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BUSINESS // AUTOS

Driverless semis are taking over Texas roads, but regulations struggle to keep pace

Texas AV operators will have to contend with a new law next spring, but it falls short of what some watchdog groups have demanded.

By **Amber Gaudet, Mackenzie Sheehy**

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Tom Fox/Staff Photographer

PALMER - On a recent July afternoon, Sasko Cuklev's eyes swept over a color-coded map of the United States.

Baby Gronk: How an eight grader became a viral football star



Just outside, a black Volvo semi - hitched to a bright yellow DHL trailer - idled in the dirt-and-gravel lot, still muddy from the previous night's downpour.

Cuklev, who heads the on-roads solutions unit for Volvo Autonomous, eyed a large light-blue outline toward the bottom center of the map.

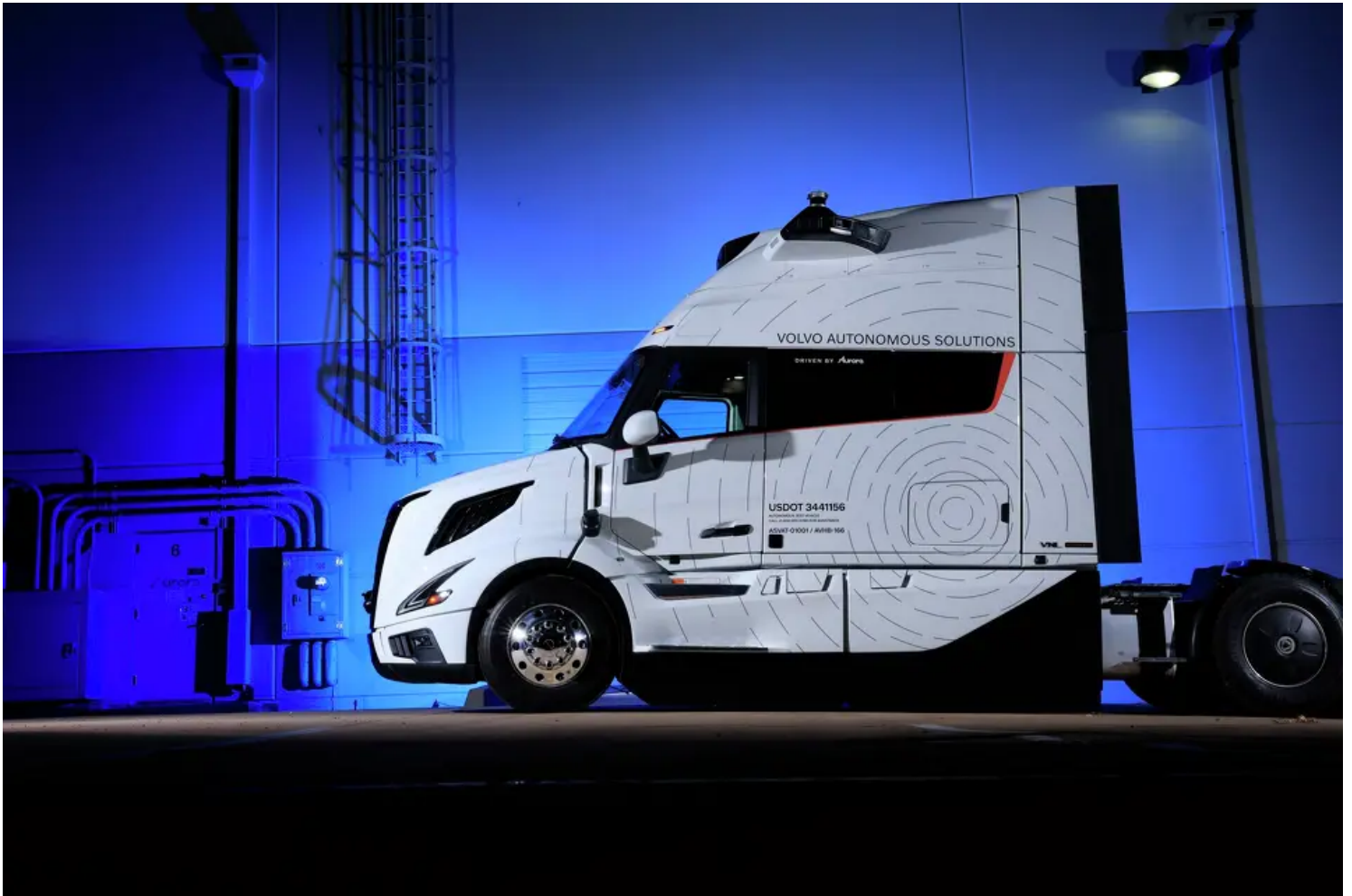
"Of course, Texas [is a] very friendly regulatory environment, and that is one of the reasons why we started here," Cuklev told a group of reporters gathered nearby.

