



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: July 14, 1986
In reply refer to: H-86-8 and -9

Honorable Elizabeth Hanford Dole
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
400 Seventh Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20590

SP-20
Log # 17746

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.

In its review of State driver licensing practices, the Safety Board found that all States require license applicants to take a road test, but in 19 States and the District of Columbia, the applicant is not required to demonstrate proficiency in the type of vehicle he or she intends to drive. Thus, a person could take a road test in a small sedan, obtain a license, and then legally use that license for driving a tractor-semitrailer. Thirty-one States issue licenses corresponding to specific classes of vehicles, with the classifications usually determined by such factors as vehicle weight or number of axles. In a "classified licensing system," which the Safety Board endorses, applicants are given a road test in the type of vehicle specified in the license being sought.

In addition to the lack of classified licensing in some States, the Safety Board found that the test procedures used in many States are not sufficient for evaluating an applicant's qualifications to drive a heavy truck. To make truck driver licensing more uniform throughout the United States, and to make it a more effective means of setting and enforcing adequate qualification standards, the Safety Board believes a national license for truck drivers should be developed. Such a national system also would help prevent truck drivers from holding more than one license at a time and spreading the traffic violations accrued among those multiple records--a ploy used by some drivers to hide their unsafe behavior from authorities.

The following are some of the issues that will have to be addressed in developing a national truck driver licensing program, as well as some of the features that the Safety Board believes such a program should contain.

Training Requirement and Other Qualification Standards. The Safety Board has recommended that truck drivers under the jurisdiction of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations be required to master the skills taught in a formal truck driver training program. ~~Those Federal regulations~~ govern interstate trucking operations. In order to apply the training requirement to intrastate drivers as well as interstate, the requirement also should be established as a prerequisite for obtaining the National Driver License. Other uniform qualification standards are needed for the License, for example, in areas such as minimum age, medical condition, and previous driving record. These qualifications should probably be derived from the Federal regulations.

License Classification and Differentiation. The national licensing system should be classified by vehicle size, as well as other vehicle factors determining the skills needed for safe operation. Perhaps using a model program developed by the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators and other existing classification schemes as reference, the framers of this system will have to arrive at a standard series of license classes. The system should stipulate that road tests for each class be given in the largest type of vehicle allowable in that class. There should be a separate license or license endorsement for hazardous materials drivers. Separate licenses or endorsements also may be needed for drivers of trucks with special handling characteristics, such as tank trucks or combination vehicles with multiple trailers.

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

Performance Test Procedures. A standardized performance test procedure will be needed, as well as uniform eligibility and training standards for license examiners.

Certificates of Proficiency. In some States, a motor carrier can issue a certificate indicating that a driver has been tested and meets the company's performance standards, and the State will accept that certificate in lieu of a road test. A review is needed of the safety implications of this practice, to determine whether it should be permitted in the national system.

Knowledge Test and Driver's Manual. Uniform knowledge tests will be needed that feature substantial emphasis on safe driving practice. It may be advisable to include questions on the operational requirements of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations. Another promising source would be the test battery being developed for the Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety's (BMCS) Model Curriculum for Training Tractor-Trailer Drivers. All questions in the knowledge test should be properly validated before being put into use.

The standard driver's manual also may be drawn from portions of the BMCS curriculum. Although individual States probably would have to augment the manual with information on their own traffic regulations, each State would no longer have to develop a full driving handbook on its own.

License Renewal. Each person holding the National Truck Driver License should be required to undergo a full retest of knowledge, performance, and vision each time that license is due for renewal.

One-License/One-Record Concept. One of the most important reasons for establishing the National Truck Driver License is to promote the one-license/one-record concept, which is an effort to prevent drivers from holding more than one license at a time. With a single system for issuing licenses and recording traffic violations, it will be much harder than it is now for a driver with a bad record to avoid detection.

