

In 2011, Texas issued a record-breaking 590,000 permits. In 2012, the state is on track to issue more than 700,000 permits



# Texas talk

**Carol Davis**, one of the most engaging administrators in the realm of state transportation, talks big about Texas, and for good reason. **D. Ann Shiffler** reports



**“E**verything is bigger in Texas.” This old adage certainly applies to Lone Star State’s transportation system. Texas is the number one U.S. export state, and about 17 percent of all U.S. exports pass through the Texas. The state has more than 90,000 centerline miles of on-system roadways and 50,000-plus bridges. At any given time, some 9,000 temporary and permanent restrictions are in place in Texas, most of which are potential impediments to oversize/overweight transport.

Manufacturers, shippers, carriers and consumers depend on moving cargo through Texas, and the state issues 27 different permit types to transport cargo exceeding legal size and weight limits.

In 2011, Texas issued more than 590,000 permits, a record-breaking year.

In 2012, the state is on track to issue more than

700,000 permits, an 18 percent increase.

Who is it that oversees the mammoth job of assuring overweight and oversized cargo is transported through Texas? That would be the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles, which is headed by a veteran in the business, Carol Davis.

For close to 25 years, the petite, yet dynamic Davis has toiled in the Texas transportation sector, learning the ropes of an industry that involves working with a host of people, ranging from the owners of small trucking companies to powerful business leaders and politicians.

Until January 2012, Davis worked for the huge state entity known as TxDOT. In 2009, the Texas legislature created the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV), and the Motor Carrier Division’s (MCD) oversize/overweight (OS/OW) permitting and size/weight administrative enforcement programs were transferred from the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) to TxDMV in January 2012.

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**”**



Davis also made the jump to the TxDMV.

"TxDMV was created to be customer-focused and retail-oriented, so it's a good fit for our motor carrier programs," says Davis. "It's a very exciting time for us, with many opportunities to re-think state government. Right now I'm engaged in TxDMV initiatives to implement enterprise-wide technology, organizational, and business process improvements. I'm also working to ensure continued collaboration with TxDOT to get the information we need to safely permit and route transported cargo."

One of the biggest initiatives of her department has been the implementation of the Texas Permitting and Routing Optimization System, known as TxPROS. Launched in August 2011, Davis says the new system has been a huge convenience for transportation companies that do business in Texas. TxPROS was implemented just in time for a notable increase in permit applications, as well.

"Over the past 9 months we've routinely issued 2,600 to 3,200 permits daily, and on May 29th we broke our all-time record by issuing 3,674 permits," Davis says. "In one day!"

Before TxPROS, Davis says the state couldn't easily capture specific, industry-type information for permitted loads. "It was all calculated manually, and we didn't do it very often because of the manpower involved," she says. "TxPROS automated that task, and the majority of permitted cargo for the first 9 months of fiscal year 2012 is related to oil and gas production (40 percent) and general/roadway construction (25 percent).

We caught up with Davis in late May to discuss her department's efforts to automate Texas' permitting process and talk about oversized/overweight transportation issues in general.

#### **WHAT IS TXPROS? HOW IS IT WORKING?**

TxPROS was launched in August 2011 after four years of development. TxPROS provides beginning-to-end permit processing, tracking, financials and workflow/performance management capabilities for both customers and the state. TxPROS provides integrated, GIS-based mapping and routing with real time restriction management for true (versus "static") automated routing.

TxPROS has built-in flexibility so designated staff can change fees, add permit types, change "help" verbiage and



forms, and a multitude of other tasks that will allow us to respond more quickly to changing needs and save us money over the program's lifecycle. Both MCD and customer dashboards provide real-time information on permit statuses and workflow. MCD can adjust staff resources in-real time to meet the current work volume.

Before TxPROS, customers could submit applications online through our old Central Permitting System, but those applications sat in a queue until normal business hours. Every morning we faced 600 to 800 applications when we walked in the door and it was often 10 or 11 a.m. before we could start working on today's applications. We manually processed applications and routed trucks using customized paper maps.