For the occasion, executives from Volvo and partner Aurora had invited journalists from across North Texas to witness the deployment of a driverless semi from its launch center in Palmer.

By that time, it was a familiar sight.

Autonomous trucking companies have been strategically relocating their headquarters to Texas to test driverless long-haul trucks across the region. They cite what industry giants describe as the state's laissez-faire approach to the next frontier of trucking.

But state lawmakers have recently signaled they're paying more attention to the flock of driverless trucks that increasingly traverse Texas roadways - and changes are coming.



A Volvo VNL Autonomous semi truck is photographed at the Aurora facility in Coppell, Texas, September 8, 2025. The long-haul, self-driving truck utilizes Lidar (Light Detection and Ranging) in the Aurora Innovation, Inc. (AUR)'s autonomous driving system. Lidar (the units on either side at the top of the truck) uses laser pulses to create a detailed 3D map to detect and identify objects in its environment. This latest model of truck was specifically built with all the technology incorporated into it and not a retrofitted model.

Tom Fox/Staff Photographer

An AV frenzy with little pushback

Driverless companies have been testing their tech on Texas roads for years.

Back in 2021, Kodiak Robotics [celebrated their first Dallas-to-Houston trips](#) relying on their proprietary driving system, more than a year after the company's first initial freight delivery. It's since partnered with other major transportation players like Martin Brower and [U.S. Xpress](#) to deploy freight from its base in North Texas.

Pittsburgh-based Aurora Innovation recently began regular customer deliveries between Dallas and

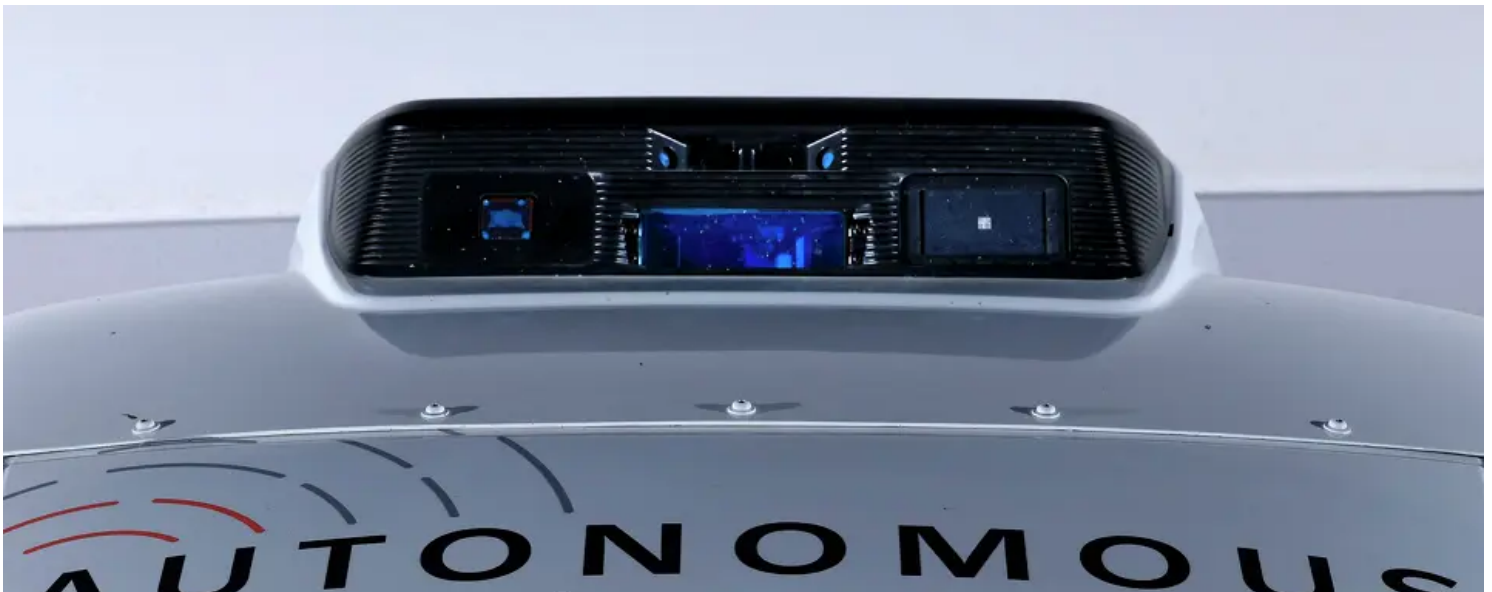
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It made Aurora the first company to operate a commercial self-driving service with heavy-duty trucks on public roads without a safety driver - a human behind the wheel who can take over if things go wrong.

