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How to Tell if a Company Is a Freight Broker or Carrier

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Executive Summary

A public Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) record can support a provisional answer to "is this company a freight broker or a carrier," but only when the analyst reads the right field. The USDOT number identifies a regulated entity, not a business model (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). The business model is signalled by the operating authority attached to that entity: motor carrier authority for hauling, broker authority for arranging, and freight forwarder authority for assembling and taking responsibility for a move (www.govinfo.gov). FMCSA issues a distinct registration number for each authority held, which is why one legal entity can show several docket numbers (www.govinfo.gov) (www.fmcsa.dot.gov).

The most common error is reading a size or classification field as an authority test. SAFER's Company Snapshot describes itself as a record of identification, size, commodity and safety information (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov), and its Power Units field counts vehicles (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov). The authority question is answered by the snapshot's separate Operating Authority Status field, which can read NOT AUTHORIZED for an entity with an active USDOT number (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov). As of FMCSA's registration statistics, operating authority counts were 329,160 property carrier, 25,074 broker and 1,879 freight forwarder records, current to May 15, 2026 (ai.fmcsa.dot.gov), while the same page counted 1,083,501 carriers in the for-hire operation class as of a September 25, 2026 snapshot (ai.fmcsa.dot.gov). The two numbers measure different things and should not be compared as if they were one.

The lookup landscape changed in 2026. FMCSA's Motus registration system replaces the Unified Registration System (URS) and the FMCSA Portal (www.federalregister.gov), and FMCSA reported that Motus launched on **May 19** (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). SAFER and the Licensing and Insurance (L&I) Carrier Search remained reachable on October 31, 2026, but the L&I page still carries a banner announcing a May 14 retirement of legacy functions (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov). FMCSA states that existing L&I records remain available for viewing and verification (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). The Motus public search layout and status values should be captured live before a template is built.

The recommended workflow is a legal-entity match first, a USDOT-level and docket-level authority read second, and a dated capture third. Records then fall into pass, review or unknown gates against the mandate. Any conclusion about whether a company is lawfully operating, adequately insured or correctly registered is a matter for counsel, not for a screening worksheet. Docket, a research platform for private equity origination teams, frames this as an evidence-handling problem: every classification should carry a source URL, a capture date and a stated conflict, so that a reviewer can reproduce it.

Introduction and Background

Private equity transportation and logistics teams routinely begin with a name on a list and a question: does this company move freight with its own trucks, arrange freight for others, or do both? The answer drives valuation logic, diligence scope and the comparables used downstream. The public regulatory record is the cheapest first test, and FMCSA data is the standard source. Yet the record is built from several systems that describe different things.

This explainer answers the target question, how to tell if a company is a freight broker or a carrier, and the connected lookups: how FMCSA broker authority differs from motor carrier authority, how to check operating authority, how a docket number lookup behaves, how SAFER and L&I differ, and what changes when a company holds both authorities. It is scoped to a provisional business-model classification from public registration data. It is not a legal opinion on whether any company is eligible to operate, not advice on insurance sufficiency, and it does not name any real target.

Three facts frame the problem. First, FMCSA's statute and rules draw a line between carrying freight and arranging it: a broker is a person, other than a motor carrier or its employee or agent, who sells, negotiates or holds itself out as arranging transportation by a motor carrier for compensation (www.govinfo.gov). Second, registration is a precondition: a person may act as a motor carrier, freight forwarder or broker only if registered (www.govinfo.gov). Third, the underlying systems are in transition. FMCSA's April 29, 2026 Federal Register notice says Motus will replace URS and the FMCSA Portal and that the legacy L&I system, established in 1994, would be sunset as a registration tool (www.federalregister.gov).

Sources are regulators and statute text, current as of October 31, 2026; where official pages disagree or look stale, the disagreement is preserved.

Definitions and Taxonomy: Identifiers and Authority Types

Identifiers: USDOT, MC, FF and MX

The **USDOT number** is the entity-level identifier. FMCSA describes it as a unique identifier used when collecting and monitoring safety information, and it applies to companies operating commercial vehicles carrying passengers or cargo in interstate commerce. SAFER's help text adds a useful caution: the census number has no internal coded structure (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov). A USDOT number therefore cannot be decoded to reveal whether the holder is a carrier or a broker.

