

ODOT's U.S. Hwy. 395 'outside the box' freight improvement project

Summer - 2012

During this summer and fall, two contractors working for ODOT in Region 5 (eastern Oregon) have been busy along U.S. 395 south of Ukiah, about 50 miles south of Pendleton. Their work included widening a sharp curve near Dale and installing road sensors and signs along the narrow, curvy section of highway. The two projects are part of a pilot program to help ease length restrictions for freight haulers.

The route between Pilot Rock and Mt. Vernon is currently restricted to vehicles no longer than 48 feet in length due to numerous sharp curves and a narrow roadway. Freight haulers participating in the pilot project are allowed to run 53-foot vehicle combinations through the corridor at select times, providing they comply with additional requirements, such as using their citizens band radios to alert other truckers when they are approaching the critical corners marked with curve signs.



One of the new U.S. 395 curve signs

In addition to the curve signs, sensors have been placed in the roadway at both ends of the 10-mile stretch between mile posts 50 and 60-B that will trigger flashing lights on top of warning signs at opposite ends of the corridor. The signs will help alert all travelers that a truck is traveling through the area.

"ODOT has been working with the regional solutions team, local freight carriers and other stakeholders," said Area Manager Craig Sipp. "Together, they've been investigating possible ways of reducing or removing the length restrictions along this route."



Newly widened curve at mile post 64.5

"The 53-foot trailers are a little more economical to run," said Art Andrews, manager of Malheur Lumber Company in John Day. Malheur Lumber is a producer of wood products that are transported by other freight haulers. "There are a number of these trucks out there and to move our products out of the mill, we have got to be able to utilize any and all types of trucks. It's going to be a good deal, not just for Malheur Lumber."

He mentioned Ace Hardware and other local companies in the Grant County area that would benefit from additional, more flexible freight transport options in and out of the area. He also said he is working on a proposal that could potentially support an additional 20 jobs along the freight corridor.

Finding a solution

Straightening out all the sharp curves along the restricted route would have cost tens of millions of dollars and potentially taken a dozen years or more to fully fund.

After reviewing video footage of a 53-foot truck driving the route, Region 5 staff determined the longer vehicles could safely travel the restricted section with one critical curve widened and a warning system set up for the most challenging section where it could be problematic if two long trucks met on the same corner.

The two projects had a combined cost of around \$500,000.



Truck Test Run video showed front/rear views

“We think we have a good, relatively low cost solution for temporarily lifting U.S. 395 length restrictions for the freight carriers in our pilot program.” said Sipp. “Over the next two years we will be monitoring the safety concerns along the route and adjust the program as needed. After that time, we’ll make a determination if the restrictions can be relaxed for other trucking companies or removed entirely.”

Besides Sipp, ODOT District 12 Manager Marilyn Holt and Assistant District Manager Ace Clark, Project Leader Ken Patterson, Region 5 Manager Monte Grove and many others have been actively working over the past couple years to bring the pilot project to completion.

“Marilyn, Ace, Craig and Monte have all been just great to work with,” Andrews said. “I mean, they’re watching out for ODOT and the state, but they’re not just shutting their minds. They’re trying to come up with solutions and I’m very appreciative of that fact.”

Keeping an open mind to new ideas and different ways of solving transportation issues is necessary in today’s challenging economic climate and shrinking budgets.

“The ODOT team and our partners involved in this project undertook a non-traditional approach to solving a problem,” said Grove. “They got through all the hurdles and struggles with doing that in a way that works. Everybody did everything they could to make this happen.”

This project is just one example of how transportation stakeholders are working together to find, fund and implement creative solutions.

“It’s very refreshing to work with people who are willing to listen and have a ‘can do’ attitude,” said Andrews.