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National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: August 22, 1990

In reply refer to: H-90-88 through -89

Mr. Larry Purcell
Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Co., Inc.
2800 Bissonnet
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About 7:34 a.m., central daylight time, on Thursday, September 21, 1989, a westbound school bus with 81 students operated by the Mission Consolidated Independent School District, Mission, Texas, and a northbound delivery truck operated by the Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Company, McAllen, Texas, collided at Bryan Road and Farm-to-Market Road Number 676 (FM 676) in Alton, Texas. Nineteen students died at the accident scene, and two died later in the hospital. The 21 fatalities were the result of drowning or complications related to the submersion. Furthermore, 3 students sustained serious injuries, 46 others sustained minor injuries, and 11 students were not injured.¹

According to company officials, before April 1989, Valley Bottling Company had an informal truckdriver training and qualification program conducted by a supervisor during slack time periods. Potential truckdrivers were selected from employees who applied for the position and held a valid Texas Class A driver license. This informal training consisted of the supervisor showing safety movies and asking questions about them, and student workbook assignments. Behind-the-wheel training consisted of the trainer riding in a truck with each trainee to ensure that the student could handle the unit. Behind-the-wheel training was tailored for each student and lasted until the training supervisor was satisfied with the student's driving performance. Following this training the student was promoted to trainee and authorized to drive a truck as a relief driver on various routes. No formal training certificate was issued, but an interoffice document was used to indicate the person's promotion to trainee. A trainee was promoted to driver upon assignment to a permanent route.

¹For more detailed information, read Highway Accident Report--"Collision between Mission Consolidated Independent School District School Bus and Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Inc., Tractor-Semitrailer, Intersection of Bryan Road and Texas Farm-to-Market Road Number 676, in Alton, Texas, September 21, 1989" (NTSB/HAR-90-02).

After April 1989 Valley Bottling Company began a process of certifying all drivers and trainees in the Texas district according to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations (FMCSR). Although, at the time of the accident Valley Bottling Company was not subject to the FMCSR because the business is an intrastate operation, it used them as guidelines to certify drivers. Therefore, when completed, all driver files should contain a physical examination, record of driving violations history, and written and road test results. In addition, all drivers should have completed a formal training program consisting of scheduled classroom sessions and behind-the-wheel experience.

The Safety Board believes that although in April 1989, the Valley Bottling Company started to use the FMCSR as guidelines to certify its drivers and trainees, it still needs to develop a formal driver training program. The training program should be taught by qualified instructors and conducted with classroom and behind-the-wheel exercises. Emphasis should be placed on seat belt usage and compliance with traffic regulations. Valley Bottling should also maintain driver records and documentation concerning driver examinations and road test results.

The Safety Board believes that the maintenance performed on the accident truck was marginal. The postaccident examination revealed that the accident truck had at least three improperly adjusted service brakes and an accumulation of oil and water emulsion in the service brakes air reservoir tank.

The marginal mechanical condition may be because of the relatively high ratio of vehicles to mechanics at the Valley Bottling Company facilities. At the McAllen facility 3 mechanics serviced 162 vehicles, (a 54 to 1 ratio), and at the San Benito facility 2 mechanics and 1 helper serviced 111 vehicles (a 44 to 1 ratio). The vehicle maintenance staff was responsible for general repairs identified as a result of driver pretrip inspections, normal periodic vehicle maintenance, and an annual vehicle inspection program for the 273 vehicles. Therefore, it is unlikely that this small staff was able to effectively detect and correct the majority of mechanical discrepancies. The Safety Board believes that additional maintenance resources are needed for the company to properly maintain its vehicle fleet.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Valley Coca-Cola Bottling Co., Inc.:


Develop and implement a formal truck driving training program including classroom and behind-the-wheel instruction with emphasis on driving articulated vehicles, using seatbelts, and complying with traffic regulations. The program should include maintaining adequate records and other documentation of driver examinations, including road test results. The training should be performed by qualified instructor(s). (Class II, Priority Action) (H-90-88)

Establish procedures and provide adequate resources to ensure that proper vehicle maintenance is performed in accordance with manufacturer specifications. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-90-89)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations H-90-74 through -78 and reiterated H-89-5 to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; H-90-79 through -80 to the Texas Department of Public Safety; H-90-81 to the Texas Education Agency; H-90-82 through -83 to the Hidalgo County; H-90-84 through -85 the City of Alton; H-90-86 to the Mission Consolidated Independent School District; H-90-87 to the Coca-Cola Enterprises, Inc.; and H-90-90 to the National Association of State Directors of Pupil Transportation Services.

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 action taken as a result of its safety recommendations. Therefore, it would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations H-90-88 through -89 in your reply.

KOLSTAD, Chairman, COUGHLIN, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER and BURNETT, Members, concurred in these recommendations.


By: James L. Kolstad
Chairman