Operating authority is a separate layer. FMCSA says operating authority is often identified as an MC, FF or MX number, depending on the type of authority granted (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). In SAFER's help text, the MC/MX/FF field holds the number FMCSA issued to grant interstate authority, and freight forwarder docket numbers and MX numbers are listed in the same field (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov). In practice:

- **MC (motor carrier) docket:** carries motor carrier or broker authority; the prefix alone does not distinguish them.
- **FF docket:** freight forwarder authority.
- **MX docket:** authority for Mexico-domiciled carriers.
- **USDOT-only record:** an entity that needs a USDOT number but not operating authority, such as a private carrier hauling its own cargo.

The practical consequence of the shared MC prefix is that a broker and a carrier can both display an "MC" number. The authority type, not the prefix, carries the business-model signal. FMCSA's page states that the authority type dictates the type of operation a company may run and the cargo it may carry.

Carrier, broker and freight forwarder

FMCSA's types-of-authority page describes the motor carrier of property as an authorized for-hire carrier (www.fmcsa.dot.gov), and the broker as an entity that arranges transportation without taking possession or assuming responsibility for the property (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). The regulation at 49 CFR 371.2 defines a broker as one who arranges, or offers to arrange, the transportation of property by an authorized motor carrier (www.ecfr.gov). The statutory definition of a motor carrier rests on providing motor vehicle transportation for compensation (www.govinfo.gov).

The **freight forwarder** is the third category and the one most often confused with a broker. The statute describes a forwarder that assembles and consolidates shipments and assumes responsibility for transportation from the place of receipt to the place of destination (www.law.cornell.edu). For classification, the contrast is this: a broker arranges and does not take responsibility for the cargo, while a forwarder takes responsibility and uses carriers for part of the move.

Pending, granted, inactive and revoked

Authority is a status with a history, not a permanent attribute. The L&I help text defines an Active authority as currently registered and compliant with applicable insurance regulations (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov), and an Inactive authority as revoked, with for-hire interstate operations then illegal (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov). The help text also says a "None" entry can still stand for a pending application or a previously denied, dismissed or withdrawn one (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov). L&I's Carrier Search is described as covering interstate for-hire carriers that have been granted authority or have applications pending (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov).

Under Motus, FMCSA says status names are unchanged but each status now carries a stated reason, for example a pending status with a review reason (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). The analyst should therefore capture the status together with any reason text, because the same word can describe different positions in the application cycle.

Reading the Sources: SAFER, L&I and Motus Compared

What each system answers

SAFER's Company Snapshot is a one-entity-at-a-time tool: it is available by ad hoc query, one carrier at a time, free of charge (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov), and it can be searched by DOT number, MC/MX number or company name (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov). As of October 31, 2026, the SAFER snapshot for USDOT 80806 showed a data date of **October 29, 2026**, with the page stating that it reflects FMCSA management information systems as of that date (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov). SAFER was therefore operating after the May 2026 transition.

The L&I Carrier Search remained a read-only public search, and its form warns that new applications will not appear for 24 hours after filing (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov). Its landing page, however, carries a banner saying legacy registration functions would be permanently retired on Thursday, May 14, at 8:00 PM ET, and that users with incomplete updates must wait for the Motus launch the following week (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov). The banner describes a cutover that had already happened, so it is stale text. FMCSA's registration alerts page adds a conflicting layer: one section says the information in the L&I system is the authoritative source for whether an entity may operate (www.fmcsa.dot.gov), while a later FMCSA FAQ says existing L&I records will remain available for viewing and verification. Read together, the safest summary is that L&I records remained viewable, but FMCSA's notice says it will sunset L&I as a registration tool (www.federalregister.gov).

Motus is the new registration system. The Federal Register notice says it will show registration and operating authority status on a dashboard-style page (www.federalregister.gov) and that the USDOT number remains the unique identifier for all regulated entities (www.federalregister.gov). Route names, field labels and status vocabularies on the Motus public search screen should be confirmed against the live screen. Analysts should capture the live screen and treat any template built from older SAFER or L&I screenshots as provisional.

The Motus identifier changes

Motus changes how a multi-authority entity looks. FMCSA's May 2026 fact sheet says new USDOT numbers will be randomized and existing numbers will not change (www.fmcsa.dot.gov), that each newly granted authority gets its own docket number, and that USDOT suffix letters identify the authority: B for broker and F for freight forwarder (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). The notice adds that an entity may have multiple suffixes after its USDOT number to identify specific registrations (www.federalregister.gov), and FMCSA's FAQ gives the same rule for an entity with multiple authorities (www.fmcsa.dot.gov).

