



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

SP-20

Date: July 14, 1986

In reply refer to: H-86-21 and -22

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copy H-474D

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.

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.

With such regulatory changes in place, it would be the legal obligation of motor carriers to hire only drivers with certificates showing they successfully mastered the skills taught in an approved course of driving instruction. But motor carriers do not have to wait for new regulations to start improving truck drivers' performance and training level. Trucking firms can start immediately to hire only drivers who have successfully completed formal training. Once there are uniform curriculum standards and an accreditation program applying them authoritatively, the companies should hire only graduates from accredited programs. In the case of drivers who own their own trucks, shippers should require the same of the drivers with whom they contract. Even before there is a regulatory training requirement or a national truck driver license, such industry action would make it difficult for a training school to remain in business without obtaining accreditation.

^{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 the Private Truck Council of America Inc., and other organizations involved in promoting safe truck driving should be the ones to develop a guidance program for prospective truck drivers. It is also the Board's view that the National Safety Council should coordinate this effort.

An upgraded training system can be expected to produce increasingly skilled, new drivers. The more a person learns in training about proper truck handling, the less he or she will have to learn in service. Nevertheless, the instructive role of experience is unlikely to be eliminated. When a new driver is just beginning to build up on-the-job experience, qualified supervision can help ensure that he or she develops only safe driving habits. Such supervision also can minimize the risk to the driver or to others on road. An effective way of supervising new drivers would be through an apprenticeship program. There is currently no such nationally organized program in the United States, but the Safety Board has recommended that one be established. If it is, its success will depend on widespread participation by members of the trucking industry.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Private Truck Council of America, Inc.:

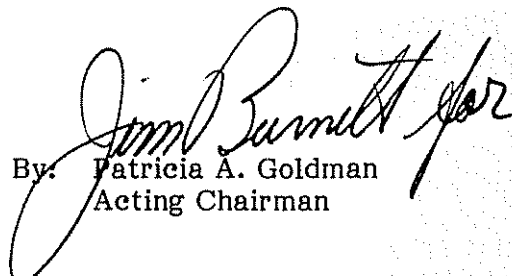
Work with the National Safety Council to develop a guidance program designed to reach as many people as possible who are considering a career in commercial truck driving. The program should explain the considerations in such a vocational choice, the value of formal training, and the factors to consider in selecting a truck driver training school. The program also should 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-86-21)

Undertake a program urging member companies to hire only drivers who have received formal truck driver training. Once the Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety Proposed Minimum Standards for Training Tractor-Trailer Drivers have been validated, stipulate that only drivers who have graduated from schools that have met the criteria established by those standards should be hired. The program also should encourage member firms to participate in apprenticeship training programs. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-86-22)

(Separate letters containing a recommendation corresponding to Safety Recommendation H-86-21 have been sent to the American Trucking Associations, Inc.; the International Brotherhood of Teamsters; the Professional Truck Driver Institute of the Trucking Industry Alliance; the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association of America; and the National Association of Truck Driving Schools.)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "...to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation H-86-21 and -22 in your reply.

GOLDMAN, Acting Chairman, and BURNETT, LAUBER, and NALL, Members, concurred in these recommendations.


By: Patricia A. Goldman
Acting Chairman