With TxPROS, customers can self-issue the majority of permits types online 24/7, including general permits to transport loads up to 16-foot-wide, 16-foot-6-inches high, 110-foot-long and weighing 180,000 pounds. Customers can manage their own accounts, user rights, inventories, yards, financials and reporting. If they choose to save their truck and trailer information, they don't have to re-key it for every application. The streamlined processing and self-service capabilities TxPROS provides allows us to use our staff time working on more complex permit types, process those permit applications more quickly, and provide better customer service for all.

We collaborated closely with our staff and customers – the true system users – from project design

through development, testing and implementation. The initial successes we've had with TxPROS, and its simple, intuitive design, are a direct result of that collaboration.

TxPROS will always be a work in progress as we continue to improve it. From day one, more than 50 percent of customers have self-issued their permits online and that number keeps growing. We've been able to issue more permits in the first 9 months since implementation than was ever possible before. We've collected an additional \$14 million in fees during that timeframe. Not bad for a \$1.6 million investment.

#### **WHAT TYPES OF VIOLATIONS ARE MOST COMMON IN TERMS OF OVERWEIGHT/OVERSIZE CARGO?**

From looking at law enforcement citations and our own size/weight administrative enforcement actions, a few types of size and weight violations stand out: overloading axles, which causes some of the more serious pavement damage; improperly loading tall cargo and hitting bridges/overpasses; and then just plain disregard for permitting requirements, with no company program in place to ensure they operate within the law.

You see a lot of interesting things, and I often wonder, "What was this person thinking?" Carriers who routinely add extra weight to each truck with no regard for roadway or bridge damage. Individuals who routinely shave 10,000 pounds off their gross weight to avoid the route inspection process. Shippers who are more interested in the "low bid" carrier than in operating within the law, and don't





**Carol Davis, (left) was a part of a panel of regional transportation officials that presented an update at the SC&RA Specialized Transportation Symposium in Kansas City in March 2012. Pictured, from left, are Davis, representing TexasDMV and Western Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (WASHTO); Tommy Thames, Mississippi DOT and the Southeastern Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (SASHTO); Angela Woodard, Indiana Department of Revenue's Oversize/Overweight Permit Section and Mid America Association of State Transportation Officials (MAASTO); and Glenn Rowe, Pennsylvania DOT and the Northeast Association of Transportation Association (NASTO)**

consider their own potential liability in those situations.

I don't think people understand the potential risks involved – to the traveling public, people and cargo and the transportation infrastructure. Or maybe that's just a risk they're willing to take. In the end, we're all taxpayers and we all pick up the tab.

**TEXAS HAS A REPUTATION OF BEING ONE OF THE MORE "HEAVY HAUL FRIENDLY" STATES. WHY DO YOU THINK THIS IS THE CASE?**

In our case we're very cognizant of the big picture and the role we play in it. That's something our employees learn from day one. We've built a high-performing, accountable culture where employees are focused on finding solutions.

We aim to smash what I call artificial roadblocks – requirements or practices that have no basis in statute or maybe no longer make sense. We try to approach challenges creatively with a big picture focus. Now, the carrier may have to "go the long way" to get from Point A to Point B. They may have to barge their cargo further than expected, or mitigate for bridges that can't take the weight. But we will do everything within our power to make it happen. I can't recall a single case where we've said, "Sorry, you can't get from here to there."

In addition to educating our employees and customers, we make the effort to educate/inform our agency peers on the ground. We want them to understand what we do at MCD, how we do it, and why it's important. This helps break down organizational silos and head off

complaints about all the big trucks we're sending on their roads. We strategically develop MCD's management team and staff to help meet our goals. We reach out to our industry partners to better understand their needs and points of view, and incorporate their input into our operations. All of this is an ongoing process and none of it happened overnight, or by accident. It's been part of MCD's strategic plan for years.

**WHY DO YOU THINK OTHER "LESS FRIENDLY HEAVY HAUL" STATES ARE MORE RELUCTANT TO ADDRESS UNIFORMITY?**

Each state has unique challenges. It may not be that they're more reluctant. It may be that they're less able to address these challenges. Some state motor carrier programs are buried deep within engineering-focused organizations. Many programs are under-resourced and don't have current technology.

