



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

## Safety Recommendation

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**Date:** February 15, 2006

**In reply refer to:** H-06-9

Manufacturers of vehicles equipped with air brakes  
(See distribution list)

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The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating transportation accidents, determining their probable cause, and making recommendations to prevent similar accidents from occurring. We are providing the following information to urge your company to take action on the safety recommendation in this letter. The Safety Board is vitally interested in this recommendation because it is designed to prevent accidents and save lives.

This recommendation addresses the issue of maintaining air brakes equipped with automatic slack adjusters (ASAs). The recommendation is derived from the Safety Board's investigation of the collision between a Ford dump truck and four passenger cars in Glen Rock, Pennsylvania, that took place on April 11, 2003, and is consistent with the evidence we found and the analysis we performed. As a result of this investigation, the Safety Board has issued 11 safety recommendations, 1 of which is addressed to manufacturers of vehicles equipped with air brakes. Information supporting this recommendation is discussed below. The Safety Board would appreciate a response from you within 90 days addressing the actions you have taken or intend to take to implement our recommendation.

About 3:36 p.m., eastern daylight time, on April 11, 2003, in the Borough of Glen Rock, Pennsylvania, a 1995 Ford dump truck owned and operated by Blossom Valley Farms, Inc., was traveling southbound on Church Street, a two-lane, two-way residential street with a steep downgrade, when the driver found that he was unable to stop the truck. The truck struck four passenger cars, which were stopped at the intersection of Church and Main Streets, and pushed them into the intersection. One of the vehicles struck three pedestrians (a 9-year-old boy, a 7-year-old boy, and a 7-year-old girl), who were on the sidewalk on the west side of Church Street. The truck continued across the intersection, through a gas station parking lot, and over a set of railroad tracks before coming to rest about 300 feet south of the intersection. As a result of the collision, the driver and an 11-year-old occupant of one of the passenger cars received fatal injuries, and the three pedestrians who were struck received minor-to-serious injuries. The six remaining passenger car occupants and the truck driver were not injured.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information, read National Transportation Safety Board, *Collision Between a Ford Dump Truck and Four Passenger Cars, Glen Rock, Pennsylvania, April 11, 2003*, Highway Accident Report NTSB/HAR-06/01 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 2006).

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of this accident was the lack of oversight by Blossom Valley Farms, Inc., which resulted in an untrained driver improperly operating an overloaded, air brake-equipped vehicle with inadequately maintained brakes. Contributing to the accident was the misdiagnosis of the truck's underlying brake problems by mechanics involved with the truck's maintenance; also contributing was a lack of readily available and accurate information about automatic slack adjusters and inadequate warnings about the safety problems caused by manually adjusting them.

With respect to maintaining air brakes equipped with ASAs, the Safety Board noted that the majority of heavy trucks on the road are equipped with ASAs. All air-braked vehicles manufactured after 1994 are required to have them and, in 1992, the Safety Board found that about 65 percent of the vehicles inspected during the *Heavy Vehicle Airbrake Performance* safety study<sup>2</sup> were already equipped with ASAs. These safety devices were introduced without a concentrated education effort being employed.

The postaccident inspection of the Glen Rock accident truck revealed that the two rear axle brakes were out of adjustment and produced little or no braking force. The front axle air chambers, which were slightly more than half the size of the rear chambers, were in proper adjustment. Yet, because the larger T-30 rear brakes produced little or no braking force, excessive strain was placed on the significantly smaller T-16 front brakes, which caused them to quickly overheat, resulting in severely diminished truck braking capability.

The truck was equipped with Gunitite ASAs on all four brakes. After the accident, when the two rear adjusters were tested at the Gunitite facility with the worn "quick-connect" clevises and clevis pins from the accident truck, the pushrod stroke would not go below 2 1/2 inches, which is outside the adjustment limits, rendering the system incapable of producing braking force. However, when the ASAs were tested with new clevises and clevis pins, they functioned properly and the adjustment stayed well under 2 inches, which is within the adjustment limits and would provide adequate braking forces. Therefore, the Safety Board concludes that at the time of the accident, the ASAs for all four of the accident truck's brakes were capable of working properly; however, the quick-connect clevises and clevis pins for both rear brakes were worn to the extent that they prevented the ASAs from properly adjusting the brakes, thereby reducing the capability of the rear brakes.

