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Freight Forward: Women drivers are breaking barriers in the produce industry

By

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Recently at an apple warehouse in the Yakima Valley, I saw a woman driver pull in to pick up an order. It had been some time since I'd seen a woman driver, and I wondered how many women are in the industry. Some quick research showed that about 10 percent of all truckers are women, and in the produce industry, the number is a bit lower. I figured it'd be male dominated, but these numbers were a bit surprising to me.

Despite the low representation, there is a noticeable and commendable trend of increasing efforts to bring more women into the driver's seat. This is particularly intriguing given that women have a strong presence in the logistics and coordination aspects of the produce industry, often excelling in roles that involve meticulous planning and efficient management of transportation schedules.



Mattie Fisher

"I have felt welcomed and supported into the logistics and trucking industry since day one, and I have seen a notable increase in the number of women entering the field," said Mattie Fisher, logistics coordinator and marketing manager of John Greene Logistics Co. "This growing diversity brings new perspectives and strengths, enhancing our ability to meet the challenges of the produce industry. Often, I notice that the wife is the dispatcher, finding loads and negotiating rates for their husbands.

Hearing their little ones playing or crying in the background resonates with me as a full-time working mother. I absolutely love it when I am looking for a truck and a woman says, 'I am the driver.' I have so much respect for women working inside the logistics and transportation industry."

Several initiatives are under way to address the gender disparity among drivers in the produce industry. Organizations such as Women In Trucking (WIT) are at the forefront, advocating for a more inclusive environment and offering support networks for women in all facets of trucking. WIT's efforts include mentorship programs, scholarships for women pursuing careers in trucking and initiatives to enhance safety and security for female drivers on the road.

"Increasing gender diversity in transportation creates more opportunity for all who are in the trucking profession, and a key point of the mission of our organization," said Jennifer Hedrick, CAE, president and CEO of the Women In Trucking Association, an industry professional association with a mission to encourage more women in the transportation industry, help to remove obstacles for them and recognize accomplishments. "A more inclusive environment not only creates more jobs for women but increases the bottom line for companies."



Jennifer Hedrick

Moreover, companies within the produce industry are increasingly recognizing the value of diversity and are implementing targeted recruitment campaigns to attract more women drivers. These campaigns often highlight the benefits of a career in trucking, including competitive salaries, opportunities for travel and the chance to be an integral part of the supply chain that keeps grocery stores stocked with fresh produce.

Training and support programs specifically designed for women are also being developed and when 325 individuals obtained their Commercial Driver's Licenses in spring 2024 through federally funded training programs in Oregon, we learned that a number of the drivers were women. These programs focus on providing comprehensive training that addresses the unique challenges female drivers might

face, such as safety concerns and work-life balance. By creating a more supportive and accommodating environment, the industry hopes to retain more women drivers and encourage others to consider this career path.

"Promoting women's careers in high-wage, high-demand fields like transportation are essential for advancing gender equality, economic empowerment and innovation," said Jesse Quinn, community engagement director of Lane Workforce Partnership, Oregon. "By diversifying the workforce, we not only creating opportunities for women but also enhance the industry with a wealth of diverse perspectives and skills.

"Driving Prosperity has significantly contributed to the training and certification of 325 Commercial Driver's License holders across Oregon, underscoring its commitment to empowering individuals and strengthening the transportation sector," said Quinn. "Recognizing the critical role transportation plays in economic development, many communities are actively targeting this field's importance by providing essential resources and support for prospective drivers. These efforts include offering accessible training programs, financial assistance and career guidance to ensure that aspiring drivers can successfully obtain their CDLs."

While women are currently underrepresented among drivers in the produce industry, concerted efforts by advocacy groups, industry leaders, and companies are paving the way for change. By fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment, the produce industry is working to increase the number of women drivers, ultimately benefiting from the diverse perspectives and skills they bring to the table.

Eric Patrick is a seasoned marketing director within the GrubMarket family, bringing over two decades of experience in the fresh produce industry and logistics. He's also an adjunct marketing instructor at Yakima Valley College. He appreciates the importance of logistics and how it impacts industries every day.

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