the English language? Are there specific highway signs or messages that are shown to the driver?

4. Are there any cases in which State officials, exercising their authority under State law, have placed drivers out of service for being unable to read or speak the English language, after making a determination that the driver’s inability to comprehend the language created a safety risk that was too great to be ignored? * * *

5. How does one measure an individual’s level of ‘English proficiency’ or whether that individual has a ‘working knowledge of English’? * * *

Comments

Fifty-eight comments were received. These came from 9 States, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the ACLU, individual citizens, associations representing various segments of the trucking industry, insurance associations, several trucking companies, individual drivers and trucking industry management, associations representing State and Provincial enforcement and motor vehicle administrators, associations and unions representing drivers, and safety advocates.

Very few of the comments addressed the questions asked in the ANPRM. The vast majority of those commenting viewed the ANPRM as a proposal to lower the current English proficiency standard. The comments from groups representing the trucking industry, labor groups representing drivers, insurance companies and associations, and individual companies and drivers all recommended retaining the current provision. Nine States submitted comments that either recommended retaining the current standard or promulgating a more stringent standard. Of the members of the public who commented, 20 commenters recommended that the FMCSA either retain the current English language standard or enact a more stringent standard.

Mr. Victor Morales submitted a copy of a motion filed by counsel on his behalf in the County Court for Palm Beach County, Florida requesting the Court to declare § 316.302, Florida Statutes (1997), relating to the English proficiency requirement for CMV drivers, unconstitutional on the basis that it was vague, overly broad, and subject to arbitrary enforcement. Two commenters believed that the agency should revise the regulation to require a performance-based standard. Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart (who represented Congressional District 21 in

Florida) opposes FMCSA's current regulation at § 391.11(b)(2) "due to a recurring problem in our state as it pertains to enforcement of this regulation." Representative Diaz-Balart states that his constituents have had their CDLs suspended due to enforcement of § 391.11(b)(2). Examples include, * * * "traffic citations to CDL drivers for not commanding the English language to the satisfaction of the law enforcement officer, thereby giving him or her unfettered discretion; suspension of the licenses by judges, magistrates and/or officers of the peace of those drivers for not being able to communicate in English with the judge when appearing in Court; violation of due process and therefore the posing of many civil rights questions." Representative Diaz-Balart urged the agency to revise § 391.11(b)(2) to protect the constitutional and civil rights of drivers, and to end the arbitrary application of the regulation. Another member of Congress stated that the current regulation ought to be retained for safety reasons. The Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety stated its belief that a "performance-based" standard might result in unacceptably low levels of English proficiency that would directly endanger the traveling public.

The ACLU submitted comments explaining why, in its view, the current regulation has a discriminatory impact upon national and ethnic minorities, and invited discriminatory enforcement. The EEOC stated it shared the concern of the ACLU that as "currently written, the FMCSRs' English fluency requirement may conflict with the Federal civil rights laws." The EEOC suggested drafting a qualification standard in broad terms that could be applied in a manner appropriate to a specific job for a specific employer.

Decision

The FMCSA has decided to withdraw the ANPRM. After analysis and review of the comments, FMCSA has concluded that at this time there is no quantifiable data on which to propose modifying the regulation either to require a more stringent or definitive standard or to require State motor vehicle agencies to administer a specific test for English proficiency.

The FMCSA appreciates the analysis provided by the EEOC and the ACLU relating to the requirements of Title VI. However, the information introduced in response to the ANPRM does not establish that the current regulation requires an unnecessarily high level of English fluency that has resulted in a discriminatory impact or effect based

upon national origin, color or ethnicity. Accordingly, FMCSA believes that the regulation as currently written and properly enforced effectively balances issues of civil rights and highway safety.

In analyzing § 391.11(b)(2) in today's climate, the FMCSA believes that the regulation was, and remains, a requirement imposed to ensure that persons who drive commercial motor vehicles operate safely. As written, the regulation sets forth the qualifications of drivers of CMVs to read and speak the English language and allows each motor carrier employer the flexibility to determine the extent of proficiency needed to enforce it. It provides carriers with the flexibility to individually determine whether a driver has communication skills and English fluency to operate safely on the highway. There is no data available to suggest that this flexibility has caused discrimination or to conclude that motor carriers are employing the English language requirement in anything other than an evenhanded manner, tailored to the requirements of each particular company's operations. Nor do we have evidence to suggest that our State and local partners are subjecting limited English speakers to discrimination based on their race, color or national origin. The intent of the English-only regulation is not to discriminate, but to advance public safety and this is an essential aspect of our program.

