



# Survival guide for smarter fleets

August 2026

An August 2026 update on the trends shaping enterprise freight as the industry heads into the January 2027 EPA NOx deadline.



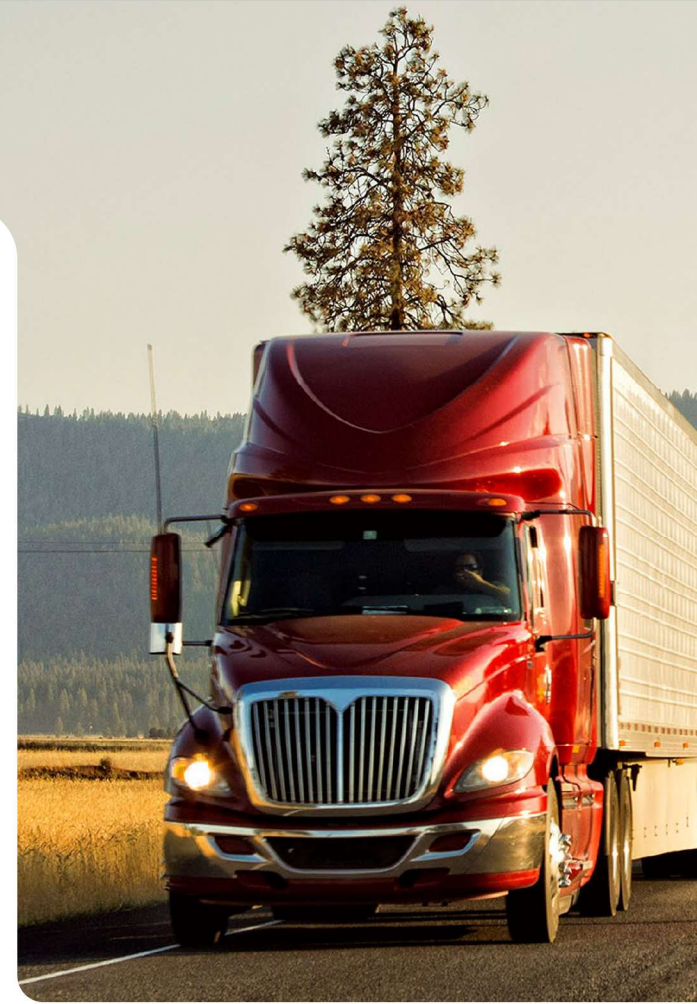
## The EPA 2027 heavy-duty NOx regulation takes effect this January.

The freight recession that gripped trucking since 2022 has, by most measures, ended. Spot rates cleared their COVID-era peak in June 2026, tender rejections are running at levels not seen since early 2022, and capacity that fled the market over the past two years hasn't come back.<sup>1,2,3</sup>



At the same time, new deadlines are drawing closer as many of the industry's existing challenges show no signs of easing. The EPA has maintained the January 2027 implementation date for its stricter NOx emissions standard and is expected to finalize the rule this summer. Meanwhile, the 25% tariff on imported trucks and parts remains in place, and nuclear verdicts continue to drive up insurance costs regardless of where the freight cycle stands.<sup>8,11,12,14</sup>

Shell Lubricants collaborated with RigDig and Commercial Carrier Journal (Fusable) on this report. Fusable surveyed 434 fleets and owner-operators directly for the 2026 Trucking Buyer Behavior Survey, while RigDig analyzed millions of miles of vehicle data.<sup>27</sup> Together, their insights power the trends and recommendations in this guide. As the industry accelerates toward the January 2027 deadline, we're examining the key pressures facing enterprise freight and sharing strategies to help fleets adapt, remain competitive, and emerge stronger on the other side.