Two cautions apply. First, elimination of MC and FF numbers was deferred: the notice says the Phase II release will not include it (www.federalregister.gov). Second, FMCSA explains that MC numbers were used to track proceedings tied to a single operating authority (www.fmcsa.dot.gov), which is why an MC number should never be treated as a company identifier.

Bulk data as a cross-check

FMCSA's open data program provides a second lens. The legacy Carrier "All With History" dataset was last refreshed on May 14, 2026 and will not be updated again (catalog.data.gov), while the Motus Carrier dataset notes that the legacy system allowed multiple authorities per docket number (catalog.data.gov). The authority

history dataset keeps the DOT number and docket number of the entity that holds or held an authority (catalog.data.gov), and the Motus BOC-3 dataset lists the process agent each entity must hire to obtain operating authority (catalog.data.gov).

The screening implication is a version rule: a pre-May 2026 export may carry one row per docket with several authority flags, while a Motus export carries one row per authority, so merging them without a documented rule can miscount broker records.

Table 1 below summarizes what each source can and cannot establish.

Source	What it can establish	What it cannot establish	Capture notes
SAFER Company Snapshot	Identity, size, commodity and safety record, one entity at a time (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov); separate USDOT status and Operating Authority Status fields (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov)	Business model from fleet fields: Power Units counts vehicles (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov); operation class can hold several values (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov)	Record the snapshot data date (October 29, 2026 on the page read) (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov)
L&I Carrier Search	Granted or pending interstate for-hire authority (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov); Active, Inactive and None authority values (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov)	Current registration actions; the page banner is stale and the lookup lags new filings by 24 hours (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov)	Screenshot the banner and the authority history
Motus (FMCSA registration system)	Registration and authority status on a dashboard-style page (www.federalregister.gov); suffixes by authority	Public search layout and status vocabulary: confirm on the live screen, because the sources cited include no data dictionary	Capture the live screen on the review date
FMCSA open data files	Authority records and history in bulk (catalog.data.gov)	Real-time status; the legacy Carrier file was last refreshed on 05/14/2026 (catalog.data.gov)	Log the file name, schema era and refresh date
State, SAM.gov and GLEIF registries	Legal name, entity status and relationships (see below)	Whether the entity holds any FMCSA authority	Store as corroboration, not as authority evidence

The pattern in *Table 1* is that only the FMCSA sources speak to authority, and even they speak to different slices of it. Registry corroboration answers an identity question.

The Status Grid: Broker-Only, Carrier-Only, Both, Pending, Revoked and Unmatched

Authority is not operations, revenue or insurance adequacy

A record shows what a registrant has been granted and what filings are on file. It does not show whether the company currently hauls freight, brokers freight, or earns revenue from either. FMCSA's statement that the registration process requires companies to define their type of business operation (www.fmcsa.dot.gov) means the label starts as a declaration, and the grant follows review. Insurance and bond filings are a condition of the grant. Under the operative rule text, filings are due within 20 days from the date an application notice is published (www.ecfr.gov), interested persons have 10 days from publication to protest (www.ecfr.gov), and a

broker is not registered until a surety bond or trust fund of **$75,000** is in place (www.ecfr.gov). Those filings show that a minimum filing exists. They are not a measure of whether the amount is adequate for a given business, and this report offers no view on that.

An exempt-commodity carve-out also matters. FMCSA says a party brokering exempt commodities needs no broker authority when hauling them would need no motor carrier operating authority (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). A target with no authority record may therefore still arrange freight, and the screen should return "unknown" rather than "not a broker."

Reading the six record types

- **Broker-only:** a broker authority record is active and no motor carrier authority record is attached to the same USDOT number. Under Motus the suffix B would appear without C. This is consistent with an asset-light intermediary, but SAFER fleet fields may still be populated if the entity filed vehicle data.
- **Carrier-only:** a motor carrier authority record is active and no broker record exists. FMCSA states that a carrier cannot broker without first applying for and receiving a separate property broker license (www.fmcsa.dot.gov).
- **Both (dual authority):** a USDOT number carries both authorities. FMCSA says carriers that broker loads, even occasionally, must register both (www.fmcsa.dot.gov), and that FMCSA issues a separate MC number for the broker authority (www.fmcsa.dot.gov).
- **Pending:** an application exists without a grant. The L&I menu includes pending applications (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov), and FMCSA says the authority history page displays the granted date of the operating authority (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). An application with no grant date is not a grant.
- **Revoked or inactive:** the L&I help text ties Inactive to revocation (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov). Under the statute, a suspension for lapsed filings remains in effect until the registrant complies with the applicable sections (www.law.cornell.edu). The status alone does not tell the analyst which path was taken, so the authority history needs to be captured.
- **Unmatched:** no registration record can be tied to the legal entity, or several candidate records exist and none can be confirmed. This is a research outcome, not a negative finding about the company.

