

And Now a Word from Rt. 501's Heaviest Users

NOBODY USES RT. 501 MORE THAN THE BIG RIGS HAULING FREIGHT FOR LOCAL BUSINESSES. SO, WHAT'S THE ROAD LIKE FROM THEIR PERSPECTIVE?

Many motorists see big-rig trucks on the highway as nothing but a nuisance—too much size and weight speeding down this hill, then crawling up the next.

But truck freight is in many ways the lifeblood of our economy, daily carrying food to markets, clothes to stores, and raw materials back and forth from the local industries that employ our friends and family.

As we continue our focus on Rt. 501, we thought it might be helpful to hear from some of the local plants putting multiple trucks on the road each and every day.

BROOKNEAL CHIPS

Exactly 53 miles of highway lie between Brookneal Chips and the Georgia-Pacific paper mill at Big Island. It's familiar road to the Brookneal Chips drivers who haul chips up to Big Island: About 200 times a week they go up the road, and 200 times a week, they come back down.

Brookneal Chips formed years ago when Georgia-Pacific (GP) opted to cut loose its wood-processing operation in order to free up needed space at its Big Island facility. The new company landed in Brookneal, where today it continues to process GP-owned logs into wood chips for use in the GP paper mill.

John Warren, the company's mill manager, says the road is a constant concern to his company. "In addition to the 300 to 400 trips our trucks are making each week," Warren said, "we're also receiving 300 to 400 truckloads of logs from loggers. Many of these are also coming to us via 501."

The challenges these drivers face?

"The severity of the crown of the road (all roads crest downward from the middle toward the outside to make water run off to the sides), the trucks lean to the outside, and because of the weight of the trucks,

our right side tires wear out more frequently than the left."

Warren also says that cars frequently cross the highway's double yellow line to pass slow-moving trucks traveling up the mountain. "Heading toward the peak of the mountain fully loaded, the top speed our trucks can hit is about 15 to 20 mph, and understandably, motorists get frustrated," Warren said. But passing a truck in a no-passing zone on mountainous terrain is terribly dangerous, he emphasized.

GEORGIA-PACIFIC

For economic reasons, Georgia-Pacific's Big Island facility is using less rail transport these days, and that's putting more GP trucks on the road than ever before. Much of the plant's outgoing truck traffic bypasses 501, but that's not the case with the company's Brookneal plant, which makes oriented strand board (an alternative to plywood).

Plant manager Wayne Bales said his facility puts 60 truckloads of board on the highway every day—and he has as just as many trucks dropping of supplies and raw materials on a daily basis. Added together, GP Brookneal is putting about 120 trucks on Rt. 501 each and every day.

Bales shares the concerns expressed by John Warren, but goes further: "In addition to my role as plant manager at this facility, I serve as an operations manager for Georgia-Pacific. In that role, I travel all over the United States. Rt. 501 is the most dangerous stretch of road I drive on. You have to drive defensively all the time, or you will get hurt."

Bales said Rt. 501 is "the commerce tie" for Southside Virginia and deserves attention as such from those controlling the purse strings in Richmond.



Georgia-Pacific

R.O. HARRELL TRUCKING

When Curtis Waskey trains new drivers in R.O. Harrell's driver orientation program, he uses examples from Rt. 501 to illustrate the need for safety first.

"Frankly, we avoid the road as much as we can," Waskey said, by moving trucks whenever possible over to Rt. 29. But that's not easy. The South Boston company dispatches about 100 tankers a day—most carrying dry dust substances, such as cement, lime and ash.

Waskey points to the narrowness of the road as being most problematic, given all of the road's curves, hills, and no-passing zones.

SUNSHINE MILLS

Not far away from R.O. Harrell is Sunshine Mills, a pet food manufacturer that sends out 20 to 30 trucks a day loaded with bags of dog and cat food. Even more trucks come into the facility every day, bringing supplies for the manufacturing process. Melvin said his drivers must always drive defensively on such a narrow road with so much traffic and so many blind curves.

DOLLAR GENERAL

Finally, the South Boston Distribution Center for Dollar General, owned by Warner Enterprises, sends out more than 40 big rigs a day. Paula Hanson, a dedicated manager with the company, said her drivers must fight the hills, curves, and narrowness of Virginia's Rt. 501 before they can make it to safer roads that will take them all over the region.

These aren't the only companies putting trucks on Rt. 501, but you get the picture.

So the next time you're on the highway and your frustration level rises, remember: Those truck drivers are the guys driving our economy—and, chances are, they're more frustrated than you. ♦



Brookneal Chips

501 Safety Report

According to Don Austin of the Virginia Department of Transportation's Appomattox Office, when transportation officials analyze traffic data, they commonly look at a three-year period of time. How safe is the Virginia portion of Route 501? Here's a three-year overview of the accidents along the highway from 2004 to 2007 (the most recent data available). ♦

Bedford County

Miles	14.290
# of Accidents	78
Injuries	52
Deaths	2
Property Damage	672,331
Death Rate	5.328

Campbell County

Miles	28.260
# of Accidents	215
Injuries	103
Deaths	7
Property Damage	1,150,167
Death Rate	3.402

Halifax County

Miles	28.28
# of Accidents	155
Injuries	89
Deaths	5
Property Damage	773,024
Death Rate	4.475

City of Lynchburg

Miles	11.14
# of Accidents	41
Injuries	20
Deaths	2
Property Damage	249,750
Death Rate	0.679



New Bridge at Gladys Completed

One of the biggest pinch points for 501 traffic this past year occurred a mile south of Gladys, where a bridge-replacement project narrowed a two-lane stretch of the highway down to one.

Now complete, the new bridge at Gladys is wider, safer, and more traffic-friendly than its predecessor.

"We appreciate the short-term inconvenience this sort of work causes," said Don Austin, residency administrator with the Virginia Department of Transportation's Appomattox office, "but we do hope motorists are pleased with the results."

The \$884,000 improvement project represented the largest single investment made to Rt. 501 during 2008. The work began in April and finished on schedule—and on budget—in mid-November.

Now that the temporary signals, changing patterns, and single-lane delays are all history, the flow of traffic should be better than ever. ♦



Corridor Comments is a publication of the U.S. 501 Regional Coalition: Bedford County, Campbell County, Halifax County, Town of Brookneal, Town of South Boston, and City of Lynchburg.

For a full list of localities represented and businesses active with the 501 Coalition, call Mike Davidson at (434) 592-9595.

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