I've heard of at least one state where employees use a paper map, a push pin, and a string with 1-mile increments marked so they can calculate the state mileage fee as the crow flies. Many state government staff aren't exposed to the big picture issues and their overall role, or they don't have the ability to engage upper management about the importance of their programs. And then there are always bad actors in the industry who give everyone a bad reputation in the eyes of state employees. And unfortunately, there are always employees who will protect their turf at all costs – even if it impacts their customers and their own state's economic vitality.

We need industry leaders to help effect real, wide-scale change. We greatly value and need industry collaboration on

regional and national Highway Transport Committees, but you're essentially preaching to the choir. For the most part, the state people at those meetings get it. We need industry – motor carriers and shippers – to partner with us and help elevate these issues within state organizations.

Don't yell at the permit clerk who's buried in the weeds: Start having real conversations with state leadership about the importance of these industries to the economy, American job growth, infrastructure funding; discuss your customer service needs, the pressing harmonization issues between states and how that affects business operations. Take on a leadership role and collaborate on state and national solutions.

**CAN YOU DESCRIBE A FEW OF THE MORE MEMORABLE HEAVY HAUL PROJECTS IN TEXAS OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS?**

Of course cargo bound to aid in disaster recovery efforts always have an impact. People are hurting and we get to help facilitate the delivery of food and water, or construction equipment and cranes to dig out. We play a small role but at least we're not helpless.

There have been so many memorable projects – and every day there's something new. Everything from mega-load generators and transformers to help support our electrical infrastructure, to movie props, numerous space shuttles, and Christmas trees bound for the White House. Everything has a personal connection for me.

Early on I was too embarrassed to ask someone what a pig launcher was, so I asked my dad. Turns out it's a piece of oil field equipment. I got over my embarrassment and still ask stupid questions today.

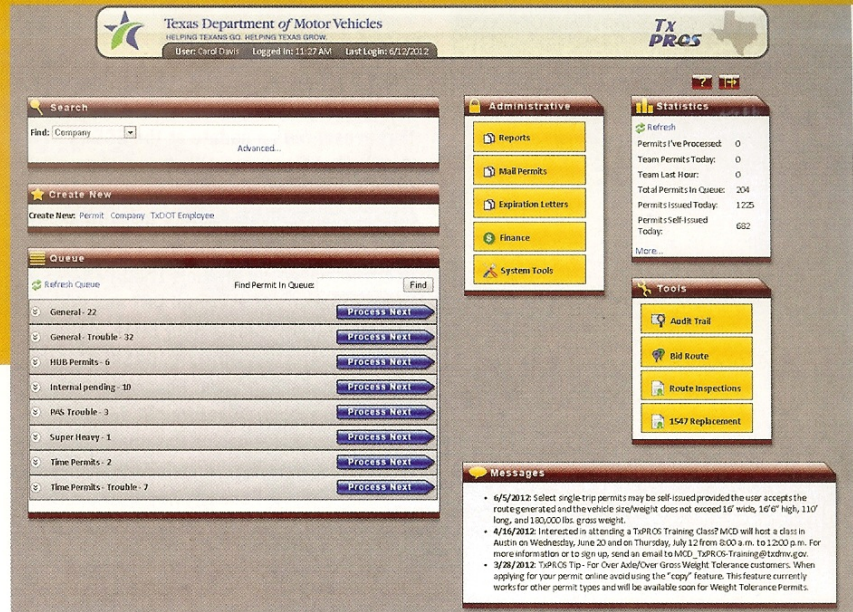
In 1997 we were so proud to contribute photos of permitted loads to TxDOT's 80th anniversary exhibition. We had a dusty photo of a Victorian-era house being moved. I thought it looked really interesting and included it. When our then-executive director passed by, he whispered that the house was actually the infamous "Chicken Ranch." Never could confirm that, but the photo came down.

