

Diesel Pulls Back, But the Capacity Squeeze Is Just Beginning

U.S. diesel eased to \$6.199/gal for the week ending 10/05/26 (EIA), pulling the TL fuel surcharge down to \$0.84/mi (FreightPlus FSC Schedule) after a late-September peak. The relief is thin: diesel still adds \$234 to a typical 600-mile load versus the pre-disruption baseline, and the EIA now projects diesel above \$6.00/gal through October. The month's real story is on the supply side, where load-to-truck ratios are up 50% to 75% year over year (DAT Trendlines) as regulatory enforcement, a shrinking driver pool, and broker-liability pressure pull capacity out of the market faster than demand is falling.

By FreightPlus Market Intelligence · Published October 8, 2026 · 12 min read

At a Glance

U.S. DIESEL · NATIONAL AVG	TL FSC · \$/MILE	DAT VAN SPOT RATE	VAN LOAD-TO-TRUCK RATIO
\$6.199 -0.18 WoW · +\$0.75 over 8 wks	\$0.84 -\$0.03 WoW · FreightPlus FSC Schedule	+46.3% YoY +3.8% MoM · DAT Trendlines	13.3 +9.6% MoM · +73.4% YoY

Diesel: EIA Weekly Retail, wk ending 10/05/26. FSC: FreightPlus FSC Schedule. Van spot and load-to-truck: DAT Trendlines, wk ending 10/03/26. Red borders flag elevated metrics.

Executive Summary

U.S. on-highway diesel eased for a second straight week to \$6.199/gal for the week ending 10/05/26, down \$0.18 on the week and \$0.33 off the late-September peak of \$6.529 (EIA Weekly Retail Diesel, wk ending 09/21/26). That pulled the TL fuel surcharge to \$0.84/mi from \$0.87/mi (FreightPlus FSC Schedule). The pullback is real but modest: diesel is still \$0.75 higher than it was eight weeks ago, and the EIA's October Short-Term Energy Outlook projects retail diesel staying above \$6.00/gal through October before easing toward a roughly \$4.50/gal average in 2027 (EIA STEO, October 6 2026 release). Carriers are still absorbing elevated fuel, and shippers are still paying \$234 more per 600-mile load than at the pre-disruption baseline.

The month's decisive move is on the supply side. DAT's national van load-to-truck ratio climbed to 13.31 for the week ending 10/03/26, up 9.6% on the month and 73.4% year over year (DAT Trendlines); reefer and flatbed ratios are up 75.4% and 50.4% YoY respectively. National load postings are up 26.9% YoY while truck postings are down 24.5% YoY (DAT Trendlines), a widening gap that reflects capacity leaving the market rather than demand surging. Carrier executives describe the correction as still in its early innings, with one large provider cutting its approved-carrier list to 14,000 from a peak of 60,000 (Schneider, via FreightWaves 09/17/26).

Demand is firm, not frenzied. ISM manufacturing expanded for a ninth straight month at 54.5% in September, with new orders at 55.3% and the prices-paid index jumping to 77.9% (ISM Manufacturing PMI, October 1 2026 release). Contract truckload rates are grinding higher even as August spot rates pulled back, and the spot-contract gap has reopened (U.S. Bank/DAT, October 1 2026). The setup heading into the 2027 bid season is a market where tightening capacity, not softening demand, sets the direction of rates.

Diesel and Fuel Surcharges

Diesel pulled back for a second consecutive week but remains sharply elevated. The national average fell to \$6.199/gal for the week ending 10/05/26, down \$0.18 from \$6.382 the prior week and \$0.33 below the September 21 peak of \$6.529 (EIA Weekly Retail Diesel). Over the full eight-week window the average is still up \$0.75, driven by tight distillate inventories and ongoing Strait of Hormuz supply disruption that the EIA cites as still constraining global flows (EIA STEO, October 6 2026). For carriers, fuel remains a heavy operating cost; for shippers, it remains a heavy surcharge line. Neither side is getting relief yet, only a slower rate of increase.

Week Ending	U.S. Avg (\$/gal)	Notes
08/17/26	\$5.454	8-week window opens
08/24/26	\$5.652	Climbing
08/31/26	\$5.599	Slight ease
09/07/26	\$5.967	Resumes climb
09/14/26	\$6.285	Crosses \$6.28
09/21/26	\$6.529	Peak
09/28/26	\$6.382	Pulls back
10/05/26	\$6.199	Latest · second week of easing

At \$6.199/gal, the FreightPlus TL fuel surcharge computes to \$0.84/mi, one step down from \$0.87/mi the prior week as diesel eased (FreightPlus FSC Schedule). The intermodal surcharge sits at 49% of linehaul at the current reading (FreightPlus FSC Schedule). The surcharge is a separate, formula-driven component that resets with diesel; it is not built into the linehaul rate. As diesel comes off its peak, the surcharge steps down with it, but on monthly-lag contracts that step-down trails the weekly reading.