→ Trend 1

# Capacity tightened faster than anyone expected

## What's happening now

The freight recession that dragged on for nearly four years is, by most accounts, over. It wasn't a demand rebound, but rather capacity finally leaving faster than the market could replace it. Truckload spot rates hit an all-time high of \$3.83 per mile in early June 2026, topping even the COVID-era peak, while tender rejections climbed above 17%, a level last seen in 2022.<sup>1</sup>

## What fleets are already doing



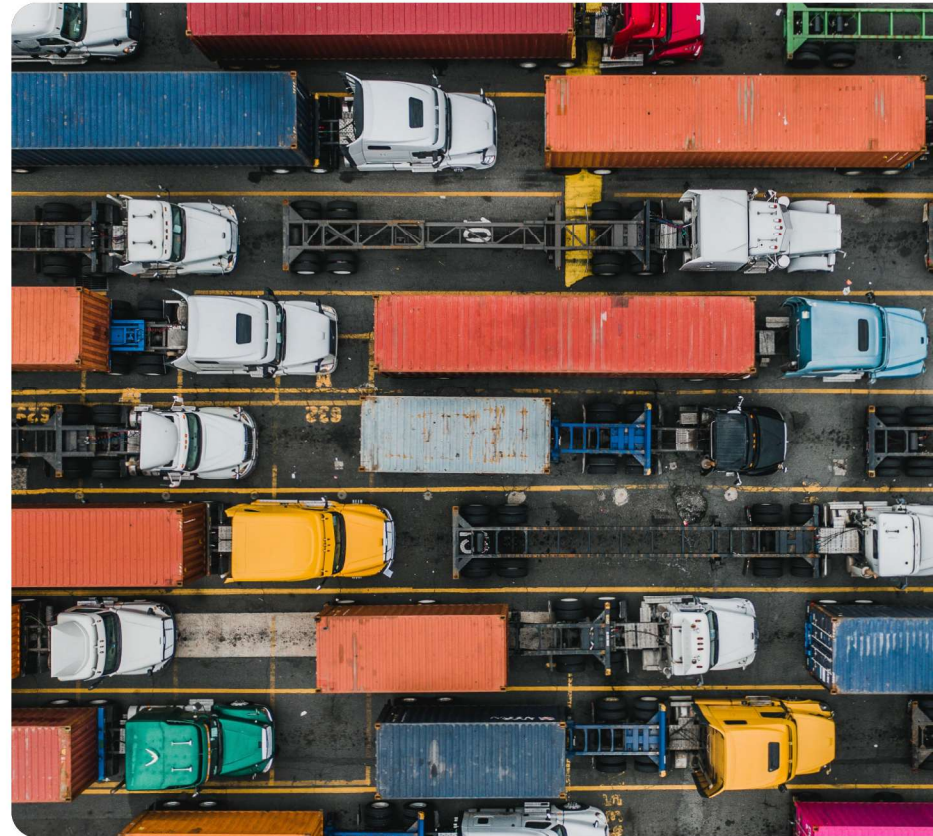
### Private and dedicated fleets keep capitalizing on for-hire weakness.

Larger, better-capitalized fleets continue absorbing freight from failed competitors as small carriers exit. Over 8,000 DOT numbers have shut down or revoked authority since the start of 2024, and small carrier bankruptcies were still piling up in July 2026.<sup>4,5</sup>



### Survivors are consolidating leverage.

Fleets in energy, infrastructure, and data-center-adjacent freight continue to outperform, and AI-driven data center buildout remains a durable demand source layered on top of the broader capacity crunch.<sup>2</sup>



→ **Trend 1** | Capacity tightened faster than anyone expected

## What's coming next



### **The tightening is broad-based, not seasonal.**

Rejection rates and spot pricing rose together through the spring and summer of 2026. This is a textbook signature of a capacity-constrained market rather than a one-off produce-season or holiday spike. Analysts expect elevated rates to persist through the rest of 2026 as routing-guide failures keep pushing freight onto the spot market.<sup>2,3</sup>



