

Advocates believe pilot car certification will reduce accidents, lower insurance costs and limit damage to infrastructure. AT RIGHT: Pilot cars in the fleet of Pit Row Services are shown in front of the Talladega Superspeedway in Lincoln, AL.

Will national pilot car certification become a reality in the United States?

Hal Lundgren reports.



# Pilot car safety

**P**ilot cars could be considered the unsung heroes of specialized transportation. Their work often flies under the radar, and yet they perform invaluable work for all of the entities involved in a heavy haul. In the United States, a load wider than 8 feet, 6 inches must be accompanied by a pilot car. Other rules pertain to load height and length, pilot car signage and whether one or two cars will escort the load. Some regulations, such as permitting, take effect before loads depart.

Amid what seems to many to be a regulated business, one component of pilot car operation appears unresolved. Why is there no widespread – even national – certification of and training for people who drive those escort vehicles? Only a handful of U.S. states now require certified drivers.

Mike Morgan, owner of Alabama-based Pit Row Pilot Cars, believes he knows the best case for certification.

“Safety is undoubtedly the No. 1 reason for pilot car certification and training,” Morgan said. “They can impact the livelihood of every motorist on federal, state and local road systems.”

Pilot cars exist to protect the public from oversized movements.

“With certification and training programs, the motoring public will be in much better hands,” Morgan said.

Danny Wells agreed. Wells manages oversize/overweight permits for Colorado’s Department of Transportation.

“From a state government perspective, I don’t believe there can be any other reason than safety,” Wells said. “Actions we take and requirements we enact must be in

the best interest of the motoring public while improving safe transportation on our roadways. Enhanced safety continues to be the primary factor in support of certification.”

## Looking out for safety

A national pilot car certification would ensure better and more consistent training for pilot/escort vehicle operators.

“Training must be designed to protect the public, the load being escorted, the highway infrastructure and the escort vehicle operator,” said Wells.

In Colorado, pilot car operators may be asked to perform many functions of traffic control.

“Just because one is capable of operating a tractor trailer doesn’t necessarily translate to being able to operate a tractor trailer grossing 300,000 pounds that is also 17 feet wide and 17 feet tall,” said Wells. “Experience and training are keys to successful operations.”

The state of Colorado, Wells said, wants operators on its roadways “who have received specific training that meets state-prescribed requirements for safe escorting of large loads” performing these tasks.

Mike Dincau of Minnesota-based Sentinel Pilot Car Services points to another significant reason for pilot car certification.

“Certification is required only in several states,” he said. “But a person can still go out, buy some equipment and become a pilot car operator in most states with no job training or education.”

Recognized nationally for her work in pilot car certification, Oklahoma State University professor Dr. Ann Hamilton

said “standardization of certification (and equipment) across states is safer and easier. It also creates a better climate for reciprocity among states. Over time, lower insurance rates for certified P/EVOS, perhaps. Safety is positively linked to lower costs and efficiency of operation.”

Some would question whether certification adds burdens of cost and regulation to pilot car operations.

Wells would not be among the questioners. He dismissed both cost and extra regulation as arguments against certification.

“Is there a price applied to safety?” he asked. “I have never been involved in creating regulation just to create regulation, nor will I be.”

Sentinel’s Dincau also pushes aside the idea that cost and extra regulation as worthy opponents to certification.

“Cost seems relatively minor for all the value certification provides pilot car operators,” he said. “Also, the trucking companies using pilot cars know the operators have basic knowledge to pilot oversize loads. There are states like Utah that have people who travel all over the country to offer certification classes. Washington has instructors throughout the country. That helps mitigate travel costs to attend a certification class far away.”

In Dr. Hamilton’s view, cost is hardly a factor. “Typical cost for a certification class is \$200 to \$250 plus travel costs for some,” she said. “A one-day class every four to five years is not prohibitive. Agencies/organizations require time to schedule, teach classes and maintain records, etc. Renewal of certification every four to



five years is not prohibitive in terms of added cost or regulation for pilot/escort operators. I do not view certification as regulation. It's education for the operators in an industry where there is little available education or training other than learning on the go."

Certification has another value as well. "It provides assurance to trucking companies that a pilot car operator has obtained the needed knowledge to pilot oversized loads and also passed some type of standardized testing," Dinciau said.

Pit Row Pilot Cars' Morgan, who is also president of the National Pilot Car Association, contends that pilot car certification would provide a multitude of industry-wide benefits.

"Insurance companies are pushing to provide discounts to certified pilot car operators," he said. "Certification classes allow pilot car operators to gain practical training on industry-specific situations and conditions. That makes the process of piloting oversized movements safer for the public as well as everyone involved in moving those loads."

The bottom line is that regulation is implemented to keep the public safe, he said. "The argument against regulation in the pilot car industry means there is no room for improvement regarding safety standards," Morgan said. "Regulation also helps keep the industry professional and efficient."

### Standardization issues

Another problem with the pilot car industry is the lack of standardization among states regarding requirements and best practices. Some sort of national standard would help mitigate this problem.

"Concerning costs, I believe return on investment of implementing or completing

a standard certification program is enormous on both sides of the line," said Morgan. "The governments help educate and train pilot car operators who will be operating on their highways. Pilot car operators gain vital knowledge that will help protect themselves, their clients and the public."

Morgan described cost and regulation as "unsound arguments" against certification.

As for data supporting pilot car certification, he cites the NTSB study of the Skagit River Bridge in Washington after an oversized load struck the bridge.

"On Page 47 of the study, it begins to go into detail on the steps that have been taken to promote and create pilot car certification and training at a state and national level," he said. "It states reasoning behind these certification processes. If you read the conclusion section, it finds conclusive evidence that a certification and safety program would have helped prevent this accident, and that moving forward, implementation of certification and safety training programs for pilot car drivers will help save lives."

Colorado DOT's Wells is less specific about studies that support certification.

"Our state's certification requirements were established long before my arrival in this department," he said. "I am not aware of any such studies. I can offer anecdotal observations from my 25 years of CMV enforcement and more than five years managing our state's oversize overweight (OSOW) permitting unit. That experience has led me to believe this: virtually every situation where I was involved in investigating allegations of unsafe OSOW escort involved pilot/escort operators who were not certified to carry out such operations in Colorado."

Dinciau also preferred to take a broader approach to need for certification, as opposed to findings from a single study.

"We know standards are needed in the industry," he said. "There are factors like reducing the number of accidents, lowering insurance costs and limiting damage to infrastructure. Certification would also promote professionalism in our industry."

Morgan unsuccessfully searched for reasons to oppose certification.

"I am not aware of any studies or statistics that question its value," he said. "I did a quick Internet search and didn't come up with any results that fit the description. If anyone is aware of any studies, statistics or other data from a reputable source that questions the value of certification, I would be willing to discuss it."


Asked for the federal government's input on the pros and cons of certification, an FHWA spokesman declined comment.

"Certification and permitting are the authority of the states," the spokesman said. "We (FHWA) can only speculate on the reasons for their respective certification programs. FHWA is in the process of updating pilot car/escort vehicle driver training and developing a framework to ensure that certification is good."

But when will that certification come to be? Dr. Hamilton, who manages Oklahoma's state-wide certification and training program, offered insight. She has developed educational and promotional certification materials for almost a decade and also taught the courses. She is pleased that her state is one of about a dozen that mandates certification.

Though she is strongly committed to the benefits of national certification and its benefits, Hamilton does not see it looming in any upcoming legislation. "As for when we will have it, I would not hazard a guess beyond more than five years," she ventured.

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MIKE MORGAN, President, National Pilot Car Association