Table 2 converts those record types into a provisional classification and a follow-up item.

Record pattern	Provisional classification	What to hold for follow-up
Broker authority active; no carrier authority	Broker (intermediary) candidate	Confirm the entity does not run affiliated carriers under a different USDOT number (www.law.cornell.edu)
Carrier authority active; no broker authority	Carrier candidate	Check whether the business also arranges other carriers' freight
Both active under one USDOT number	Hybrid; classify by revenue mix in diligence, not by registry	Request the mix of hauled versus arranged volume; the registry gives no ratio
Application pending, no granted date	Unresolved	Re-run after the grant; record the date seen (www.fmcsa.dot.gov)
Authority inactive or revoked	Not currently authorized on the record	Capture history, then route the question to counsel

Record pattern	Provisional classification	What to hold for follow-up
USDOT only, authority absent	Private or intrastate operator, or unknown	SAFER says the not-authorized reading does not apply to private or intrastate operations (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov)
No confident entity match	Unmatched	Do not classify; widen the entity search

Table 2 deliberately avoids a "fails" label. The grid separates what the record shows from what the mandate requires. Even a clean broker-only pattern remains provisional, because the identifiers could belong to a different legal entity than the target.

Entity Reconciliation: Legal Names, Aliases, Related Entities and Name Changes

Begin with a legal-entity match

Matching should start from the legal entity and move outward. A **state business registry** holds the legal name, and registries differ in what a name search returns. Delaware's public name search lists inactive as well as active entities and states that a hit is not an indication of current status (icis.corp.delaware.gov). California's page notes that the status of a foreign entity there applies only to its California registration (www.sos.ca.gov), so the state of formation must also be checked. Trade names sit in different places: Texas requires an assumed name certificate with the Secretary of State (www.sos.state.tx.us) and describes it as public notice that the entity is conducting business under that name (www.sos.state.tx.us), while California's fictitious business name statements follow a separate statutory process (leginfo.legislature.ca.gov). A brand name is therefore a lead, not an entity.

Federal registries add corroboration. **SAM.gov** publicly displays the record status, legal business name and physical address of an entity (sam.gov), and the General Services Administration (GSA) states that matching uses legal business name and address (www.gsa.gov). The **Legal Entity Identifier (LEI)** is unique to one entity (www.gleif.org), and a lapsed LEI status reflects renewal rather than whether the company operates (www.gleif.org). LEI parent links appear only where the parent holds its own record (www.gleif.org), and an entity can decline to report a parent and give an exception reason (www.gleif.org).

For a public parent, **Exhibit 21** of an annual report lists subsidiaries with their jurisdictions (www.ecfr.gov) and the names under which they do business (www.ecfr.gov), which helps link a brand to a legal entity. The SEC EDGAR search page supports finding those filings by company name or ticker (www.sec.gov).

Compare SAFER with the current authority source

Only after the entity is fixed should the analyst read FMCSA data. Enter the USDOT number in SAFER, capture the identity block, the USDOT status and the Operating Authority Status, then open the L&I or Motus record for the same USDOT number and capture the authority type, status and history date. Compare:

1. **Do the legal names match?** Compare the registry name with the name on the FMCSA record; a mismatch may reflect a name change (see below) rather than a different company.

2. **Does the authority type match the claimed business model?** Do not infer it from the fleet fields. Power Units is a vehicle count, and operation classification can hold several values at once.
3. **Is the USDOT status active?** SAFER defines Inactive as a missed biennial update of MCS-150 data (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov), and Out-of-Service as a separate status tied to an order (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov). These are different things and should be recorded as such.
4. **How old is the registration data?** The MCS-150 form date is the date from the registration form (safer.fmcsa.dot.gov), a self-reported update date and not an authority date.

One 2026 caveat: FMCSA reports that it has temporarily suspended enforcement of biennial updates and the inactivation of USDOT numbers during the transition (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). An Active USDOT status therefore says less about registration currency in this period.

