ST. GEORGE: UTAH SUPER PORT

MELANIE BUCK

St. George port of entry.
PETERSON/UDOT

The heat rises off Interstate 15 in waves near the border between Utah and Arizona, where temperatures routinely soar above 100 degrees. The St. George, Utah, Super Port of Entry appears on the horizon like an oasis in the desert terrain.

You downshift to 56 kilometers per hour (35 miles per hour) on the approach ramp to the port. Signs direct you to maintain an interval of 30 meters (100 feet) between your truck and the one ahead. You are pulling a set of doubles and silently wondering how much time you will lose. It has been a long, dry haul through the desert and every second counts. Without knowing it, you have already passed over the first medium-speed weigh-in-motion scale, which boasts an accuracy rate within 3 percent. Your vehicle was also electronically monitored for height limit violations.

Overhead you see large variable message signs displaying directions. You slow down to the posted 32 kilometers per hour (20 miles per hour) as you pass over the second weigh-in-motion scale. This is a totally new experience, but there is no time for speculation because the message sign is already telling you to proceed back onto the freeway. In 10 seconds port personnel have viewed your rig with remote cameras and have taken note of your company and identification number. Your permits, inspection, and tax status were verified through a computerized data base. Everything is in order.

Melanie Buck is Community Relations Officer, Utah Department of Transportation.

The St. George port handles 2,300 commercial vehicles every day with an average processing time of 4 minutes.

Port personnel use computer technologies to make permitting process more efficient.
PETERSON/UDOT

As you follow the line of trucks in front of you past the port building and onto the entry ramp and merging lane, you are amazed at the convenience and time-saving benefits from these state-of-the-art technologies. Instead of a time-consuming delay, your detour was merely a matter of slowing down.

SPEED AND EFFICIENCY

On February 28, 1992, the St. George Super Port of Entry was dedicated and open for operation. The federal government picked up most of the $12.1 million price tag, with Utah and Arizona splitting the balance. Utah manages the northbound facility and Arizona the southbound, with uniformed officers from both states working side by side, sharing the same computers and data base. The operational costs are divided equally between Arizona and Utah.

UDOT's ports of entry are dedicated to "protecting and preserving Utah's highway infrastructure while enhancing safety for the motor carrier industry and the motoring public," according to the mission statement for the ports. Efficiency was the top priority during the design and construction of the Utah-Arizona combined port of entry. The St. George port handles 2,300 commercial vehicles every day with an average processing time of four minutes, or less than a minute if a truck has automatic vehicle identification (AVI).

The port includes two identical buildings: one on northbound I-15 and one on southbound I-15. Located less than 2 kilometers (1 mile) north of the Utah-Arizona border, both facilities are at a 45-degree angle from the highway, allowing maximum visibility of the secured parking area at each site. An alarm notifies the port when a vehicle leaves a parking area. Not even the smallest design detail was overlooked, including the placement of the observation windows. From their vantage point inside the port, agents can see the entire length of the approach ramp and can visually inspect each passing vehicle.

To further improve speed and efficiency, the St. George port is equipped with a freeze-frame remote camera. The camera sends a truck's image to a monitor inside the port. The camera is positioned 0.4 kilometers (0.25 mile) away on the approach ramp and includes a lighting system to identify vehicles at night. This early visual information allows port personnel to identify and check each vehicle before it reaches the first variable message sign.

Truckers directed by the variable message signs to show proper permit or tax documentation can pull around to the paved parking area that can service more than 40 heavy trucks. Two call boxes are located in the parking area with direct lines into the office. A trucker need only pick up the phone to find out what specifically needs to be verified or cleared with port personnel.

Just inside the port is a lobby complete with telephones, vending machines, and restrooms. The port office is designed to accommodate several customers at once. At the permits counter, truckers enjoy "one-stop shopping," conveniently purchasing all necessary permits for both Utah and Arizona. Required permits include oversize and overweight, tax commission, and temporary fuel permits. A trucker can even pay a citation fine at the port office.

The port's variable message signs have more than 3,000 pre-programmed messages, which include graphics and text. Specialized messages can also be entered from a computer terminal inside the port. Computers are the core of port operations. Intelligent transportation systems technology has brought automation to many port functions with increased efficiency and cost savings. According to JoAnna Gunderson, supervisor of the northbound St. George port of entry for Utah, "ITS technology will double the capacity of the port of entry, as trucks are more quickly identified and credentials are checked."