In order to make that system truly effective, it will be necessary for the national license to supplant all others. Persons operating vehicles not covered by the national system would continue to drive on whatever type of license they received from the State. But those wishing to drive qualifying commercial vehicles would have to surrender all other driver licenses before being issued a new, national license. After that, any traffic violation, regardless of the type of vehicle driven, would be recorded on the national license. The situation must be avoided in which a driver would maintain one license for driving a truck and another for driving a private automobile. That would run counter to the principle of one-license/one-record. Furthermore, it is the Safety Board's position that everything a person does on the highway, regardless of vehicle, has bearing on his or her fitness to drive a truck.

Program Administration. Administering the National Truck Driver License involves developing uniform qualification standards and licensing procedures and then implementing them throughout the United States. The roles of State and Federal governments in these functions must be determined.

At present, driver license administration is close to an exclusively State operation, and, as shown, this arrangement is in need of improvement. At the other extreme, licensing could be made an exclusively Federal function, analogous to the Federal Aviation Administration's licensing of pilots. That would require the creation of a new network of licensing bureaus, and since there are many more commercial drivers than pilots, the costs of such a network would be prohibitive. The most realistic course, therefore, would be a partnership between governments on the State and Federal levels.

Testing applicants and examining their qualifications should remain a State function, using the motor vehicle bureaus already in place. The Federal government, working with the States and other interested parties, should develop uniform standards and testing procedures, and ensure that these are adhered to in all States. The other functions in the national licensing program will include:

- 1) Issuing the licenses, and making sure that each driver under the system obtains only one.
- 2) When warranted because of the license holder's record, suspending or revoking the driving privilege, or taking other enforcement action. (The program will have to establish uniform criteria for such action.)
- 3) Maintaining records on all license holders.

There will be roles for both State and Federal authorities in carrying out these functions. It should be the responsibility of the Department of Transportation (DOT), based on public comment and its own analysis, to assign those roles.

The DOT will have to determine how and where the license records will be kept. The recordkeeping function will be essential to the success of a National Driver License system. Without a single, complete file on each license holder that includes all traffic violations and other relevant information, it would be impossible to detect and take action against unsafe drivers. Whether the records are kept by the States (presumably the State issuing the license) or the Federal government, the accuracy of those records will depend on an effective communications system. Notification of every violation must be transmitted to the recordkeeping entity. If the records are maintained by the states, there **probably would have to be** a central listing of all license holders, indicating the licensing State and containing sufficient identifying information on the license holder to prevent that driver from obtaining more than one license.

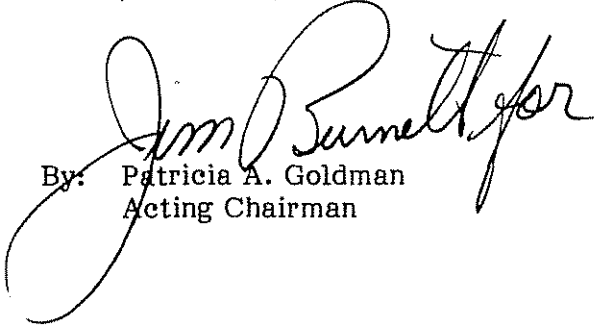
Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Secretary of Transportation:

Develop a program under which State and Federal authorities would jointly administer a National Driver License for commercial truck drivers. Such a program should implement the one-license/one-record concept, and a system should be developed that will keep track of the records of all individuals holding a National Driver License. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-86-8)

Develop uniform licensing criteria, a set of uniform performance and knowledge test procedures, and a driver's manual for use by State agencies in a National Driver License program for commercial truck drivers. The criteria should be derived from the driver qualification standards of Part 391 of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations

and should also include formal training as a prerequisite for licensure. The test procedures should be based on a classified licensing system, with separate licenses or license endorsements for individuals transporting hazardous materials or driving vehicles with special handling characteristics. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-86-9)

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


By: Patricia A. Goldman
Acting Chairman

