



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: July 14, 1986

In reply refer to: H-86-17

Mr. T. C. Gilchrest
President
National Safety Council
444 N. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60611

log. H474B

On July 5, 1984, a tractor-semitrailer was following a car too closely on wet pavement near Ashdown, Arkansas. When the car slowed suddenly, the truck had to brake hard to avoid hitting it. The truck jackknifed, and the tractor rotated into the oncoming lane and struck a police car. All four police officers in the struck vehicle were killed. 1/

A tractor-semitrailer collided head-on with a church van in Lemoore, California, on October 8, 1982, killing all but 1 of the van's 11 occupants. There had been a stalled car blocking the truck's lane at an intersection. Instead of slowing down, the truck driver attempted to go around the car, and he lost control of the combination vehicle in the process. 2/

These are examples of the heavy truck 3/ accidents investigated by the National Transportation Safety Board in which driver performance was a major factor. The operation of heavy trucks places special demands on the driver, demands he or she may not always be able to meet. Long stopping distances, the possibility of brake fade on steep hills, restricted maneuverability, cargo shifting, and the danger of jackknifing are only a few of the problems that drivers of heavy trucks must face constantly, but which automobile drivers experience rarely, if at all.

1/ Highway Accident Report--"Collision of DeQueen, Arkansas, Police Department Patrol Car and Terrell Trucking, Inc., Tractor-Semitrailer, U.S. Route 71, Ashdown, Arkansas, July 5, 1984" (NTSB/HAR-84/07).

2/ Highway Accident Report--"J.C. Sales, Inc., Tractor-Semitrailer and Calvary Baptist Church Van Collision, State Route 198 at 19th Avenue near Lemoore, California, October 8, 1982" (NTSB/HAR-83/02).

3/ According to the definition used by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, all of the following are considered heavy trucks: 1) single-unit (or "straight") truck with gross vehicle weight greater than 26,000 pounds; 2) tractor-trailer combination; 3) truck pulling one or more cargo trailers; and 4) tractor pulling no trailer. A medium truck is any single-unit truck with a gross vehicle weight between 10,000 and 26,000 pounds. While this recommendation letter deals generally with drivers of heavy trucks, many of the observations apply also to those driving medium ones. Light vehicles, such as pickup trucks, are excluded.

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Truck driving is a specialized skill, distinct in many ways, and more demanding than operating a smaller vehicle, such as a car. However, far too many people are able to enter the field without having first acquired that skill. The Safety Board has completed a study that examines the system that prepares candidates for employment as truck drivers and then initially places them into service. ^{4/} The objective of the study was to identify weaknesses in the system, to describe current efforts for improvement, and to offer recommendations for ways to augment those efforts.

Formal training is the most reliable way to learn the special skills required for safe truck driving. Such training is available from proprietary, State, and motor carrier-owned schools, but, at present, there are few safeguards to ensure quality of instruction and insufficient incentives for a prospective truck driver to enroll in any school.

Three elements are needed to significantly upgrade the quality of formal truck driver training programs and to increase their utilization throughout the industry:

- A single, universally accepted set of criteria against which all training schools can be measured for accreditation.
- A system of evaluating each school and certifying whether it has met the criteria.
- A means of encouraging prospective truck drivers to obtain training, and only at schools that meet the criteria.

The Proposed Minimum Standards for Training Tractor-Trailer Drivers, recently issued by the Department of Transportation's Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety (BMCS), have the potential to satisfy the first of these requirements, and the BMCS Model Curriculum offers a ready-made plan with which a school could meet those Standards.

The Safety Board has recommended that a training requirement for truck drivers, based on the BMCS Standards, be incorporated into the Federal rules that regulate interstate truck operations. To reach all drivers, including those who operate within a single State, and therefore, are, not covered by the Federal regulations, the Safety Board has also recommended that the training requirement be made one of the criteria for obtaining a proposed national truck driver license. Once such requirements are in place, an accreditation system will be needed to identify those schools that meet the Standards.

The accreditation system also would be needed even before there is a regulatory training requirement or a national truck driver license. Today, a majority of truck driver training schools are able to function without accreditation. But once there are uniform curriculum standards and an accreditation program applying them authoritatively, changes could be instituted in the trucking industry that would make it difficult for a school to remain in business without obtaining accreditation. The Safety Board has recommended that motor carriers, through voluntary action and under pressure from their insurers, employ only those drivers who have been trained in accredited programs. In the case of drivers who own their own trucks, shippers should require the same of the drivers with whom they contract.

^{4/} Safety Study--"Training, Licensing, and Qualification Standards for Drivers of Heavy Trucks" (NTSB/SS-86/02).

The message will need to reach prospective truck drivers that without a certificate showing successful completion of training from an accredited school, they are unlikely to find jobs in the industry. A program is needed not only to convey that message through traditional means, such as brochures distributed to vocational guidance counselors, but also to develop new education techniques. Since most vocational school students now make enrollment decisions based on little more than school advertising, new methods must be developed to educate prospective truck drivers in a timely fashion.

Improved guidance programs for prospective students are needed not only in conjunction with recommended future regulations and accreditation efforts; they are needed today as well. Like any other consumer in a marketplace, today's prospective truck driving student is confronted with a choice among services of varying quality. Particularly since there is still lacking a uniform set of training standards and a system of evaluating schools against those standards, prospective students need to do their own school assessment before enrolling. There is far too little information available on how to conduct such an assessment. If the prospective student does not know what to look for and what questions to ask, he or she may end up enrolling in an expensive but worthless program. When that happens, more is lost than that person's money and time. The opportunity also is lost to produce a qualified, safe driver.

The Safety Board believes that organizations involved in promoting safe truck driving should be the ones to develop a guidance program for prospective truck drivers. The National Safety Council should coordinate this effort, with participation from the Professional Truck Driver Institute of the Trucking Industry Alliance; the American Trucking Associations Inc.; the Private Trucking Council of America, Inc.; the Owner Operator Independent Drivers Association of America; the International Brotherhood of Teamsters; and the National Association of Truck Driving Schools.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the National Safety Council:

Coordinate development of a guidance program designed to reach as many people as possible who are considering a career in commercial truck driving. The program should explain the considerations in such a vocational choice, the value of formal training and the factors to consider in selecting a truck driver training school. The program should also inform prospective students about which schools have met the criteria established by the Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety Minimum Standards. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-86-17)

GOLDMAN, Acting Chairman, and BURNETT, LAUBER, and NALL, Members, concurred in this recommendation.

By:  Patricia A. Goldman
Acting Chairman

