

Empty Miles Are Still a Massive Industry Drain

Not every mile a truck drives generates revenue. Across North America, empty miles are estimated to account for up to 30% of total trucking distance. This is dependent on lane balance, freight availability, and network efficiency. That represents a significant amount of equipment, fuel, labour, and time being consumed without producing income.

For an industry built on utilization, that matters.

Every empty mile is purely cost, expenses to operate continue to build without freight on the trailer. While some repositioning is unavoidable, excessive empty mileage reduces profitability and weakens overall network efficiency.

The challenge is especially pronounced in imbalanced freight markets.

Certain regions consistently produce more outbound freight than inbound, while others experience the opposite. This is known in the industry as fronthaul/backhaul disparity.

Seasonal shifts, economic cycles, and changing consumer demand can intensify imbalances, forcing carriers to reposition equipment long distances to secure the next paying load.

The effects of this are felt throughout the supply chain. Higher empty-mile percentages contribute to increased operating costs, reduced available capacity, and greater pricing pressure across the market. Carriers must recover these inefficiencies somewhere, which ultimately influences freight rates and service economics.

There is also a broader industry impact.

Reducing empty miles improves not only profitability, but fuel efficiency, equipment utilization, and overall transportation sustainability. Fewer non-revenue miles mean less congestion, lower emissions, and better use of existing trucking capacity, an increasingly important consideration as the industry faces ongoing driver shortages and rising operational costs.

Technology and visibility are playing a growing role in addressing the issue.

Improved freight matching, real-time market visibility, network optimization, and better planning tools are helping carriers reduce repositioning distances and identify reload opportunities more effectively. The goal is not to eliminate empty miles entirely, which is unrealistic, but to minimize unnecessary ones wherever possible. In trucking, profitability is often determined not just by the loads you move, but by the empty miles driven between them.