Fuel Cost Impact · vs. Pre-Disruption Baseline

Baseline: \$3.897/gal (week ending 03/02/2026, last EIA reading before the Strait of Hormuz disruption), TL FSC \$0.45/mi. The impact column shows added per-load fuel surcharge versus that baseline over a standardized 600-mile load, the FreightPlus customer year-to-date average distance.

Week Ending	Diesel (\$/gal)	TL FSC (\$/mi)	delta vs. baseline (\$/mi)	Impact per 600-mi load
08/17/26	\$5.454	\$0.71	+0.26	+\$156.00
08/24/26	\$5.652	\$0.75	+0.30	+\$180.00
08/31/26	\$5.599	\$0.74	+0.29	+\$174.00
09/07/26	\$5.967	\$0.80	+0.35	+\$210.00
09/14/26	\$6.285	\$0.85	+0.40	+\$240.00
09/21/26	\$6.529	\$0.89	+0.44	+\$264.00
09/28/26	\$6.382	\$0.87	+0.42	+\$252.00
10/05/26	\$6.199	\$0.84	+0.39	+\$234.00

The burden is easing from its peak but remains substantial. At the latest reading, a standard 600-mile load carries \$234 more in fuel surcharge than at the baseline, down from a peak burden of \$264 per load at the September 21 diesel high. Across the eight weeks shown, the per-load fuel burden has ranged from \$156 to \$264 above baseline. For a shipper moving 100 such loads a month, the current surcharge level adds roughly \$23,400 in monthly fuel cost versus the baseline; for carriers, the surcharge offsets fuel at the pump but does not cover the full operating-cost drag of \$6 diesel.

Rate Forecast: Then vs. Now

The EIA's October Short-Term Energy Outlook, released October 6, raised its crude and fuel path materially, the most consequential forecast revision this month for freight cost planning (EIA STEO, October 6 2026).

Metric	Prior Forecast	Current Forecast	Direction
Brent crude · Q4 2026 avg	~\$91/bbl	~\$105/bbl	Up ~\$14
Brent crude · 2026 full-year avg	~\$91/bbl	~\$98/bbl	Raised 8%
U.S. retail diesel · Oct 2026	gradual easing	above \$6.00/gal	Higher for longer
U.S. retail diesel · 2027 avg	n/a prior	~\$4.50/gal	Eases in 2027

The near-term path is higher for longer and the medium-term path is lower: diesel stays above \$6 through October on tight distillate inventories, then the EIA sees it easing toward a \$4.50/gal average in 2027 (EIA STEO, October 6 2026). That split is the central assumption to carry into 2027 bids, and it is why the FSC mechanism choice matters more than any single spot diesel print.

Top Corridor Spotlight · Pre-Q4 Retail / Port-to-DC

This basket rotates with the season so it tracks the freight actually moving this quarter. For October we show the pre-Q4 retail and port-to-distribution-center lanes that carry import and replenishment volume ahead of the holiday peak. All four are priced through blended network-rate predictions for an October 6 pickup; figures are month-over-month and year-over-year rate changes with model confidence, no rate dollar amounts.

Lane	Distance	MoM %	YoY %	Linehaul YoY %	Confidence
Long Beach CA → Memphis TN	1821 mi	-1.8%	+38.5%	+26.3%	81/100
Long Beach CA → Chicago IL	2027 mi	-1.1%	+22.5%	+2.5%	50/100
Savannah GA → Atlanta GA	257 mi	+11.8%	+58.3%	+51.2%	76/100
Newark NJ → Chicago IL	782 mi	+3.2%	+52.4%	+35.6%	82/100

The import-gateway lanes are moving in opposite directions. Long Beach to Memphis is up 38.5% YoY (linehaul +26.3% YoY) but eased 1.8% on the month, and Long Beach to Chicago shows a thinner linehaul move of just 2.5% YoY at lower model confidence (50/100), a sign the long transcon van rate is being carried more by fuel than by linehaul strength. The Southeast tells the tighter story: Savannah to Atlanta, a short port-drayage-adjacent lane, is up 11.8% on the month and 58.3% YoY, with linehaul up 51.2% YoY. Newark to Chicago rounds out the basket up 52.4% YoY (linehaul +35.6%) at high confidence (82/100). The pattern fits the capacity story: short, dense, import-fed lanes are tightening fastest as pre-holiday volume meets a thinner truck pool.