### **Diesel volatility hasn't let up.**

The national average diesel price reached \$5.35 a gallon in early August 2026, up roughly 41% year over year and its fourth straight weekly increase, driven largely by global oil-supply constraints. Fuel remains the highest non-driver operating cost for fleets, and every fresh spike squeezes margins just as capacity gets scarcer.<sup>6</sup>

Buyers are feeling this squeeze directly: in a survey of 434 fleets and owner-operators, 64% named rising equipment costs and 63% named the cost of insurance as their top challenges heading into 2026—both ahead of weak freight demand.<sup>20</sup> That's a shift worth noting for this edition: the 2026 story was a demand-side freight recession; 2027's is a supply-side capacity crunch, but the cost pressure fleets report feeling hasn't moved.

## How you can adapt

### **Improve your fuel economy.**

Fuel remains the highest non-driver operating cost for fleets, and with diesel back above \$5 a gallon nationally, incremental efficiency gains matter more than ever. They're also more achievable than they used to be: on-highway Class 8 tractors hauling real loads have hit 10–11 MPG in fleet data, up from just 6.5 MPG in 2008, and one 2025 industry demonstration averaged 11.6 MPG over 22,550 miles. Adoption is catching up with 38% of fleets now reporting using fuel-efficiency technologies and practices, up from 20% a year earlier, and nearly half plan to expand their use over the next two years.<sup>18</sup>



**Lubrication choice is one of the more overlooked levers here:**

**Shell Rotella's own testing shows its T4 10W-30 heavy-duty oil can deliver roughly a 2% fuel economy improvement over conventional 15W-40 oils, from lower viscosity reducing engine resistance alone.<sup>25</sup>**



→ Trend 2

# The EPA 2027 heavy-duty NOx regulation

## What's happening now

EPA's proposed revisions to the Model Year 2027 heavy-duty NOx rule cleared White House review and were published for public comment in July 2026. The comment period runs through August 29, 2026, with a final rule expected shortly after in time to take effect before January 1, 2027.

The core 0.035 g/bhp-hr NOx limit and the January 2027 start date remain intact; what's changed is the cost of compliance. Early estimates put the incremental cost as high as \$20,000–\$25,000 per truck, but with EPA expected to relax warranty and useful-life provisions, industry analysts now put the more likely range at \$8,000–\$18,000 per vehicle—with the DEF-derate penalty itself, which EPA plans to replace with visual and audible warnings, worth up to \$6,000 of that savings on its own.<sup>7,8,18</sup>



## What larger fleets are doing



**The pre-buy has already happened—and it was bigger than expected.** Class 8 net orders reached 30,500 units in June 2026, up 241% year over year, capping a seven-month order surge. Year-to-date orders are up 125% over 2025, and the 2026 order season is running 36% ahead of the prior one. Over the trailing 12 months, orders totaled 334,160 units. That's a sharp reversal from 2025, when actual Class 8 tractor registrations, as opposed to forward-looking orders, fell 16% as the freight recession and regulatory uncertainty depressed real deliveries.<sup>9,10,18</sup>

That pre-buy surge is a sharp break from recent buying norms. In the same buyer survey, only 37% of respondents said their last truck purchase was new (56% used) and among owner-operators specifically, just 30% bought new.<sup>21</sup> Fleets have historically refreshed equipment faster than owner-operators (54% new vs. 30%), which may help explain why the current order surge is concentrated where it is with larger fleets moving first to lock in pre-2027 compliance before the pricier MY2027 trucks arrive.