Aliases, related entities and name changes

Name changes are a routine reason for mismatches. FMCSA's help text says a name change request on the operating authority record uses a dedicated form (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). After corporate transactions, FMCSA says it will record a transfer of operating authority only if motor carrier operations will continue (www.fmcsa.dot.gov). The 2013 transfer rule explains that FMCSA records transfers and no longer processes transfer applications (www.federalregister.gov), asking both parties for basic identifying information (www.federalregister.gov). A record that predates a deal can therefore show a legal name and an authority history that differ from the entity the buyer thinks it is acquiring.

Related entities deserve a separate pass. The statute allows FMCSA to take account of undisclosed common ownership, common management or familial relationships to other registrants (www.law.cornell.edu). For screening, the point is neutral: a brand, an arranging affiliate and a hauling affiliate may sit under different USDOT numbers with a shared address or shared principals. The worksheet should record same-address records as leads and mark the relationship as unverified until a registry or filing confirms it.

Implementation Guidance: The Authority-to-Target Worksheet and Decision Gates

Capture discipline

Every row needs a source URL, a capture date and the system's own data date. SAFER shows its data date on the snapshot; the open data catalog shows a dataset refresh note (catalog.data.gov). Store the screenshot or export with the row.

Table 3 lists the worksheet fields.

Field	Content	Why it is there
Legal entity	Name as filed with the state registry, state of formation, entity ID	Anchors the match before any FMCSA read (icis.corp.delaware.gov)

Field	Content	Why it is there
USDOT number (and suffix)	Number as shown; Motus suffix if displayed	Entity identifier; suffixes mark authority
MC / FF / MX docket	One row per docket	An MC number tracks one authority
Authority type, status, history date	Carrier, broker or forwarder; status and reason; grant date	Status has a history
SAFER fields	USDOT status, Operating Authority Status, Power Units, operation classification, MCS-150 form date, snapshot data date	Context only; not an authority test
Source URL and capture date	Exact URL, access date, screenshot or export file name	Reproducibility
Registry corroboration	State, SAM.gov, LEI or Exhibit 21 hit and date	Identity support (sam.gov)
Conflict	Any disagreement between sources, including stale banners	Preserves uncertainty
Reviewer and decision	Initials, date, pass, review or unknown	Accountability

Fleet size and revenue do not appear as inputs to classification, because no public conversion from a SAFER fleet field to revenue exists in the sources reviewed.

Asset-based carrier versus freight broker: what to hold for diligence

- **Asset-based carrier:** the registry shows motor carrier authority; equipment, driver and facility evidence sits outside it.
- **Freight broker:** the registry shows broker authority and a filed bond or trust fund (www.ecfr.gov); carrier-sourcing terms and credit exposure sit outside it.
- **Dual authority operator:** request the split between hauled and arranged revenue, since the record gives no ratio.
- **Freight forwarder:** an FF docket signals a party that assumes responsibility for the move (www.law.cornell.edu), a different profile from a broker.
- **Acquisition screening:** for a target list, run the worksheet in bulk against the open data files, then verify flagged rows by hand; the legal entity that survives a deal determines which USDOT number and authority carry forward (www.fmcsa.dot.gov).

Pass, review and unknown gates

The gates below apply to a private equity logistics mandate. They are screening gates, not legal conclusions.

- **Pass:** the legal-entity match is confirmed by a state registry and the USDOT number; the authority type and status are captured with a date from the current source; and the authority type is consistent with the mandate's target model (for example, active broker authority for a brokerage thesis).
- **Review:** the record is consistent but something is unresolved: a pending status, both authorities with an unknown mix, same-address affiliates, a recent name change, a stale banner, or conflicting dates between SAFER and the authority source.

- **Unknown:** no confident entity match, no authority record, a USDOT-only record, or a source that could not be opened. Unknown is not a negative finding, and an exempt-commodity broker may legitimately have no broker authority record.
- **Escalate to counsel:** any question of whether authority is required, whether an arrangement meets the broker or bona fide agent definitions, whether a revocation or reinstatement affects the deal, or whether filings are sufficient. FMCSA's guidance on the broker definition, applicable from June 16, 2023 (www.federalregister.gov), is fact dependent: it says a bona fide agent may be either an employee of a motor carrier or a contractor (www.federalregister.gov), and that handling money exchanged between shippers and motor carriers strongly suggests the need for broker authority (www.federalregister.gov). The regulation describes a bona fide agent as part of the normal organization of a motor carrier (www.ecfr.gov), and FMCSA says it lacks statutory authority over dispatch services unless they are also registered or registrable as carriers, brokers or forwarders (www.federalregister.gov). Applying those tests to a specific business is a legal task.