Specifically, with regard to concerns about arbitrary or discriminatory enforcement, the FMCSA has found no evidence to suggest that enforcement officers routinely issue citations for lack of English proficiency. To the extent that such enforcement discretion is exercised, the FMCSA believes that such instances are exceedingly rare and may be occasioned by a misunderstanding of the provisions of § 391.11(b)(2). From the comments and the data available, the FMCSA believes that the discretion of enforcement officials to place a driver out of service when he or she constitutes a safety hazard is, and has been used judiciously.

Further, FMCSA finds no inconsistency in its authorization to States to offer CDL tests in languages other than English, while at the same time requiring motor carrier employers to ensure a level of English proficiency for drivers on our public highways. The tests, training and study manuals associated with obtaining a CDL are complex. Therefore, the administration of the CDL test in languages other than English is justified. However, in actual operation on the highway, the CDL

driver must be able, based on the needs of the carrier's operation, to have a sufficient command of English to ensure that safety is not compromised.

After reviewing the comments, the FMCSA is also persuaded that the performance-oriented standard, based on required tasks, as suggested in the ANPRM and advocated by the ACLU and EEOC is, in fact, not substantively different than the current standard to which persons who drive commercial motor vehicles must already adhere. The FMCSA is mindful of the concerns voiced by safety groups and members of the enforcement community that drivers with limited English proficiency may pose a potential safety concern both on the roadway, as well as in situations in which an enforcement officer is conducting a vehicle inspection, weighing a vehicle, or in other routine law enforcement actions. At this time, however, as noted, the FMCSA has no quantifiable data on which to base a proposal that would modify the standards in or scope of the existing regulation at 49 CFR 391.11(b)(2).

One other matter requires comment here. Under Executive Order 13166, titled "Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency" (65 FR 50121, September 16, 2000), and guidance issued on the same day by the Department of Justice (DOJ), titled "Enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—National Origin Discrimination Against Persons With Limited English Proficiency" (65 FR 50123), the Federal government must ensure that no person with limited English Proficiency (LEP) shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, color or national origin under any program or activity that receives Federal financial assistance.

Consistent with the executive order, the DOJ guidance, and additional guidance issued by the Department of Transportation titled, "DOT Guidance to Recipients on Special Language Services to Limited English Proficient (LEP) Beneficiaries" (66 FR 6733), we believe that the regulation at 49 CFR 391.11(b)(2) is fully consistent with FMCSA's commitment to provide meaningful access to programs and activities that persons with limited English proficiency would seek. We are confident that the rule fulfills its purpose of advancing safety in a manner wholly in keeping with the terms of the executive order and the corresponding guidance.

In view of the foregoing considerations, Docket No. FMCSA-1997-2759 is withdrawn.

Issued on: July 11, 2003.

Annette M. Sandberg,
Acting Administrator.

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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration

49 CFR Part 393

[Docket No. FMCSA-1997-2213 (Formerly
FHWA Docket No. MC-93-34)]

RIN 2126-AA12 (formerly RIN 2125-AD25)

Parts and Accessories Necessary for Safe Operation; Sleeper Berths on Motorcoaches; Withdrawal

AGENCY: Federal Motor Carrier Safety
Administration (FMCSA), DOT.

ACTION: Notice of withdrawal of
proposed rulemaking.

SUMMARY: The FMCSA withdraws its January 12, 1994 Advance Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (ANPRM) relating to the use and design of driver sleeper berths used by the motorcoach industry. Due to other regulatory priorities and minimal interest by the industry concerning this issue, no further action was taken by the FMCSA after publication of the ANPRM. At this time FMCSA chooses not to establish potentially design-restrictive regulatory standards for the use of sleeper berths on motorcoaches without authoritative research to guide their development. Accordingly, the January 12, 1994 ANPRM regarding the use and design of motorcoach sleeper berths is withdrawn.