Rate signals: Predictive network rates, October 6 2026 pickup. Confidence is model confidence on a 100-point scale.

Flatbed Market Highlight

These four lanes are fixed rather than seasonal, chosen to cover the main flatbed demand drivers (lumber and building products, steel and metals, machinery, and energy equipment) and held constant month to month so the trend stays comparable. Flatbed enters the fourth quarter tight, with construction season still drawing equipment out of general freight.

Flatbed load-to-truck sits at 43.0 for the week ending 10/03/26, +8.3% month over month and +50.4% year over year (DAT Trendlines). Flatbed spot rates moved -1.1% on the week, +2.3% on the month, and +44.2% year over year (DAT Trendlines). Read the load-to-truck level as direction of travel: the ratio is climbing month over month into the fourth quarter.

Lane	Distance	MoM %	YoY %	Linehaul YoY %	Confidence
Portland OR → Salt Lake City UT	772 mi	-6.2%	+64.9%	+59.2%	77/100
Birmingham AL → Houston TX	668 mi	-1.9%	+64.5%	+58.6%	75/100
Cleveland OH → Chicago IL	350 mi	-6.5%	+45.0%	+37.4%	65/100
Houston TX → Chicago IL	1100 mi	-3.6%	+31.7%	+15.6%	73/100

The flatbed basket is up across the board year over year even as several lanes eased month over month. Portland to Salt Lake City, a Pacific Northwest lumber and building-products lane, leads at 64.9% YoY (linehaul +59.2% YoY) though it pulled back 6.2% on the month. Birmingham to Houston, Southeast steel into Gulf Coast energy and fabrication, is up 64.5% YoY (linehaul +58.6% YoY). Cleveland to Chicago, Midwest steel into manufacturing, is up 45.0% YoY, and the long Houston to Chicago energy-equipment haul is up 31.7% YoY. The month-over-month softening on all four lanes is consistent with construction season winding down into winter, but the year-over-year strength reflects a structurally tighter flatbed market: fewer trucks, firm steel and infrastructure demand. A flatbed shipper coming up for renewal should expect to negotiate against capacity that is tighter than a year ago, not looser, even where recent weeks have softened.

Rate signals: Predictive network rates, October 6 2026 pickup, flatbed equipment. Flatbed load-to-truck and spot rates: DAT Trendlines, wk ending 10/03/26.

Supply Side: Capacity Leaves Faster Than Demand Falls

The supply side is where this market is being decided. Capacity is contracting through a combination of elevated fuel, regulatory enforcement, a structurally smaller driver pool, and rising liability costs, and the load-to-truck data shows the squeeze tightening into the fourth quarter.

Load-to-Truck Ratio • DAT Trendlines, week ending 10/03/26

Equipment	Current LTR	WoW	MoM	YoY
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Van	13.3	+20.5%	+9.6%	+73.4%
Reefer	20.8	+17.9%	-4.0%	+75.4%
Flatbed	43.0	+6.1%	+8.3%	+50.4%

The ratios are up sharply year over year across all three equipment types, which is the comparison that matters; the week-over-week jumps are context, not the story. Van load-to-truck rose to 13.31, up 9.6% month over month and 73.4% year over year. Reefer eased 4.0% on the month but is up 75.4% YoY, and flatbed is up 8.3% MoM and 50.4% YoY. Read these as direction of travel, not absolute states: the ratios are climbing, with loads up 26.9% YoY and trucks down 24.5% YoY nationally (DAT Trendlines). The frame matters even for primarily-contract shippers: spot load-to-truck is what gives contract carriers negotiating leverage at renewal, so a tightening spot market pulls contract rates up behind it regardless of how little freight a shipper moves on spot.

Driver pool. The eligible driver pool is structurally smaller, not cyclically smaller. FMCSA's Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse showed 202,345 CDL holders in prohibited status as of January 2 2026, of whom 159,226 have taken no step toward returning to duty (FMCSA Clearinghouse data, via FreightWaves 03/17/26). Separately, the non-domiciled CDL Final Rule that took effect March 16 2026 is projected to render roughly 194,000 current holders ineligible to renew (FMCSA, via FreightWaves). These are additive reductions to the qualified driver pool that do not reverse when freight demand recovers.

