

# Big Truckers Say Vaccine Mandate Could Push Drivers Away; Companies worry that testing requirement also poses logistics hurdle for workers on the road

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## FULL TEXT

Big trucking companies say a federal vaccination and testing mandate aimed at curbing the spread of the Covid-19 virus could push more workers away from their operations and deepen upheaval in U.S. supply chains.

Executives say the proposed testing requirements for workers who choose not to get vaccinated could also pose challenges for trucking companies whose fleets haul goods long distances, often along irregular routes that send drivers from one corner of the country to another over several days or weeks.

The impact, they say, would hit companies already struggling to hire and retain drivers in a tight labor market and add to pressure on logistics networks that are straining to keep stores stocked and factories humming.

"We're in an industry where we can't afford any fallout. We don't have enough drivers today," said Eric Fuller, chief executive of U.S. Xpress Enterprises Inc., a large trucking carrier based in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Under the plan President Biden announced last week, companies with 100 or more employees would have to require that their workers be vaccinated or undergo at least weekly testing for the virus.

Trucking companies are among the businesses navigating a tricky path on vaccinations, with some blue-collar workers bristling at employer mandates and companies have been reluctant to alienate staffers in a tight labor market. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration plans to roll the federal requirement out in coming weeks via an emergency temporary standard.

U.S. Xpress is encouraging its roughly 10,000-person workforce, which includes about 7,000 drivers, to get the Covid-19 shot. The company estimates that just under half of its drivers are vaccinated. But the carrier isn't requiring its workers to get the vaccine, "and we're not necessarily comfortable with the government mandating it," Mr. Fuller said.

Trucking companies worry that workers who balk at the requirements could decamp for smaller fleets that don't fall under the mandate or turn to gig-economy jobs, further shrinking the pool of drivers at a time when a shortage of transport capacity is slowing delivery times and driving up costs for retailers and manufacturers.

Mr. Fuller said that the federal requirement could "create additional stress on each point of the supply chain," rippling across trucking, warehousing and manufacturing workforces and potentially creating "the situation where we have empty shelves."

Dave Jackson, chief executive of Phoenix-based Knight-Swift Transportation Holdings Inc., the largest truckload carrier in North America, said the testing requirement poses a major logistical hurdle for operators that could slow deliveries and affect wages for drivers, who are typically paid by the mile.

Federal safety rules that limit truckers' hours behind the wheel "do not allow a driver to stop the clock once it starts, for example to take a Covid-19 test," he said. "Once hours are lost, they cannot be restored, he said, "and [that] could impact availability to drive and deliver loads in an already supply-starved freight transportation environment."

Kirk Graves, director of transportation at Atlanta-based supply-chain consulting firm Chainalytics Inc., said the

long-term health benefits from the federal plan could outweigh the short-term pain.

"The economy has already been affected in trucking and warehousing," he said. "People being out now in dribs and drabs because they're sick with Covid, or because their loved ones are sick, or they're in quarantine, that's going to continue to affect things."

The American Trucking Associations, one of the largest trucking industry groups, called the 100-employee threshold "discriminatory and counterproductive" and said the planned requirements could impede Covid-19 response efforts and slow the economic recovery if they cause further disruptions in the supply chain.

More than 97% of U.S. trucking companies operate fewer than 20 trucks, according to the ATA.

Some business groups such as the Business Roundtable support the vaccination and testing plan while others have responded more cautiously. The Retail Industry Leaders Association warned that widespread testing requirements could strain existing capacity.

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Credit: By Jennifer Smith

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