At the forefront of ITS technology is AVI. In Utah 1,500 commercial vehicles are equipped with transponders that transmit vehicle identification information to receivers at the port of entry. This small but rapidly growing method of identification allows a data base search for current registration, fuel tax, and inspection information. If a trucker needs to update or purchase a permit, the computer automatically flags the vehicle and the appropriate message is displayed on the overhead variable message signs. Utah's AVI equipment is also capable of reading transponders from other states, especially now that a common standard is being adopted.

A major benefit to truckers from AVI is time savings. If a vehicle has all the correct paperwork, the variable message sign directs the truck through the bypass lane in as little as 30 seconds, a fraction of the time it takes a non-AVI truck to pass through the port.

Another unique and time-saving feature at the St. George Super Port of Entry is the vehicle inspection process. Each port is equipped with two large inspection bays. One of the bays is equipped with an 18-meter (60-foot) pit accessible by stairs at either end, which allows inspectors to stand underneath the trucks for greater visibility and more thorough inspection. The second inspection bay is at ground level with in-floor lighting. The Utah port has three full-time inspectors who work random shifts around the clock.

"This facility is very efficient. We accomplish more and better inspections here than anywhere."
Lane Elmer, Certified CVSA Inspector, Utah

Each port is equipped with two large inspection bays.
PETERSON/UDOT

The St. George port is the only port of entry in Utah to have on-site inspection capability and staff. Other Utah ports must rely on Highway Patrol officers to inspect vehicles in parking lots or at roadside. The time savings and increased safety of on-site inspection benefit truckers and port personnel. According to Lane Elmer, a certified Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance inspector for Utah, "This facility is very efficient. We accomplish more and better inspections here than anywhere."

St. George port is only port of entry in Utah with on-site inspection staff.
PETERSON/UDOT

The secret of the success of the St. George Super Port of Entry is the unique harmony between port personnel and the cutting edge computer technologies at the facility.

Vehicles with correct paperwork can bypass detailed inspection in only 30 seconds.
PETERSON/UDOT

SAFETY

Improved safety for the motoring public is a primary focus for the port of entry. To further that goal, a hazardous materials containment area was built on the outskirts of the secured parking area. This area consists of a rectangular pit, 3 meters by 20 meters (10 feet by 65 feet), with a rubberized liner to contain hazardous materials and prevent groundwater contamination. The cost of hazardous materials cleanup is directed to the carrier responsible for the spill.

Utah port agents have the authority to issue misdemeanor and infraction citations and order vehicles out of service. If a pursuit or arrest is necessary, a Utah Highway Patrol or other enforcement officer is notified. This shared enforcement partnership has proven extremely positive and efficient.

Glenn Goodrich, Director of UDOT's Motor Carrier Division, has indicated that the partnership extends to the trucking companies and the drivers who represent them. Goodrich estimates that 90 percent of truck traffic is fully compliant. Of the remaining 10 percent, perhaps 7 percent of drivers are inadvertently in violation, and as little as 3 percent of truckers willfully violate requirements.

Alcohol testing is performed by port personnel when there is any indication of a problem. All drivers with a commercial driver's license are subject to drug testing by their employers. From November 1992 to October 1993, the St. George port participated in a four-state federal study to determine the value of state versus private carrier drug testing. In one year less than 1 percent of drivers tested positive for alcohol; 4 percent of drivers tested positive for other drugs, primarily marijuana, cocaine, and methamphetamine.

CONCLUSION

The secret of the success of the St. George Super Port of Entry is the unique harmony between port personnel and the cutting edge computer technologies at the facility. ITS technologies such as weigh-in-motion scales, AVI, and variable message signs enable trucks to pass through the port quickly. The Utah and Arizona port personnel have mastered technologies and used them as tools for greater efficiency and effectiveness. Because time is money in the trucking industry, any time savings equals cost savings for motor carriers. As an additional benefit, the less time a truck stands idling while waiting in line, the lower the fuel emissions. This contributes to environmental protection.

As you merge back onto I-15, you check your mirrors and see the port vanishing into the desert sand and cactus. You have a long haul ahead of you, but your trip was made just a little easier by the speed and efficiency of the St. George, Utah, Port of Entry.