Related: [Semis are taking to Texas roads — with no one behind the wheel](#)

Torc Robotics opened its first autonomous hub in Fort Worth's AllianceTexas development in May, testing its self-driving trucks on Interstate 35 between Dallas and Laredo. And California-based Plus and its partners have been trialing its driverless trucking software system, SuperDrive, throughout the [Texas Triangle](#) this year.

Driverless technology has the potential to reshape the freight industry, allowing trucks to be on the road for [more than 20 hours a day](#) and trim delivery time for long-haul loads by days. Companies developing autonomous programs say driverless hauling will improve highway safety, and stabilize transportation costs.



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Tom Fox/Staff Photographer

Major players in the automotive and freight spaces are betting on it. Amazon, FedEx and Uber Freight have partnered with companies like Aurora and Volvo Autonomous Solutions to pilot driverless routes, while an increasing number of commercial shipments are incorporating AV technology.

Yet the influx has presented new challenges for law enforcement. Austin's first responders contended with [law-breaking Cruise robotaxis](#) until 2023, when the company [suspended its self-driving taxi](#) operations in the city.

Officers struggle to identify AVs, lack knowledge of varying automation levels used and may have limited access to AV operators, which poses problems when coordinating training or seeking emergency assistance, according to a [report from the Texas A&M Transportation Institute](#).

The absence of standardized incident reporting systems also makes it difficult to track crashes or assess safety on a statewide scale, the analysis points out.

Only recently did Texas lawmakers take the first steps toward addressing disparities.

[Senate Bill 2807](#) requires AV operators to submit safety response plans, including information on law enforcement engagement, to the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles.

The legislation [took effect on Sept. 1](#), and final rules must be adopted by Dec. 1. Enforcement of the new law is expected to begin in spring 2026, 90 days after rule adoption.

The DMV will work with the Department of Public Safety and the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation to issue operating permits, once plans have been approved.

"Response plans will serve as a guide to law enforcement on the general operations of AVs being operated by these companies, including how they respond to mechanical malfunctions, crashes, traffic stops and other interactions with law enforcement and other first responders," DPS said in a statement.



Aurora Truck Operations Specialist Charles Griffin takes photos of an autonomous semi trailer before departing on Interstate 45 near Palmer, Texas, June 21, 2023. To help the truck improve its performance, he and another operations specialist record information about the shipping route between their Palmer and Houston facilities. Part of the autonomous driving system uses cameras and

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enforcement about their inspection processes for trucks deployed out of Palmer, according to executives.

"We're engaged with many, many law enforcement agencies in the state of Texas," Torc chief safety officer Steve Kenner said.

"We think it's really important to do that even before you start doing your testing, and especially before you do commercial operations," he added. "So we've gone through that process and that engagement to make sure people understand what are we doing, where are we doing it, and then how to interact with our vehicles, both now and in the future."

Yet the legislative changes fall short of the kind of strong regulations advocated for by unions and watchdog groups.

Industry faces patchwork regulation

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has issued voluntary safety guidelines and is working toward establishing a single set of national regulations for automated driving systems. Current AV regulation is largely left up to states, however.

"It's hard to develop a set of federal regulations for technologies that are still extremely experimental," said Missy Cummings, a professor at George Mason University.

"We just can't start making rules [as] an entire industry if we still don't yet understand how the technology works, and we still don't understand how much it might change over the next few years," added Cummings, a former senior safety advisor to the NHTSA.

It's up to companies how much they share about how their technology works, how it's been tested and what redundancies are in place.

AV companies have taken a different view on existing safety standards, pointing to the many regulations on commercial trucks that they also have to follow.

Earl Adams Jr., vice president of public policy and regulatory affairs at Plus and a former deputy administrator of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, insisted the safety standards of AVs and traditional vehicles should be comparable.

"You and I can get in our car right now with a tail light out, the transmission barely working, with a flat tire," Adams said. "Every time we put our truck on the road, it has to meet the same standards as a truck that does not have autonomous technology."