DATES: The advance notice of proposed rulemaking published on January 12, 1994, at 59 FR 1706 is withdrawn as of July 24, 2003.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: John Steinhoff, Chief, Commercial Passenger Carrier Safety Division, (202) 366-2174, Office of Bus and Truck Standards and Operations, Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, Department of Transportation, 400 Seventh Street, SW., Washington, DC 20590.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: On January 12, 1994, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) (now FMCSA), issued an ANPRM requesting public comment on the use and design of driver sleeper berths used by the motorcoach industry (59 FR 1706). This action was taken in response to comments received in past years from the motorcoach industry, and ones offered specifically at a motorcoach

industry Zero-Base Review (an initiative in which the agency presumed that no prior regulations existed, and started drafting from a clean slate, or as if we had "zero" regulations). The hearing was held in Miami, Florida, on January 20, 1993. There was some concern among the industry that when the current sleeper berth regulations at 49 CFR 393.76 were promulgated, the differences in design and operation between motorcoaches and trucks may not have been considered by the agency.

The FHWA received nine comments to the docket in response to the ANPRM. The comments varied as to whether the regulations should be amended and whether the agency should prohibit the placement of a sleeper berth in the baggage area (under the passenger compartment) of a motorcoach. The current regulation prohibits placement of the sleeper berth in the cargo compartment. Some commenters believed that specific sleeper berth standards for motorcoaches would improve safety by improving the physical well-being of the driver and by providing an opportunity for a relief driver to get adequate rest.

Due to other regulatory priorities and a minimal interest by the industry concerning this issue, no further action was taken by the FMCSA after these comments were received.

Operationally, the motorcoach industry rarely uses sleeper berths, choosing to transport replacement drivers to rely points for the few non-stop trips that are longer than 500 miles in length. The vast majority of motorcoach trips are broken into segments where less than 10 hours of driving are required. Therefore, FMCSA believes there is no urgent safety need for the agency to initiate regulatory action on this matter.

The FMCSA believes there is presently no research on which to base the development of new, motorcoach-oriented sleeper berth specifications. The current requirement in § 393.76 sets forth the minimum specifications for sleeper berths, and these are far exceeded by the present-day truck manufacturers. While § 393.76 is geared more toward sleeper berth installations in the truck environment, the basic principles set forth for trucks could also be adhered to by motorcoach manufacturers. These principles include: a prohibition from placing the sleeper berth in the cargo compartment (in this case, the luggage compartment), a requirement for an exit from the sleeper berth into the driver's compartment (in this case, the passenger compartment, which also includes the driver's location), and provision for

occupant restraint meeting the spirit of paragraph (h) of § 393.76. When conducting roadside inspections and compliance reviews, FMCSA considers these principles in applying the language of § 393.76 to sleeper berths installed in motorcoaches.

At this time, the FMCSA chooses not to develop regulatory standards for the use of sleeper berths on motorcoaches without authoritative research to guide their development. This could result in design restrictive requirements. Rather, the agency intends to work with the motorcoach manufacturers, the motorcoach industry, and safety organizations, such as the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance, to explore the development of a voluntary industry standard for motorcoach sleeper berth manufacture and maintenance. The FMCSA intends to work with these organizations to determine how the principles of § 393.76 apply to current and future motorcoach design and operations.

For these reasons, the January 12, 1994 ANPRM is withdrawn.

Issued on: July 11, 2003.

Annette M. Sandberg,
Acting Administrator

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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration

49 CFR Part 393

[Docket No. FMCSA-1997-2278 (Formerly
Docket No. MC-96-5)]

RIN 2126-AA19 (formerly RIN 2125-AD76)

Parts and Accessories Necessary for Safe Operation: Television Receivers and Data Display Units; Withdrawal

AGENCY: Federal Motor Carrier Safety
Administration (FMCSA), DOT.

ACTION: Notice of withdrawal of
proposed rulemaking.

SUMMARY: The FMCSA withdraws its April 3, 1996, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) to rescind restrictions on the locations at which television receivers may be positioned within commercial motor vehicles (CMVs). After reviewing the public comments received in response to the NPRM, the agency no longer considers the restrictions to be obsolete and redundant. The agency believes that it is necessary to retain the rule to prohibit unsafe driver behavior, and that doing so is not likely to discourage the use of