



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

SP-20

Date: July 14, 1986

In reply refer to: H-86-35 through -37

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log H-474F

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.

One critical element of the system reviewed by the Safety Board is the State licensing function. Licensing today may have several ancillary uses, but one primary purpose is to monitor driver performance, so that for those who have demonstrated unsafe behavior, steps may be taken to either improve that behavior or withdraw the driving privilege.

In order for licensing to be effective as a monitoring system, all traffic violations committed by an individual must be included in that person's record. What is needed but still lacking is a driving-performance recordkeeping system that is all-inclusive, readily accessible, and resistant to fraudulent abuse. In addition to internal State recordkeeping systems, there also must be an effective means for one State to make information regarding license suspensions and revocations available to other States. Without such a device, it is difficult to prevent an individual who has lost his or her license from obtaining another license in a neighboring jurisdiction. The mechanism intended to serve that purpose is the National Driver Register (NDR).

However, throughout its existence, the NDR has suffered from problems of incomplete (and sometimes inaccurate) information and from slow responses to inquiries. These problems have been documented repeatedly by the Safety Board, by the NHTSA itself, and by others in studies at least as far back as 1973.

In 1980, the Department of Transportation submitted a report to Congress outlining the problems of maintaining current and accurate data and pointing out the need to automate the NDR. That study recommended a system in which NDR would serve as a conduit for retrieving information from one State in response to an inquiry from another State and transmitting that information without interception. In this way, the NDR would no longer be required to maintain massive files, and the information would be as accurate as the information in the providing State's file at the time of inquiry.

In response, Congress enacted the National Driver Register Act of 1982, which mandated that the NDR be converted to a fully automated system, enabling a State to determine virtually instantly whether another State has taken an adverse action against a driver. It also established a timetable for implementation of the automated system and mandated that a pilot test of the system be conducted.

This law mandates that the NDR be changed from a system containing substantive data regarding adverse licensing actions taken by the States on their drivers and reported to the NDR, to a "pointer system" linking the States to a national communications network by means of the central computer of the NDR. Under the pointer system (termed the "Problem Driver Pointer System"), the NDR will simply be an index for directing an inquiring State to any appropriate state of record.

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

By late 1984, however, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) recognized that it would not be able to meet the mandated schedule. In November of that year, NHTSA proposed a revised implementation schedule, to which it currently is adhering. The revised schedule calls for the pilot test States to be selected in April 1986, the pilot test to begin in August 1987 (allowing 16 months for States to prepare for the pilot test), and be completed in August 1988. According to this schedule, it would be late 1988 or early 1989 before additional States could participate in the new, interactive system. Several additional years would be required to bring all (or most) States into the system.

The Safety Board is disappointed that, more than 6 years after its recommendations and those of the NHTSA itself regarding the need to automate the NDR, automation is still in the planning stages. Indeed, it now appears that almost 9 years will elapse before system design and testing are complete, and a dozen years will pass before the new system will be complete. These delays are attributable to system design difficulties, technical problems, delays in procurement and contracting, and problems within the State bureaucracies which must make adjustments to be compatible with the NDR design.

While nothing can now make up for the delays already incurred, the Safety Board urges NHTSA to expedite implementation of the automated NDR as much as possible. In particular, NHTSA should do all within its power to assist the four States that will participate in the pilot program to begin their participation as soon as possible. Other States should be encouraged to prepare for participation in the automated NDR system as soon as possible after the pilot test is complete. Although a short evaluation will be required following the pilot test, the Safety Board hopes that a significant number of States will be prepared to participate in the new NDR system within a year after the test's completion.

The Safety Board recognizes that in some cases the efforts required of some States in order to participate in the Pointer System will be significant and time-consuming. Although the States have automated their driver licensing operations to varying degrees, they will need to make some changes in order to accommodate the new NDR. In particular, they will need to provide access to their records by the NDR and by commercial drivers (who will be given access to NDR for the first time). Additionally, the States will need to develop procedures to enable the transmission of inquiries to their own files and to the NDR simultaneously.

While the NHTSA works to implement the Pointer System, it also has been making improvements in the quality of data stored in its NDR file, and in the promptness of its responses to State inquiries. The most significant improvement has been in the capacity of States to access the NDR file interactively. Known as the Rapid Response System, this feature will enable a State to know virtually instantly whether there is an NDR record on a license applicant. If States that issue licenses over the counter are to be able to screen an applicant before the license is issued, they must have this on-line access to the NDR file.

States which use the Rapid Response System will be able to initiate participation in the Pointer System more rapidly after the Pointer System has been tested and evaluated. All that will be required will be development of the capacity to receive and respond to other States' inquiries transmitted through the Pointer System. The Safety Board has recommended to State motor vehicle administrations that they participate in the Rapid Response System as soon as it becomes available, both as a means of obtaining interactive access to the NDR and as a means of preparing for participation in the Pointer System.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:

Take necessary action to assure that the Problem Driver Pointer System is fully operational and available to the States for their use by the Department of Transportation's published target date of February 1989. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-86-35)

Encourage State driver licensing authorities to use the Rapid Response System feature of the National Driver Register (NDR) at the earliest practicable date both to obtain prompt access to NDR records and to prepare for use of the Problem Driver Pointer System when it becomes available. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-86-36)

Actively work with the States to prepare them to participate in the Problem Driver Pointer System by encouraging the adoption of necessary statutory changes, provision of adequate budget and other resources, implementation of appropriate administrative and technical changes, and other preparations as needed. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-86-37)

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


By: Patricia A. Goldman
Acting Chairman