



# Electronic Bills of Lading: Fact, Fiction, & Future

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The image shows a yellow and red tanker truck parked at a loading dock. The truck has a large silver tank and a chrome grille. The number '12' is visible on the side of the cab. The background shows the structure of the loading dock with various pipes and lights. The DTN logo is in the top right corner, consisting of the letters 'DTN' in white with a small blue and green circular icon to the right.

If you do business at even 20 terminals, chances are you'll see at least 10 different varieties of paper bills of lading (BOLs).

They come in various shapes and sizes, and also present a variety of challenges. They get damaged. They're late. They get lost. They're difficult to read and easy to misread. Not to mention, the data on paper BOLs is not easily shared.

To help petroleum marketers and carriers solve these challenges, the use of electronic bills of lading (eBOLs) has more than tripled over the past few years. There are many benefits: increased efficiencies, better accuracy, fewer costly errors and re-bills, enhanced customer service, more profitable operations, and more. As such, we need to understand what they are (and what they are not), how they can help ensure accuracy and streamline operations, and more.

There are so many different formats and uses of nomenclature in the industry, and there is also the complexity of things like product codes and SPLC codes. People have to deal with many different formats and many different business partners calling many different things by different names. This makes integration even more challenging.

The industry has evolved and grown from nine or 10 products into boutique fuels — and product code lists have grown to more than 1,600 items, with more being added every day. This makes for a wide variety of product codes, many of which still fit into the very strict three-character limit.

In addition, SPLC codes are still commonly used in the exchange of BOL data. It is important to note that an SPLC is not a place on a map, but rather a plot of land. In a place like San Antonio, you can have four different terminals very close together that will all have the very same SPLC code.

Terminal control numbers (TCNs) are used by the IRS to identify the terminal's physical location, and they are unique to each location. However, many versions of protocols exchanged in the industry do not allow for TCNs, and are instead restricted to the use of SPLC codes.

Simply put, it can be a real mess. With so much complexity and inconsistency in the industry, there is a strong need for better, more standardized, more sophisticated eBOL reporting.

DTN independently confirmed with several different petroleum marketers, in different markets across the United States, that the average cost to correct an invoice due to a single billing error is \$126.

### Despite these challenges, eBOLs are more than worth the effort.

#### They have many benefits:

- They can speed or automate customer invoicing. In the United States, currently more than 300 petroleum marketers, including smaller organizations, are using eBOLs to automate their invoicing processes.
- They eliminate manual data entry errors — which streamlines your efforts and ensures greater accuracy.
- They validate customer billing for cost and price accuracy.
- They help you research missing or illegible BOLs, and ensure you ultimately invoice your customers and account for your inventory more accurately.
- They can identify and invoice rack customers — those who directly pull product from you at the terminal — to distinguish them from delivered business through the use of consignee numbers.
- They can help you catch missing driver and carrier paperwork much faster.
- They can be saved as PDFs for reporting and archiving purposes.







## eBOL Fiction

Just as it's important to understand what eBOLs are, and what benefits they can bring, it's essential to know how to distinguish between an actual BOL and a similar document that has no official or legal weight. Here are some key differences and misconceptions:

- The original source must be the seller or supplier, or it is not a real BOL.
- They must be formatted properly on an original BOL document to be a real BOL. Delivery information, whether it is electronic or paper, is not a BOL — and neither is manually keyed information from anything other than an original BOL document.
- Delivery documents do not replace actual BOLs. They are key to reconciling purchases for invoicing customers, but they are not official legal documents for the transfer of product, for which a supplier will charge a wholesaler.

## Streamlining eBOLs

To help resolve these issues, DTN has worked in the industry to leverage its knowledge across suppliers, terminals, and products, as well as the work that customers have already done to identify pricing records. Through this effort, the company has created a platform — DTN Fuel Admin™ — that works to provide a repository for industry eBOL data regardless of the complicated PIDX and SPLC codes.

That repository gives customers the eBOL data that they need, as fast as it can be delivered, without duplicates. Further, it provides the format they need, consistent across all sources. All of the BOLs can be formatted in the way that each individual customer needs, without the hassle or complicated middleware of trying to normalize all the data from all the different possible sources.

The data can then be integrated into a customer's accounting system, removing the need to deal with the multiple formats. It also provides the ability to consistently map key elements in the output so that you have consistent ways to deal with eBOL data. It also eliminates the need for non-supplier customers to understand what the SPLC and product codes are; this helps as they can be very foreign to a mainstream petroleum marketer or wholesaler.

This is achieved by DTN querying all of its various systems to provide the eBOL data as quickly as three minutes from loading completion. In many cases, the customer is able to access the eBOL before the driver even leaves the terminal. And in some cases the customer may even be able to retrieve an eBOL before the supplier selling them the product.



### Additional Tools

DTN Fuel Admin also includes the following to help streamline operations:

It has a "mailbox" tool for customers to conveniently search, store, and view BOL messages. This helps the user find and query a BOL number that they don't recognize from one of their suppliers, locate and sort out missing BOLs, monitor driver activity, or see how many BOLs have been pulled by a particular supplier at a certain terminal.

It includes a processing error queue, which catches incorrect BOLs and allows the user to fix them before they bring them into their back office.

It also can apply override rules. This allows the user to set up their own conditional custom codes, which can be created based on a combination of supplier, terminal, and lifting or billing ID.

Most importantly, these solutions produce "human-readable" documents for your staff and customers. Anyone can look at the BOL data and read all of the pertinent information, including the original source information, back-office code information, and key details and descriptions of suppliers, terminals, and products.

By doing business electronically, refined fuels marketers, retailers, and wholesalers can all realize the benefits of increased efficiencies and greater accuracy. eBOL data can also help reduce costly errors and re-bills, enhance your level of customer service, and support more profitable operations.