Data Analysis and Evidence

What the public counts show

FMCSA's registration statistics page gives the sharpest illustration of why fields must not be conflated. It reports operating authority counts of 4,767 passenger, **329,160** property, 7,498 household goods, **25,074** broker and **1,879** freight forwarder, stating that operating authority information is current as of May 15, 2026 (ai.fmcsa.dot.gov). The page does not say whether these are active authorities or all records. Its header lists both the MCMIS and the L&I snapshot dates as 09/25/2026 (ai.fmcsa.dot.gov), while the Authority Types note says the overview uses the L&I snapshot taken on May 15, 2026, so the L&I date in the header conflicts with the May date. We treat the authority figures as May 15 figures.

The five categories sum to **368,378** records. On that base, broker records are **6.8%** (25,074 divided by 368,378), property carrier records 89.4%, household goods 2.0%, passenger 1.3% and freight forwarder 0.5%. That is about one broker authority record for every 13 property carrier authority records (329,160 divided by 25,074). These are authority records, not companies, since one entity can hold several.

The same page reports 2,132,868 active carriers from the September 25, 2026 MCMIS snapshot, split by operation class into 1,083,501 for-hire, 809,613 private, 202,516 both and 37,238 other (ai.fmcsa.dot.gov). The for-hire class is about **3.3 times** the property carrier authority count (1,083,501 divided by 329,160). Part of the gap reflects different universes and dates, since the classification counts include intrastate carriers and the authority counts are interstate authority records, but the size of the gap is itself the lesson: an operation class and an authority record are different measures. A "both" operation class describes the carrier's operation field and says nothing about holding both carrier and broker authority.

Reference points and their limits

FMCSA's Federal Register notice referred to approximately 800,000 existing registrants who would verify identity on first access to Motus (www.govinfo.gov), and said Motus Phase I was released on December 8, 2025 (www.federalregister.gov). These counts use different definitions and dates, so we do not combine them.

They do show the scale of the screening problem: with hundreds of thousands of property carrier records and tens of thousands of broker records, name-only matching will produce collisions.

North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) definitions offer a business-model cross-check. **NAICS 484** Truck Transportation covers over-the-road transportation of cargo using motor vehicles (www.census.gov), while **488510** Freight Transportation Arrangement covers arranging transportation of freight between shippers and carriers (www.census.gov) and describes establishments that do not directly provide shipping services (www.census.gov). A company self-reporting one code and holding the opposite authority is a review flag, not a conclusion.

Worksheet metrics, with a labeled example

Two useful calculations can be taken from the worksheet, without any invented fleet-to-revenue conversion:

- **Distinct verified broker operators versus broker authority records:** count unique USDOT numbers with active broker authority and divide by the count of active broker records. A ratio below 1.0 indicates duplicate records per operator.
- **Share of ambiguous matches:** unmatched or multi-candidate rows divided by rows screened.

(Hypothetical Example) A fictional screen of 40 company names yields 6 ambiguous matches, for a **15.0%** ambiguous share (6 divided by 40). The 34 resolved rows map to 31 distinct USDOT numbers, because three names are aliases of the same entity. Those 31 numbers carry 38 authority records, since seven hold two. Twelve broker records are active, belonging to 11 distinct USDOT numbers, giving a distinct-operator-to-record ratio of **0.92** (11 divided by 12). The numbers are invented to show the arithmetic and are not results from any real list.

Case Studies and Real-World Examples

The two examples below are fictional and labeled as such. They are not drawn from any real company or engagement.

(Hypothetical Example) A brand that shares a carrier affiliate's USDOT number

"Alder Lane Logistics" is a fictional brand on a target list. A web search shows the brand name on a website that markets "capacity solutions." SAFER, searched by the USDOT number printed on the site, returns a snapshot for "Alder Lane Transport LLC," a different legal name, with a Power Units count, an Operating Authority Status showing motor carrier authority, and no broker authority.

Two shortcuts should be avoided: treating the brand as a broker because the marketing says "capacity," and treating it as a carrier because the number resolves to a carrier. The correct sequence starts with the legal-entity match: is "Alder Lane Logistics" an assumed name filed by the carrier entity, or a separate company? A state assumed-name filing would support the first reading (www.sos.state.tx.us). The authority read comes second: the record shows a carrier. Federal law treats carrying and arranging as separate registrations (www.govinfo.gov), so the record would need a second docket or a B suffix for brokering to appear (www.federalregister.gov). Absent that, the row is "review": the brand might have a separate USDOT number not yet found, which is a research gap, not a finding about the company.