And I'll never forget one of my first permit field trips. They transported the replica of Columbus' ship, the Niña, from Port Aransas to Irving, TX. This would normally be a 450-mile trip by car, but the tour was sponsored by a local burger chain, so every night they had to stop

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at one of those restaurants. And on the return trip they had to take a different route to stop at different restaurants. I'm sure it was a nightmare for whoever routed and issued that permit. Families came out to see the Niña in every town. I got my first ride in a cherry picker to take photos. And even though that ship looked huge on a trailer, I still wonder about the courage it took for the original sailors to leave their homelands for unknown lands, on a wooden boat that was about 70-feet-long, 22-feet-wide, 21-feet-tall, and weighed less than 75 tons. Truly amazing!

**WHAT IS THE ROLE OF AASHTO AND WASHTO? WHAT IS YOUR AFFILIATION WITH THESE ORGANIZATIONS?**

AASHTO is the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and I'm involved on the executive committee for the Subcommittee on Highway Transport. Regional committees are independent, such as the 18-state Western Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (WASHTO) Committee on Highway Transport (COHT) that I chair. The primary goals of the WASHTO COHT are to identify and explore major motor carrier industry-related transportation issues, define actions and solutions, improve coordination and communication, and to recommend policies, position statements and standards. The WASHTO COHT also administers the 12-state Western Regional Permitting Agreement.

Over the past few years we've had a lot more interest and participation by motor carriers, shippers and logistics professionals. We're all starting to realize that freight transportation issues can't be addressed solely on a state-by-state basis – it needs to be addressed regionally and nationally. Truck size and weight issues are of big interest right now because of several proposals to raise limits at the federal level.

Commercial vehicle safety and

enforcement are big because of the U.S. DOT's Compliance, Safety and Accountability (CSA) program. Harmonization of state permitting requirements is a big issue because it impacts every carrier transporting OS/OW cargo between states. Industry is starting to ask if "all the states have different slide rules" because of the harmonization issues.

Participation beyond our normal motor carrier stakeholders has caused us to think about these issues in new ways. The Mid-America group, formerly known as Mississippi Valley, has reformed and they're making great strides in documenting state permitting requirements and looking at regional standards. Last year Glenn Rowe from Pennsylvania attended our AASHTO Subcommittee meeting, and subsequently the Northeast region is starting to come back together as a group. There's a lot of cross-pollination between these groups as we work through the challenges.

Right now we're looking at proposing major revisions to the *AASHTO Guide for Vehicle Weights and Dimensions*, which hasn't been overhauled in a decade. We're looking at how we can address some low hanging fruit issues related to permitting harmonization. Things like lights, signs, flags, etc. The states have been involved in several conference calls on the issues, and the subcommittee is pulling together an industry advisory group to help us. Our next subcommittee meeting is in July in Milwaukee. Again, this effort will eventually require the support of executive management at the state levels, and we cannot be successful on our own. We need

industry out there helping to bring issues forward and garnering support.

**WHAT IS IT YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR JOB? WHAT IS IT YOU DON'T LIKE ABOUT YOUR JOB?**

I have the opportunity to work with great people who do amazing things as a part of their normal routine. Each day brings new challenges and puzzles to solve. I get to poke around on tours of incident command centers, state-of-the-art manufacturing and logistics facilities, ports, and even the underbelly of a cargo vessel; see what happens in real life and maybe get an idea or two for our own operations.

I get to mentor others to reach their potential, and watch them spread their wings and fly. I get to help people connect the dots from a heavy load on the highway to flipping a light switch in their kitchen. I perform a public service that has meaning to me.

Of course, there will always be disappointments and setbacks, but overall, what's not to like?

**WHAT IS IT ABOUT THE TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRY THAT KEEPS YOU ENGAGED?**

Transportation is the lifeblood of modern civilization. We built major trade routes, seaports, airports, highways, railroads and intermodal facilities. We even send humans and scientific instruments into the far reaches of space. But while other countries are investing heavily in their transportation infrastructures, we seem to be in perpetual political, and actual, gridlock when it comes to transportation. How could anyone be disengaged from something so critical?