



DID YOU KNOW?

The Knock. The File Name. The Rolling Audit.

This guide is structured for serious operators.
No fluff.
Only what protects your authority.

SECTION 1: WHAT THIS LESSON IS REALLY ABOUT

This lesson is not about fear.

It is about control.

You must understand three layers of exposure:

1. Federal authority to inspect your business records
2. Vehicle maintenance file requirements
3. Roadside inspection authority and escalation

If you fail at any one of these layers, you increase the probability of enforcement action.

SECTION 2: CAN FMCSA SHOW UP AT YOUR BUSINESS?

Yes — with proper credentials and legal authority.

The legal backbone:

1 49 U.S. Code § 504

Authority to Inspect Equipment and Records

This statute authorizes the Secretary of Transportation and designated representatives to inspect equipment and inspect and copy required records.

Official source:

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/49/504>

Search term:

“49 USC 504 inspection authority motor carrier”

2 49 U.S. Code § 521

Civil Penalties and Enforcement Authority

This statute addresses penalties for failure to allow inspection or access to records.

Official source:

<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/49/521>

Search term:

“49 USC 521 civil penalties motor carrier”

3 Principal Place of Business Guidance

FMCSA defines expectations regarding your principal place of business.

If your authority is registered to your home address, that is the physical location where records are expected to be available.

Federal Register Guidance:

<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2009/07/29/E9-18142/regulatory-guidance-on-the-definition-of-principal-place-of-business>

Search term:

“FMCSA principal place of business definition”

SECTION 3: VEHICLE MAINTENANCE FILE REQUIREMENTS

The controlling regulation:

49 CFR 396.3

Inspection, Repair, and Maintenance

Official source:

<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-III/subchapter-B/part-396/section-396.3>

Search term:

“49 CFR 396.3 maintenance file requirements”

What Must Be In Each Maintenance File?

For every vehicle operated for 30 days or more:

The file must include:

- Company number (if marked on vehicle)
- Make
- Serial number or VIN
- Year
- Tire size
- Schedule of inspections and maintenance
- Record of inspections, repairs, and maintenance

Retention requirements are also detailed in this regulation.

This is not optional.

SECTION 4: PERIODIC (ANNUAL) INSPECTION REQUIREMENTS

49 CFR 396.17

Periodic Inspection

Official source:

<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-III/subchapter-B/part-396/section-396.17>

Search term:
“49 CFR 396.17 periodic inspection”

This regulation requires:

- Annual inspection of each commercial motor vehicle
- Inspection report retention
- Documentation must be available

Documentation of the most recent inspection must be available during roadside inspection.

SECTION 5: ROADSIDE INSPECTION AUTHORITY

49 CFR 396.9

Inspection of Motor Vehicles in Operation

Official source:

<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-III/subchapter-B/part-396/section-396.9>

Search term:
“49 CFR 396.9 roadside inspection authority”

This regulation allows officers to inspect:

- Vehicle condition
- Driver
- Required on-board documentation

SECTION 6: WHAT OFFICERS CAN REQUEST FROM THE DRIVER

During roadside inspection, officers may request:

- Commercial driver’s license
- Medical certification
- Record of duty status

- Electronic logging device data
- Shipping papers
- Registration
- Proof of insurance
- Most recent annual inspection documentation

The driver represents the carrier.

The truck is a rolling compliance exposure.

SECTION 7: LOCATION OF RECORDS

49 CFR 390.29

Location of Records or Documents

Official source:

<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-III/subchapter-B/part-390/section-390.29>

Search term:

“49 CFR 390.29 location of records”

This regulation governs where records must be maintained and how they must be produced.

Understand this clearly.

If records are requested during an investigation, production timelines matter.

SECTION 8: CSA AND VEHICLE MAINTENANCE BASIC

Vehicle Maintenance BASIC measures roadside performance related to:

- Parts 392
- Parts 393
- Parts 396

Official CSA Portal:
<https://csa.fmcsa.dot.gov>

Search term:
“CSA Vehicle Maintenance BASIC”

This impacts:

- Safety score
- Insurance underwriting
- Intervention likelihood

Maintenance violations accumulate.

Documentation protects you.

SECTION 9: PROFESSIONAL FILE STRUCTURE EXAMPLE

Example digital folder naming format:

2024_Freightliner_Unit12_VIN4729_Tire295-75R22.5

Why this matters:

- Fast retrieval
- Clear identification
- Reduced hesitation during investigation
- Demonstrates control

SECTION 10: COMPLIANCE DRILL EXERCISE

Perform this weekly:

1. Select one power unit randomly.
2. Retrieve full maintenance file within 60 seconds.
3. Confirm:

- VIN matches registration
- Tire size matches documentation
- Inspection schedule is current
- Repair log is updated

Then call driver:

“Where is your annual inspection documentation?”

Measure hesitation.

Hesitation reveals weakness.

SECTION 11: HOW TO RESEARCH REGULATIONS PROPERLY

Always use official sources:

Primary:

<https://www.ecfr.gov>

Search format example:

“49 CFR 396.3”

Secondary reference:

<https://www.law.cornell.edu>

Never rely solely on blogs or social media summaries.

Read the regulation directly.

SECTION 12: WARNING SIGNS YOU ARE AT RISK

- Files inconsistently labeled
- No documented maintenance schedule
- Missing tire specification
- No documented inspection interval tracking
- Drivers unsure where annual inspection proof is located
- No structured digital filing system

If any are checked, corrective action is required.

SECTION 13: ACTION PLAN

Immediate:

- Audit all maintenance files
- Standardize naming format
- Verify inspection documentation
- Implement retrieval drill

Short-Term:

- Build mirrored paper and digital system
- Create monthly compliance review
- Train drivers on inspection document access

Long-Term:

- Integrate compliance tracking software
- Conduct quarterly mock audit

FINAL PRINCIPLE

You do not lose authority because you cannot haul freight.

You lose authority because you cannot prove control.

Documentation is proof of control.

Control is survival.