Regulatory enforcement. The DOT's crackdown on fraudulent CDL training is removing capacity at the entry point. Federal officials have moved to shut down 110 commercial driver-training schools and are targeting another 160-plus, alongside a nationwide audit of third-party CDL skills testers (FreightWaves 08/31/26). More than 28,000 commercial drivers have been placed out of service for English-language proficiency since June 2025 (DOT, via FreightWaves). Carriers describe this as narrowing the entry point for new capacity and raising the scrutiny on the capacity that does enter.

Carrier exit. The capacity correction is still early, carrier executives say. One large provider has culled its approved-carrier list to 14,000 from a peak of 60,000 (Schneider, via FreightWaves 09/17/26), and management teams expect a segment of carriers to be unable to qualify for affordable liability insurance following the broker-liability shift, further thinning the pool. Werner guided to a 10% to 13% year-over-year increase in one-way rate per total mile for the third quarter (Werner, via FreightWaves 09/17/26).

Costs. Fuel at \$6 diesel, rising insurance premiums, and a high-cost equipment-replacement cycle are pressuring the small and midsize carriers that make up the bulk of capacity. Many lack fuel-recovery mechanisms and are exposed directly to the diesel increases documented above, which accelerates attrition at the bottom of the market.

Watch list for the next 60 days. Source: FreightPlus internal capacity calendar.

Window	Event	Expected Capacity Impact
Wks 41-42 · Oct 5-18	Diwali	Regional impact in areas with Indian-American carrier presence; localized displacement.
Through October	Construction Season	Flatbed tightens (lumber, steel, aggregates); infrastructure projects draw equipment from general freight.
Through November	Hurricane Season	Gulf Coast and Southeast vulnerability; storm prep and

		recovery tie up capacity; FEMA and relief freight displace capacity.
October onward	Retail Peak Season	E-commerce and big-box replenishment; pre-Black Friday inventory pushes; surge in small-package and LTL.
November onward	Winter Storms	Severe weather across Midwest, Northeast, and mountain regions halts freight; road closures; sudden capacity loss; slow recovery.
Wks 47-48 · Nov 23-27	Thanksgiving & Black Friday	Peak retail and food distribution demand; widespread driver time off; major capacity displacement; spot market volatility.

Demand Side: Firm, Not Frenzied

Demand is holding up. ISM manufacturing expanded for a ninth consecutive month in September at 54.5%, with new orders accelerating to 55.3% and backlogs building to 56.4% (ISM Manufacturing PMI, October 1 2026 release). The prices-paid index jumped to 77.9%, a sign of input-cost inflation working through manufacturing supply chains (ISM). Freight volumes are following: DAT national load postings are up 26.9% year over year (DAT Trendlines).

The spot and contract markets have re-separated. After a brief stretch in early summer when spot ran above contract, August spot rates pulled back sharply, posting the steepest July-to-August decline in DAT's 16-year history, and van spot linehaul fell back below contract to roughly a \$0.22/mi gap (U.S. Bank/DAT, October 1 2026). Even after that pullback, spot linehaul rates were more than 30% higher than a year earlier across all three equipment types. Contract rates, meanwhile, are grinding up, and Cass reported truckload rates rose 11% in August (Cass, via FreightWaves). The weekly DAT reading shows spot stabilizing into October, with van spot flat on the week and up 3.8% on the month (DAT Trendlines).

Structurally, shippers are consolidating volume with fewer, more carefully vetted carriers. The \$5.8 billion C.H. Robinson acquisition of RXO announced October 5, at a 29% premium and expected to close in the first half of 2027 (Transport Topics, 10/05/26), is the clearest sign of consolidation in the brokerage tier, driven in part by a heightened broker-liability environment pushing shippers and brokers toward quality and scale. For shippers, the practical effect is fewer counterparties and a higher bar for carrier qualification heading into 2027 bids.

Risk Factors

UPSIDE RISKS · RATES HIGHER

Capacity attrition accelerates. Regulatory enforcement, the broker-liability shift, and \$6 diesel keep pushing small carriers out faster than new entrants qualify (FreightWaves 09/17/26).

Fuel stays high. The EIA projects diesel above \$6.00/gal through October on tight distillate inventories and

DOWNSIDE RISKS · RATES LOWER

Fuel eases faster than expected. The EIA sees diesel falling toward a \$4.50/gal average in 2027; a faster Strait of Hormuz resolution would pull surcharges and crude down sharply (EIA STEO, October 6 2026).

Demand softens. Manufacturing is expanding, but production eased to 56.7% and inventories contracted to

ongoing Strait of Hormuz disruption (EIA STEO, October 6 2026), keeping surcharges and operating costs elevated.

