TRUCK WASH RESOURCE LIBRARY

# Reading a Trade Area: Is There Room for a Truck Wash?

Two sites can sit on the same road, ten miles apart, and support completely different truck wash outcomes. The difference is not visible from the street. It shows up in freight patterns, existing supply, and demand that either does or does not route past a given point. This guide walks through how to read a trade area before committing to a site, whether the project is a public-use facility or a wash built for a company's own fleet at a location it already owns.

## START WITH TRAFFIC, BUT DON'T STOP THERE

### What is the truck percentage of traffic, not just the total count?

A road with 40,000 vehicles a day and 3 percent trucks is a very different opportunity than a road with 15,000 vehicles a day and 25 percent trucks. Raw traffic counts from a standard demographic report rarely break this out. State DOT traffic data usually does, and it is worth the extra step to find it.

### What is the time-of-day pattern?

Commuter traffic clusters in two sharp peaks. Freight traffic tends to be flatter across the day and can run heavy overnight. A site that looks busy on a standard traffic report may be busy with the wrong kind of traffic at the wrong hours.

### Is this a freight corridor or a retail arterial that happens to carry trucks?

Proximity to an interstate interchange, a distribution hub, or a cluster of truck stops and travel centers is a stronger signal than traffic volume alone. A retail arterial can carry real truck volume and still not be a freight corridor in the way that matters for wash demand.

## MAP THE DEMAND BASE

### What carriers, distribution centers, and fleets sit within routing distance?

This is the single most important question for either a public-use wash or a private fleet facility. For a public site, it identifies who might actually pull in. For a fleet's own site, it confirms the facility will see enough of the company's own trucks, and potentially nearby fleets, to justify the investment.

### What is the drive-up versus contract mix likely to be?

Owner-operators and pass-through drivers anchor early volume for a public-use facility. A private fleet facility instead depends on how many of the company's own trucks route through or near that location on a regular cycle, and how consistent that pattern is across seasons and routes.

### Are there food-grade, tanker, or specialty haulers nearby that need documented washouts?

These loads often carry wash requirements that are closer to a compliance need than a convenience, which can create more predictable, recurring demand than general freight traffic.

## ASSESS EXISTING SUPPLY HONESTLY

### What wash options already exist within a realistic drive time?

Note format, whether manual or automated, hours of operation, and general reputation among drivers. A market with one aging manual option may have real room for a modern automated alternative. A market that already has one or two modern automated washes may not, regardless of how strong the traffic numbers look.

**What can existing options not serve?**

Look for gaps: vehicle types the nearest wash cannot accommodate, hours it is not open, or a location that is inconvenient for a specific corridor or facility. Unmet demand is usually more specific than an entire market being underserved.

**For a fleet's own site, is the nearest public wash actually inconvenient enough to justify a private facility?**

Sometimes the honest answer is that a nearby public-use wash already serves the fleet well, and the stronger investment is elsewhere. Other times the detour, wait time, or inconsistent quality at the nearest option is exactly the reason to build on-site.

## AVOID THE COMMON SIZING TRAPS

**Don't rely on generic market-size figures.**

Published estimates for the size of the truck wash market vary from source to source by wide margins and frequently contradict one another. None of them describe a specific trade area, and none should substitute for the site-specific work above.

**Don't assume car wash demographic tools translate directly.**

Standard site selection software built for retail and car wash demand is calibrated around passenger vehicle traffic and consumer demographics. It can be a useful starting point, but it was not built to weigh freight corridor positioning or fleet density, and a truck wash trade area read has to layer that analysis on top.

## A Note for Facility and Property Managers

Everything above applies just as directly to a company evaluating whether to add a truck wash at a distribution center, terminal, or yard it already owns. The site is already fixed, so the trade area question becomes narrower: how many of the company's own trucks, and any nearby fleets, would realistically use a wash at this location, on this cycle, often enough to justify the investment. The same freight pattern, demand mapping, and honest supply assessment above still apply, just measured against an existing footprint instead of a site still being selected.

## The reason this step comes before a letter of intent

Site-specific work like this is what separates a defensible investment from a hopeful one. It is also, by its nature, more work than pulling a standard demographic report. That is the point. The operators and facility managers willing to do the trade area work before committing capital are the ones who end up with a site that performs the way they expected it to.

*This guide is a framework for asking the right questions, not a substitute for a market evaluation. Big Rig Development Group performs this analysis as part of the site selection process for clients developing commercial truck wash facilities nationally, whether public-use or built for a company's own fleet.*