

Transport Topics **Online**

Updated:

FMCSA Overspent \$23 Million for Wireless Weigh Stations

By Eric Miller, Staff Reporter

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A federal program aimed at helping states buy technology to speed trucks wirelessly through weigh stations obligated spending more than \$23 million above the level Congress authorized, according to a new government review of the program.

The program was actually shut down a year ago as a result of the overspending, but the details and the reason behind that action were not made public until the Government Accountability Office reported this month that the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration committed 47 “statutory violations” involving the Commercial Vehicle Information Systems and Networks program from 2006 to 2010.

The agency exceeded by 18% the \$125 million in total CVISN contract authority that Congress had authorized for 2006 through 2010 in the 2005 transportation spending law, GAO said.

The GAO report said program funding has been frozen since May 2010, and an FMCSA spokeswoman said auditors have been conducting a comprehensive review of the grant program since June 2010.

“Based on this exhaustive re-view, FMCSA is now taking proactive measures to strengthen its overall grants management systems and improve staff accountability and transparency through training,” spokeswoman Candice Tolliver said. “FMCSA agrees with the Government Accountability Office report that identifies 28 states impacted by the CVISN program irregularities.”

“The agency is working closely with those states to address all irregularities and soon will announce fiscal year 2011 CVISN funding opportunities for the remaining states,” she added.

In May 2010, the FMCSA privately alerted Congress it might have violated statutory restrictions and planned to discontinue the grants for eight to 12 weeks. That alert was before officials figured out the problems were worse than anticipated.

“Because of the way it kept records, FMCSA states that it cannot be sure that it identified all violations; however, its efforts show widespread problems that need to be addressed,” GAO said.

The program allows enforcement personnel at key inspection sites to upload inspections from FMCSA databases in real-time and view inspections from other states.

CVISN systems typically use weigh-in-motion scales and transponder readers to screen trucks electronically as they approach a weigh station. The scales, embedded in the roadway about a half-mile ahead of the weigh station, weigh the truck while the transponder reader sends a signal to the computer inside the weigh station. Within milliseconds, the windshield-mounted transponder verifies the truck’s weight, size, and registration and safety record.

GAO’s report said that, in addition to the statutory violations, FMCSA found instances in which it allowed states to continue activities on expired grants before they were renewed. FMCSA officials said they have not fully investigated this issue, but

they plan to do so after they address the statutory violations.

The grants in question were awarded to 28 states, and at least six states — Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Ohio, Oklahoma and Texas — have said they had to cancel CVISN contracts because of a lack of funding, GAO said.

Douglas Deckert, a CVISN systems architect with the Washington State Department of Transportation, said the federal grants have helped the state install CVISN technology at 11 weigh stations.

In Washington state, motor carriers pay for the transponders that communicate with enforcement computers at weigh stations, Deckert said.

The grants program has allowed the state to increase the number of trucks it green-lights at weigh stations, he said, and has increased by as much as 100% the number of trucks identified for inspections.

“The information allows officers to maintain a steady flow of vehicles that can potentially have a problem, as well as letting those vehicles that don’t have problems go by the weigh station,” Deckert told Transport Topics. “It’s been good for the trucking industry, as well as the state itself.”

A spokesman for the Connecticut Department of Transportation said the funding shutdown has not caused the state to cancel any contracts.

However, the spokesman, Ernie Bertothy, said the state had a request pending for \$900,000 in CVISN funding when FMCSA shut down the program.

States can use grant funds to develop CVISN programs or to expand CVISN functionality, which may include wireless systems, virtual weigh stations and other functions or enhancements, officials said.

For the program as a whole, FMCSA has disbursed less than half of the funds obligated to states. Of about \$154 million obligated to states over the life of the program, from 1996 to 2011, FMCSA has disbursed more than \$73.5 million. FMCSA officials said that the low disbursements are because the states have difficulty meeting legislative requirements for a 50/50 federal-state match. Many other transportation programs typically require a 10% or 20% state match.

FMCSA’s fiscal 2012 budget calls for hiring a financial specialist, a lawyer, a senior grant manager and a grants specialist for the program.