

# INFORMATION BULLETIN



July 10, 2020

## CALIFORNIA DRIVER LICENSE REQUIREMENTS FOR TOWING TRAILERS

This Information Bulletin (IB) provides clarification pertaining to the operation of combination vehicles which are subject to the requirement of holding a Class A commercial driver license (CDL), a restricted Class A driver license (DL), or a Class C DL, dependent on commercial or noncommercial (recreational) towing.

Questions have arisen as to the applicability for a California licensed driver who operates a vehicle when towing a trailer with a gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) or a gross vehicle weight (GVW) of more than 10,000 pounds, which meets a statutory requirement, to hold the appropriate class California DL when operating those vehicles.

**Section 12804.9(b)(1)(A)** of the California Vehicle Code (CVC) classifies a Class A CDL and allows operation of a vehicle, or combination of vehicles, when a vehicle being towed has a GVWR or GVW of more than 10,000 pounds. This license is valid for both commercial and noncommercial (recreational) towing.

**Section 12804.9(b)(3)(G)** CVC allows the operation of a vehicle or combination of vehicles with a gross combination weight rating or GVWR of 26,000 pounds or less, regardless of trailer weight, with a Class C DL by *farmers or ranchers* and their *employees*; or *instructors credentialed in agriculture* as part of an instructional program *exclusively* in the conduct of *not-for-hire agricultural* operations. This statute allows towing by specified persons for agricultural operations exclusively and is not valid for towing recreational-use trailers exceeding 10,000 pounds.

**Section 12804.12(a)** CVC classifies a *restricted* Class A DL, also known as a noncommercial Class A DL, which allows the operation of a combination of vehicles consisting of a two-axle vehicle weighing 4,000 pounds or more unladen when towing a trailer coach exceeding 10,000 pounds GVWR, or a fifth-wheel travel trailer exceeding 15,000 pounds GVWR, when the towing of the trailer is not for compensation. This license allows noncommercial (recreational) towing.

**Section 12804.14(a)** CVC classifies a *restricted* Class A DL which allows the operation of a two-axle vehicle weighing 4,000 pounds or more unladen when towing a livestock trailer exceeding 10,000 pounds, but not exceeding 15,000 pounds GVWR or GVW, if the vehicle



is *controlled and operated by a farmer*, the vehicle is used to transport livestock to or from a farm, the vehicle is not used in the operations of a common or contract carrier, and the vehicle is *used within 150 miles* of the person's farm.

NOTE: For the purpose of determining DL requirements, either the GVWR or the GVW, whichever is greater, will be used.

A federal label, usually located at the front left side of a trailer, will be utilized to determine the GVWR assigned by the manufacturer. In the absence of this label, or when a trailer is otherwise estimated to exceed 10,000 pounds GVW, the trailer may be weighed to determine the trailer's actual GVW for the purpose of enforcement of licensing laws.

The following are examples of DL requirements, and are not all-inclusive:

- A vehicle towing a trailer designed for human habitation as a trailer coach (Section 635 CVC), exceeding 10,000 pounds GVWR, may be legally operated with a Class A CDL (Section 12804.9[b][1][A] CVC) for any purpose, or with a restricted Class A DL (Section 12804.12[a] CVC), when not for compensation.
- A vehicle towing a fifth-wheel travel trailer (Section 324 CVC) with a GVWR at or between 10,001 and 15,000 pounds may be legally operated with a Class C DL with an "endorsement" (California Department of Motor Vehicles DL restriction code 41) for fifth-wheel travel (recreational) trailers (Section 12804.9[b][3][F][ii] CVC), a restricted Class A DL (Section 12804.12 CVC), or a Class A CDL (Section 12804.9[b][1][A] CVC).
- A two-axle vehicle, weighing 4,000 pounds or more unladen, towing a trailer coach (Section 635 CVC) with a GVW of *9,000 pounds or less* may be legally operated with a noncommercial Class C DL (Section 12804.9[b][3][B] CVC).
- A vehicle towing a trailer with a GVWR or GVW of *10,000 pounds or less* may be legally operated with a noncommercial Class C DL (Section 12804.9[b][3][A] CVC).
- A vehicle towing a trailer with a GVWR or GVW of *greater than 10,000 pounds* may be legally operated with a Class A CDL, or when operated with a restricted Class A DL as provided in Section 12804.9(b)(3)(G) or 12804.14(a) CVC.
- A vehicle exceeding 26,000 pounds GVWR or GVW, towing trailers 10,000 pounds GVWR or GVW or less, will require a Class B CDL (Section 12804.9[b][2][E] CVC) or a Class A CDL when towing trailers in excess of 10,000 pounds GVWR or GVW (Section 12804.9[b][1] CVC).



**Section 324 CVC** states, a “fifth-wheel travel trailer” is a vehicle *designed for recreational purposes* to carry persons or property on its own structure and so constructed as to be drawn by a motor vehicle by means of a *kingpin connecting device*.

**Section 635 CVC** states, a “trailer coach” is a vehicle, other than a motor vehicle, designed for human habitation or human occupancy for industrial, professional, or commercial purposes, for carrying property on its own structure, and for being drawn by a motor vehicle. A “park trailer,” as described in Section 18009.3 of the Health and Safety Code, is a trailer coach.

**Section 21715 CVC** states, no passenger vehicle regardless of weight, or any other motor vehicle under 4,000 pounds unladen, shall draw or tow more than one vehicle in combination, except that an auxiliary dolly or tow dolly may be used with the towed vehicle. Additionally, no motor vehicle under 4,000 pounds unladen shall tow any vehicle weighing 6,000 pounds or more gross.

NOTE: Some recreational trailers are configured with a bumper pull or a gooseneck hitch, which utilizes a ball and socket-type connection, and are *not included* in the definition as a fifth-wheel travel trailer (Section 324 CVC). These trailers will qualify for operation under the provisions of Section 12804.12(a) CVC, restricted Class A DL.

Commercial driver license requirements contained in Title 49, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 383, allow states to set their own standards for issuing noncommercial DLs when otherwise in compliance with federal law. The CFR allows individual states to regulate resident DL requirements more strictly than the federal requirements, at their discretion. California has chosen to exercise this option for trailers exceeding 10,000 pounds GVWR or GVW, as well as for certain travel trailers. In these cases, out-of-state drivers may operate vehicle combinations with a gross combination weight rating or gross combination weight of 26,000 pounds or less in California with a noncommercial DL due to reciprocity agreements or DL compacts between states. In contrast, resident California DL holders are required to meet the additional enhanced DL requirements currently codified in California statute.

Questions regarding the contents of this IB should be directed to Commercial Vehicle Section, at (916) 843-3400.

OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER

OPI: 062