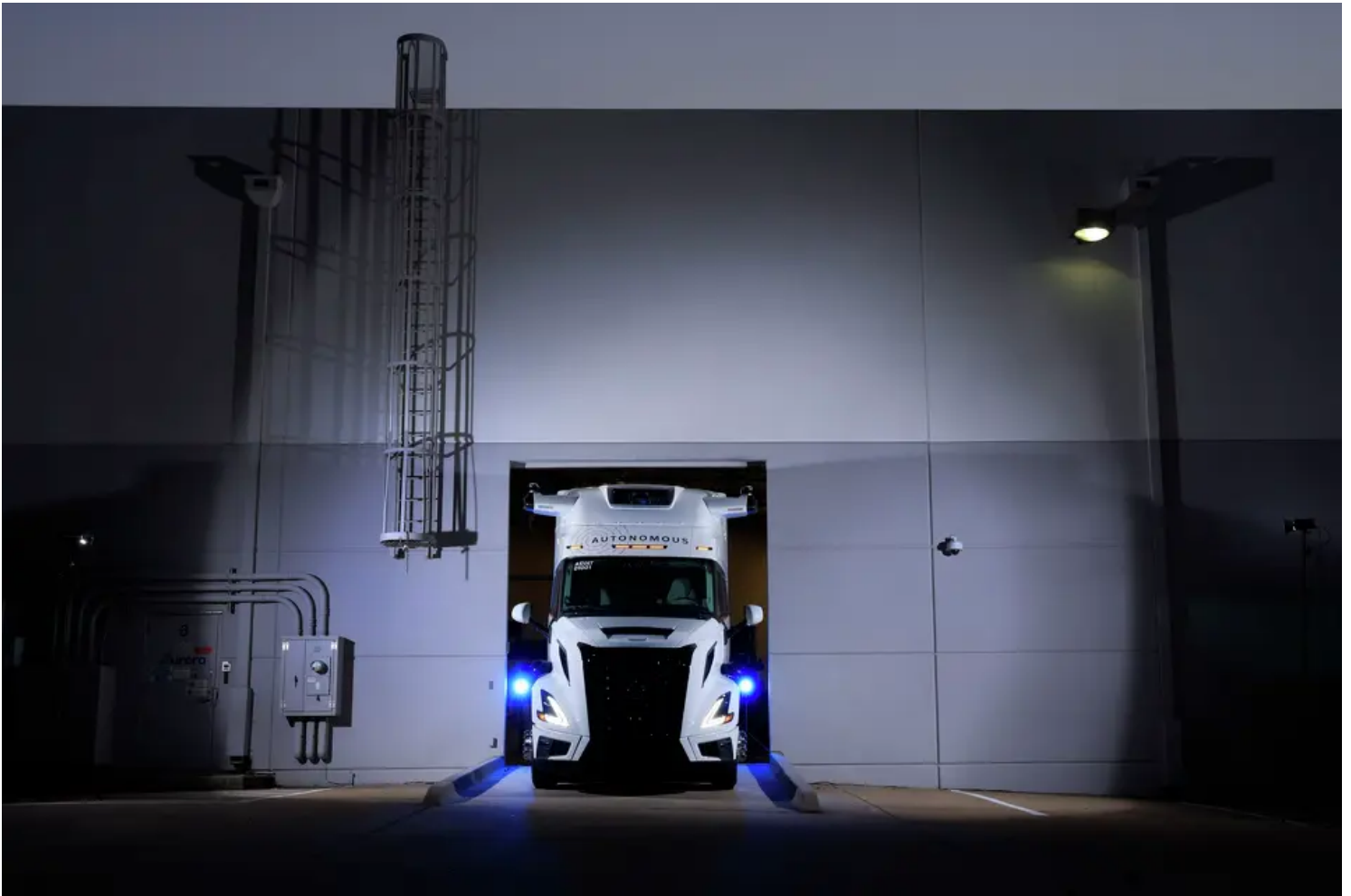
Those standards include pre-trip inspections, roadside inspections and closer scrutiny from law enforcement, Adams said.

In its language, SB 2807 does give Texas regulators the power to revoke or cancel an AV's operating permit if a vehicle is "not in safe operational condition and the operation of the vehicle on a highway or street endangers the public."

But it doesn't explicitly mandate reporting of crashes or safety incidents, or lay out step-by-step procedures for ensuring a safe rollout of the tech on public roads. Those are specifics that critics like the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association insist are crucial to any regulations.