2027 bid season tightens. Carriers enter 2027 contract negotiations during peak season with supply tightness amplified and guide to strong contract increases (Werner, via FreightWaves 09/17/26).

Driver pool keeps shrinking. Clearinghouse prohibitions and the non-domiciled CDL rule remove qualified drivers structurally, not cyclically (FMCSA, via FreightWaves).

48.6% in September (ISM); a consumer or industrial pullback would loosen freight demand.

Spot stays soft. August spot rates posted their steepest July-to-August drop in 16 years (U.S. Bank/DAT, October 1 2026); if spot fails to firm, it caps the leverage carriers carry into contract talks.

Consolidation improves matching. Brokerage consolidation (CHRW/RXO) could lift matching efficiency over time (Transport Topics, 10/05/26), modestly offsetting physical tightness.

FreightPlus Position

Fuel passthrough. Treat the fuel surcharge as what it is: a separate, formula-driven cost-recovery mechanism, not a margin lever and not part of linehaul. With diesel off its peak but still elevated, the surcharge is stepping down week to week on the schedule; shippers on monthly-lag FSC terms will see the step-down later than those on weekly reset. Neither side benefits from a fuel spike, and framing a decline as a win understates the operating-cost drag carriers carried on the way up.

Spot vs. contract. Spot softened in August while contract rates kept climbing, and the spot-contract gap has reopened (U.S. Bank/DAT, October 1 2026). Do not read soft spot prints as a loosening market: spot load-to-truck is still up 73.4% year over year on the van side (DAT Trendlines), and that spot leverage is what carriers bring to contract renewals. Lock priority lanes on contract rather than leaning on a spot market that can tighten on little notice.

Capacity strategy through next quarter. Capacity is the binding constraint, not demand. Through the fourth quarter, the holiday calendar, winter weather, and residual hurricane-season risk all compress available trucks against firm freight. FreightPlus can develop a capacity contingency plan for peak-season lanes, prioritizing committed capacity and vetted carriers over spot exposure; the vetting bar is rising industry-wide as liability exposure pushes shippers and brokers toward quality.

Contract bid timing. The 2027 bid season opens in the next 30 to 60 days and carriers will negotiate during peak tightness (Werner, via FreightWaves 09/17/26). Separate the linehaul rate from the FSC mechanism in every bid: price linehaul against capacity, and model the FSC mechanism choice (weekly-reset versus monthly-lag) at the EIA-projected 2027 annual average of roughly \$4.50/gal. At current diesel volatility, monthly-lag contracts risk a billing mismatch of about \$0.05/mi on high-mileage lanes relative to weekly reset, so choose the cadence deliberately rather than defaulting to it.

Bottom Line

Fuel came off the boil, but do not confuse that with relief. Diesel eased to \$6.199/gal and the TL surcharge stepped down to \$0.84/mi (EIA; FreightPlus FSC Schedule), yet a 600-mile load still carries \$234 more in fuel surcharge than at the March baseline, and the EIA sees diesel above \$6.00 through October (EIA STEO, October 6 2026). The cost burden is slightly lighter week to week and still heavy in absolute terms.

Capacity, not demand, is setting the market. Load-to-truck ratios are up 50% to 75% year over year across equipment types (DAT Trendlines), loads are up and trucks are down year over year, and the capacity exit is structural: a smaller driver pool, regulatory enforcement at the entry point, and liability pressure driving carrier attrition and brokerage consolidation. This tightening does not reverse when demand wobbles.

Act on timing and structure. The 2027 bid season opens in the next 30 to 60 days into a tightening market, so lock priority lanes on contract, hold spot exposure to a minimum, and separate linehaul pricing from the FSC mechanism in every negotiation. If you remember three things: fuel is still a burden on both sides, capacity is the constraint, and the bids you set in the next two months will price against a tighter 2027 than many shippers are planning for.

Sources

EIA Weekly Retail On-Highway Diesel Prices; EIA Short-Term Energy Outlook (October 6, 2026 release); FreightPlus FSC Schedule; DAT Trendlines (load-to-truck ratios, spot rates, national load and truck postings); Predictive network rates; ISM Manufacturing PMI (October 1, 2026 release); U.S. Bank / DAT Truckload Freight Rate Report (October 1, 2026); Cass Freight Index (via FreightWaves); Transport Topics (C.H. Robinson / RXO, October 5, 2026); FreightWaves (truckload capacity exodus, CDL enforcement, FMCSA Clearinghouse, September and October 2026); FMCSA (Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse; non-domiciled CDL Final Rule).