(Hypothetical Example) A company with both authorities

"Birchmoor Freight Inc." is a fictional entity whose USDOT record shows two docket numbers: an MC number for property carrier authority and a second MC number for broker authority, both active, with grant dates two years apart. This pattern is what FMCSA describes: separate MC numbers for the broker authority issued under the existing USDOT number (www.govinfo.gov). SAFER lists a Power Units count and a modest operation classification.

Calling Birchmoor a carrier because trucks are listed, or a broker because the second docket is newer, is not supportable from the registry. The record establishes that the entity holds both authorities and has two distinct histories. The classification is "hybrid, mix unknown," with a diligence request for hauled versus arranged volume. If the same entity were read from a pre-May 2026 export, the two authorities might appear as flags on one docket row, while a Motus export would show one row per authority (catalog.data.gov).

Implications and Future Directions

- **Scope of the record:** for private equity origination teams, the main implication is that the registration record is a classification input with a defined scope. It supports "holds broker authority" or "holds carrier authority" with a date, and it does not support revenue mix, asset intensity or insurance adequacy. Repeatable screens should store authority type as its own field and treat SAFER size fields as context.
- **Tooling:** with Motus replacing URS and the FMCSA Portal, and FMCSA indicating that it will sunset the legacy components (www.federalregister.gov), screens built on old L&I page layouts or legacy file schemas will need maintenance. The legacy Carrier dataset's last refresh on May 14, 2026 (catalog.data.gov) is a concrete marker: any pipeline reading that dataset after that date reads a frozen file. Teams should also expect further change. The notice describes MC and FF number elimination as deferred to later releases (www.federalregister.gov). If that happens, USDOT suffixes would become the main authority signal (www.federalregister.gov).
- **Counsel:** regulatory conclusions belong with counsel, including whether an arrangement requires broker authority, which depends on the facts of the arrangement. Docket's view, as a research service for origination teams, is that the useful output is a dated, reproducible evidence row with conflicts preserved, not a verdict.
- **Evidence limits:** the sources cited leave three items open. They include the Motus public search layout, the allowed values for Motus authority status fields (no official data dictionary is cited), and an official post-Motus count of broker authorities. An analyst repeating this work should confirm those three items first.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

How do I tell if a company is a freight broker or a carrier?

Match the legal entity, then read the authority type attached to its USDOT number. A broker holds broker authority and a carrier holds motor carrier authority (www.govinfo.gov). Do not use fleet size or SAFER classification fields as the test.

What is the difference between broker authority and motor carrier authority?

Motor carrier authority covers providing for-hire transportation of regulated cargo (www.govinfo.gov). Broker authority covers arranging that transportation by an authorized carrier for compensation (www.ecfr.gov). A carrier that brokers must register for both (www.govinfo.gov).

How do I check FMCSA operating authority?

Search SAFER by USDOT number, MC/MX number or name, and confirm the authority in L&I Carrier Search or the Motus public record, recording the date. Capture the Motus screen layout live, since it is not documented here.

Does an MC number mean a company is a carrier?

No. FMCSA says operating authority is often identified as an MC, FF or MX number depending on the type granted, and an MC number was used to track proceedings for a single authority.

What does SAFER show versus L&I?

SAFER gives an identity, size, commodity and safety snapshot. L&I covers granted or pending interstate for-hire authority.

Can one company hold both authorities?

Yes. FMCSA issues a separate MC number for the broker authority under the same USDOT number, and Motus suffixes can show more than one authority (www.federalregister.gov).

What does a pending, inactive or revoked record mean?

Pending means an application is in process, Inactive is the L&I term for revoked authority, and a record with no granted date has not been granted. Consult counsel before drawing regulatory conclusions.

What if the portal link or page text looks outdated?

Record the stale text as a conflict. The L&I banner described a May 14 retirement while the search remained usable (li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov).

Conclusion

A freight broker and a carrier differ in what they are authorized to do, and the public record reflects that difference only through the operating authority attached to a USDOT-identified legal entity. The reliable workflow, set out above, is to match the legal entity against a state registry, read SAFER for identity and context, read the current authority source for the type, status and history date, and then record the date, the source and any conflict. Fleet fields, operation classes and docket prefixes do not settle the question on their own.