### **Tariffs remain a fixed, known cost.**

The 25% Section 232 tariff on imported Class 3–8 trucks and parts has been in effect since November 2025. As of February 2026, USMCA-content vehicles can formally apply to have the tariff assessed only on non-U.S. content, giving fleets sourcing from Mexico and Canada a clearer path to lower landed costs.<sup>11</sup>

## What's coming next



### **2026 build slots are gone.**

Order books filled fast enough that manufacturers' 2026 production capacity was largely spoken for by July, with overflow demand now spilling into the first half of 2027, meaning some fleets that wanted a pre-2027 truck will be taking delivery of a 2027-compliant one instead.<sup>9,10</sup>



### **Trade policy stays a wildcard.**

USMCA member countries have been able to withdraw from the agreement with six months' notice since July 1, 2026—a fresh risk fleets should watch as sourcing decisions extend into 2027 and 2028 model years. A February 2026 Supreme Court ruling struck down the Trump administration's broader IEEPA "reciprocal" tariffs, but that decision left the Section 232 truck tariff untouched. It remains a fixed cost, not a legal question mark.<sup>9,19</sup>



### **Watch for a "pre-buy, no-buy" hangover.**

Industry analysts expect the same dynamic that has defined every prior emissions transition: fleets that rushed to lock in 2026 orders may pull back on purchases once MY2027 trucks arrive, softening demand just as the new, pricier trucks reach dealer lots.<sup>18</sup>



## How you can adapt

Get the most out of every pre-2027 truck you're not replacing yet. A lubrication program and equipment monitoring reduce unplanned downtime on aging assets while you wait out the order queue, and Shell's real-world fleet trials show proper lubrication can extend oil-drain intervals by up to 50%.<sup>17</sup> This is a natural fit for a lot of fleets already: 63% of oil changes are performed in-house across fleets and owner-operators surveyed,<sup>22</sup> meaning most already own the maintenance relationship. The opportunity is upgrading what's already an in-house process, not displacing an outside vendor.

Preparation for the next generation of heavy-duty engine oils is already underway. API's PC12 engine oil category remains on track for first licensing in January 2027, paving the way for the new CL-4 and FB-4 specifications that will follow CK-4 and FA-4. Through ongoing industry engagement and education, Shell Rotella is helping fleets understand and prepare for the transition.

**Shell Rotella's PC-12 test oils have already logged more than 13 million on-road miles and 12,000 off-highway hours, and the company's "What is PC-12?" Knowledge Hub walks fleets through how to plan current and future oil purchases around the transition.<sup>26</sup>**

→ Trend 3

# Nuclear verdicts keep climbing, regardless of cycle

## What's happening

Insurance costs are now the second-most-cited challenge facing fleets and owner-operators, named by 63% of respondents in a 2026 survey—trailing only rising equipment costs.<sup>23</sup> Trucking fleets continue to face outsized costs from “nuclear verdicts”—jury awards of \$10 million or more. Industry trackers put the median nuclear verdict against a trucking company at roughly \$44 million as of 2026, up from about \$21 million in 2020, with cases above \$50 million growing sharply and even a handful of “thermonuclear” verdicts exceeding \$100 million landing in the last two years.<sup>12,13</sup>

## What larger fleets are doing



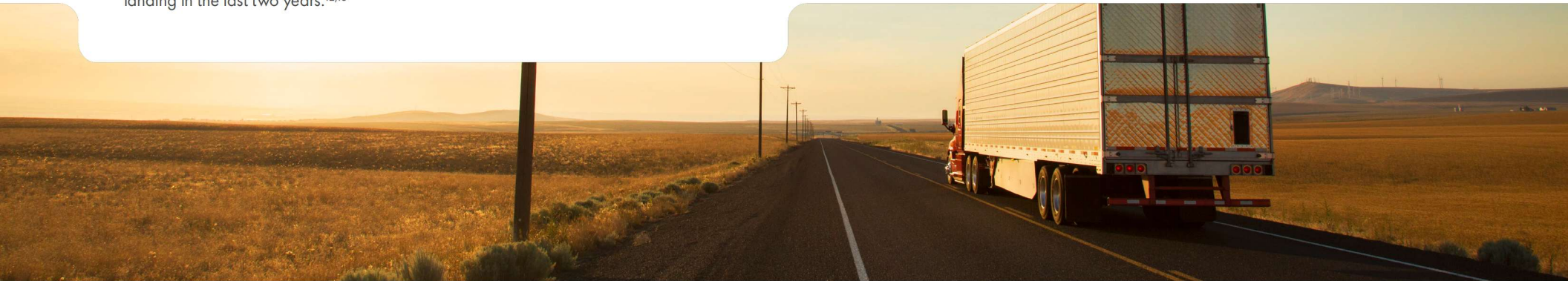
### Technology adoption keeps accelerating.