It's unclear if, or to what degree, those nuances will be considered during the rule making process led by the state. The DMV and DPS provided emailed statements, but declined to make representatives available for interviews by *The News*.

"The first questions I think that the state of Texas needs to ask are ... how much decision-making is truly made by each vehicle, and how much decision-making is being made by a human who's attached to the vehicle remotely, and are there any vulnerabilities in latency?" Cummings said in May.



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Tom Fox/Staff Photographer

Untested tech, uncertain drivers

Despite industry optimism about automation, the public has expressed doubts. About 86% of U.S. drivers would be reluctant to share the road with a driverless semi, a [survey by Advocates for Highway & Auto Safety](#) found.

But testing the tech is the best way for it to learn to deal with real-world scenarios it could encounter on the road.

"If you want to mature technology, you need to test in the real world," said Kelvin Day, a professor of civil

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For Dey, the key is developing a safety framework to minimize incidents while the technology matures. He recommends pilot testing, and rolling out the technology with a safety driver first, while gradually increasing operations on different routes.

That's standard for most AV companies. During its four-year pilot phase, Aurora completed more than 10,000 hauls across 3 million miles. Torc doesn't plan to run fully autonomous "driver-out" operations on its route between Fort Worth and Laredo until 2027.

Plus, which works closely with original equipment manufacturers to integrate software that's similar to nonautonomous vehicle parts, plans to pull out safety drivers on a closed course to start — and then only in client demonstrations. It will be up to purchasers of equipped trucks whether they engage the autonomous system.

"You win this one corridor successfully, then you learn sufficiently for that corridor, then probably start learning and keep adding to your arsenal more and more," Dey said.

Autonomous vehicles have the potential to eventually reduce the human errors that cause accidents, Dey said. Speeding, [distracted driving](#) and drunken driving are among the top causes for car crashes, according to NHTSA data.



Michael Hammond, head of safety and compliance of Volvo gives a tour of the newly launched autonomous truck, on Wednesday, July 9, 2025 in Palmer, TX.

Shafkat Anowar/Staff Photographer

In trucking, that can often mean errors caused by driver fatigue. Five motorists were killed and several more injured during a pileup caused when a truck driver fell asleep at the wheel on Interstate 20 near Terrell in June.

"The expected potential [of driverless technology] is huge for society, and that cannot be realized unless ... [we] get to testing on public roads," Dey said, who added that at least 90% of crashes occur because of human error. "We can minimize that human involvement."

Texas oversight a question mark

Far from taking shortcuts, autonomous technology companies say they are staking their reputations on

tested road conditions and the redundancies in place in case of any mechanical failures.



An Aurora autonomous semi tractor-trailer pulls through a sensor calibration area using large QR codes to set the truck up for shipping a load of cargo to Houston from their facility in Palmer, Texas, June 21, 2023. The autonomous driving system uses cameras and FirstLight Lidar sensors mounted atop the center of the truck and above the driver and passenger doors. The perception system

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Many driverless tech companies have said publicly that they welcome regulation, particularly at the federal level.

"There needs to be ... a minimum standard for purposes of establishing safety readiness," Plus' Adams said. "Every state can't do its own thing because these are interstate vehicles, and they have to be able to move nationally."

For Texas, SB 2807 is the first step toward ensuring there are guardrails around the burgeoning AV rollout. But what the proposed rules, which are being developed in consultation with AV companies, will require operators to include in their plans remains unclear.

"Details regarding these specific processes and operations are still being developed as part of the bill's implementation. However, the department will ensure that industry participants receive the necessary information to obtain and maintain authorization before the law becomes enforceable," the DMV said in a July statement.

Initial proposed rules published in the Texas Register for public feedback require companies to provide basic information on the business and autonomous vehicles it operates, but does not require crash reporting or tie safety records to permit eligibility.

Helping law enforcement understand how to engage with autonomous trucks when safety drivers become increasingly absent in cabs as the technology matures will be critical, Torc's Kenner said.

In the meantime, driverless technology companies remain optimistic about Texas' regulatory landscape and insist they will remain stewards of public welfare, regardless of any perceived regulation deficits.

"Whether they're regulators or just elected public officials, they're responsible for public safety, and as the chief safety Officer of Torc, I view my job as the same. ... We have different roles in improving public safety, but it's the same mission," Kenner said.

With little widespread understanding of how driverless technology works and less control over who they share roads with, Texas drivers, for now, will have to take it on faith.

Mackenzie Sheehy

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