The 2026 move from the legacy registration systems to Motus makes capture discipline more important, because the same word on a screen can mean different things depending on the system, the schema and the date. Some pages remain live with stale text, some datasets are frozen, and the Motus public screen should be captured live. Provisional classifications should be reported as pass, review or unknown, with regulatory questions escalated to counsel. Done this way, with each judgement tied to a dated source and each open question assigned to a named reviewer or to counsel, a registration lookup becomes a short, reproducible evidence row that a reviewer can re-open and check.

Source links

Links cited in this article, in order of first appearance. Full addresses are provided for readers using extracted text.

1. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/do-i-need-usdot-number
2. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2023-title49/html/USCODE-2023-title49-subtitleIV-partB-chap131-sec13102.htm
3. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2023-title49/html/USCODE-2023-title49-subtitleIV-partB-chap139-sec13901.htm
4. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/get-mc-number-authority-operate
5. https://safer.fmcsa.dot.gov/CompanySnapshot.aspx
6. https://safer.fmcsa.dot.gov/saferhelp.aspx
7. https://safer.fmcsa.dot.gov/query.asp?searchtype=ANY&query_type=queryCarrierSnapshot&query_param=USDOT&query_string=80806
8. https://ai.fmcsa.dot.gov/Registrationstatistics
9. https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/04/29/2026-08334/availability-of-motus-fmcsas-new-registration-system
10. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration
11. https://li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov/LIVIEW/pkg_menu.prc_menu
12. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/modernization-faqs
13. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/types-operating-authority
14. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-III/subchapter-B/part-371/section-371.2
15. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/49/13102
16. https://li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov/LIVIEW/pkg_li_std_routines.prc_help?pn_pageid=5
17. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/sites/fmcsa.dot.gov/files/2026-05/Motus%20Changes%20to%20FMCSA%20Registrations.pdf
18. https://li-public.fmcsa.dot.gov/LIVIEW/pkg_carrquery.prc_carrlist

19. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/registration-alerts
20. https://catalog.data.gov/dataset/carrier-all-with-history
21. https://catalog.data.gov/dataset/motus-carrier-all-with-history
22. https://catalog.data.gov/dataset/authhist-all-with-history
23. https://catalog.data.gov/dataset/motus-boc3-all-with-history
24. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/getting-started
25. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/part-365/section-365.109T
26. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/subtitle-B/chapter-III/subchapter-B/part-365/subpart-B/section-365.115
27. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-49/part-387/section-387.307
28. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/faq/am-i-required-have-broker-authority-if-i-am-brokering-loads-non-regulated-exempt-commodity-such
29. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/faq/can-motor-carrier-broker-loads
30. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/faq/must-freight-forwarders-and-brokers-register-fmcsa
31. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/faq/how-would-motor-carrier-also-brokers-loads-apply-broker-authority
32. https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/49/13905
33. https://icis.corp.delaware.gov/Ecorp/EntitySearch/NameSearch.aspx
34. https://www.sos.ca.gov/business-programs/business-entities/cbs-field-status-definitions
35. https://www.sos.state.tx.us/corp/instructions/503.shtml
36. https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=BPC&sectionNum=17910
37. https://sam.gov/sites/default/files/2024-11/entity-checklist.pdf
38. https://www.gsa.gov/system/files/To_Publish_-_FAQs_from_Unique_Entity_ID_Forum.pdf
39. https://www.gleif.org/en/about-lei/introducing-the-legal-entity-identifier-lei
40. https://www.gleif.org/en/about-lei/common-data-file-format/lei-cdf-format
41. https://www.gleif.org/en/lei-data/access-and-use-lei-data/level-2-data-who-owns-whom
42. https://www.gleif.org/en/about-lei/common-data-file-format/level-2-data-reporting-exceptions-format
43. https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-17/chapter-II/part-229/subpart-229.600/section-229.601
44. https://www.sec.gov/search-filings
45. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/temporary-suspension-biennial-update-requirement
46. https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/ask-fmcsa?page=2
47. https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2013/08/23/2013-20443/transfers-of-operating-authority-registration
48. https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/06/16/2023-13080/definitions-of-broker-and-bona-fide-agents
49. https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2026-04-29/html/2026-08334.htm
50. https://www.census.gov/naics?input=484&year=2022&details=484
51. https://www.census.gov/naics?input=488510&year=2022&details=488510

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