Dashcams and driver-monitoring systems are now used by roughly nine in ten preferred carriers to reduce accident frequency and to defend against inflated liability claims when a driver isn't at fault. AI-powered driver-assistance systems are showing real results too: adaptive cruise control and collision-avoidance systems, for example, have been associated with a 40% decrease in heavy-duty truck collisions in fleet survey data, and fleets that cut preventable collisions and claims frequency are positioned for a secondary benefit: lower insurance premiums. Many insurers now offer meaningful discounts for equipped fleets.<sup>15,18</sup>



### Scale still matters, but less than it did.

Larger fleets retain more leverage to fight verdicts, but even mid-size and well-run carriers are seeing steep renewal increases regardless of claims history. Insurers are pricing industry-wide litigation risk into every policy, not just individual loss history.<sup>14</sup>



→ **Trend 3** | Nuclear verdicts keep climbing, regardless of cycle

## What's coming next



### **2027 renewals are expected to be worse, not better.**

Reinsurance capital continues retreating from trucking liability, and none of the underlying pressures, such as verdict size, litigation financing, and CSA-score repricing, are easing.<sup>14</sup> Tort or insurance reform remains unlikely at the federal level. This is a long-term structural cost for fleets to manage, not a cycle that resolves on its own.

## How you can adapt

Take a proactive approach to safety and maintenance. Keep equipment operating at peak performance, invest in underride guards and other protective technologies where they provide the greatest benefit, and work with a lubrication partner that collaborates closely with fleets, OEMs, and dealers to identify potential mechanical issues early through routine oil analysis.



## Efficiency helps your fleet run through 2027, not just into it

While no fleet can single-handedly overcome the structural pressures facing the industry, there are steps you can take to improve your competitiveness. Chief among them is boosting efficiency through better lubrication practices that help maximize equipment performance and reliability.

By improving fuel economy, increasing oil-drain intervals, and practicing proactive maintenance, you can reduce expenses, increase uptime, and get more out of every truck you're running as the industry prepares for the post-2027 regulatory landscape. Fleets are already choosing this road: **Shell is the #1 primary oil brand among fleets and owner-operators surveyed, at 30%—well ahead of the next-closest competitor.**<sup>24</sup>

### **Stay ahead with Shell Rotella.**

Subscribe to our newsletter to learn about PC-12, upcoming industry changes, and how Shell Rotella is helping fleets prepare for the next generation of heavy-duty engine oil.

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## → Endnotes

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- <sup>18</sup> State of Sustainable Fleets 2026 Market Brief – TRC Companies, Inc. (a WSP company), May 2026, [stateofsustainablefleets.com](https://stateofsustainablefleets.com) (Class 8 fuel-economy, efficiency-technology adoption, MY2027 cost-range, and Class 8 registration figures).
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<sup>20</sup> 2026 Trucking Buyer Behavior Survey, Fusable/Commercial Carrier Journal (CCJ), 2026.

<sup>21</sup> 2026 Trucking Buyer Behavior Survey, Fusable/CCJ, 2026.

<sup>22</sup> 2026 Trucking Buyer Behavior Survey, Fusable/CCJ, 2026.

<sup>23</sup> 2026 trucking Buyer Behavior Survey, Fusable/CCJ, 2026.

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<sup>27</sup> RigDig Business Intelligence, Fusable, data provided directly to Shell Lubricants via Commercial Carrier Journal (CCJ), 2026.

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