The Safety Board reviewed the maintenance and inspection history of the accident truck, which had undergone four vehicle inspections between 2001 and the April 2003 accident—three Pennsylvania State annual inspections (August 2001, March 2002, and January 2003) and one roadside inspection (April 2002). During two of these inspections—the 2002 roadside inspection and the 2003 State annual inspection—the rear brakes were found to be out of adjustment. After the 2002 roadside inspection, when the accident truck was placed out of service for out-of-adjustment brakes, the driver of the vehicle, who was also a truck mechanic, manually adjusted the ASAs. The Safety Board could find no record of further examination of the brakes by the company or the mechanic to discover why the brakes had been out of adjustment. During the 2003 State annual inspection, a Ford dealership mechanic found the rear brakes to be out of

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<sup>2</sup> National Transportation Safety Board, *Heavy Vehicle Airbrake Performance*, Safety Study NTSB/SS-92/01 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 1992).

adjustment, and he manually adjusted the ASAs. In an interview with Safety Board investigators, he said he had adjusted the brakes and thought he had fixed the problem. Had he performed a more in-depth examination of the brake system, he probably would have found and replaced the worn clevises and clevis pins, which would have enabled the ASAs to adjust the brakes properly and might have prevented the accident.

The Gunite service manual gives specific instructions on how to conduct a torque test by turning the adjustment nut. If the Ford dealership mechanic had done a torque test, he might have realized that the adjuster itself was working properly. In addition, the Gunite service manual indicates that mechanics should “check the foundation brake for proper function; worn cam bushings, pins and rollers, broken springs, worn quick-connect clevis, worn clevis bushings and clevis pins. Repair as necessary and repeat the function test.”<sup>3</sup>

One reason that ASAs should not be manually adjusted is that every time the adjusting nut is turned in a counterclockwise direction, the internal components experience additional wear because the action abrades the internal adjusting mechanism. In the El Cerrito, California, brake loss accident (also addressed in the Glen Rock accident report), the driver stated that he manually adjusted the slack adjusters twice a week and had done so on the morning of the accident. Postaccident testing of the El Cerrito accident truck at the Gunite factory showed that three of the adjusting clutches were worn to the point that they could not hold an adjustment, probably due to their age and the deterioration caused by frequent manual adjustment. For the majority of ASAs, regular manual adjustment will cause premature wearing of the internal clutch, which is a necessary component for the automatic adjustment feature to work properly.

Various brake component problems can cause a pushrod stroke to go beyond the limits for producing adequate braking capability, causing the brakes to be out of service. These problems include, but are not limited to, worn cam bushings, worn or broken pins and rollers, broken springs, worn clevises (both quick-connect and standard), and worn clevis bushings and pins. When a driver or mechanic finds a pushrod stroke to be long and manually adjusts an ASA to correct the long stroke, he or she is masking the true problem with the brake, not fixing it. In all likelihood, the adjustment will be temporary. ASA manufacturers Gunite, Haldex, and Bendix indicated to Safety Board investigators that they do not know how long (how many brake applications) a manually adjusted ASA will hold an adjustment.

The drivers and mechanics who manually adjusted the ASAs on the trucks involved in the Glen Rock and El Cerrito accidents apparently did not understand that they were not fixing the underlying problem with the braking systems. They did not appreciate that when an ASA does not hold an adjustment, something is wrong with the adjuster itself or with some other foundation brake component. Therefore, the Safety Board concludes that the drivers and mechanics who manually adjusted the ASAs on the trucks involved in the Glen Rock and El Cerrito accidents did not look for underlying problems with the adjusters or related foundation brake components; consequently, they misdiagnosed the brake problems, probably because they were not properly educated on the function and care of ASAs and how they relate to foundation brake systems.

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<sup>3</sup> Gunite *Automatic Slack Adjuster Service Manual*, ASA 100-1 (Gunite Corporation, June 1994) 7.

Manually adjusting ASAs to fix an out-of-adjustment brake is a dangerous practice that can have serious consequences. If an ASA is manually adjusted, the operator may wrongly assume the adjustment has “fixed” the braking problem, which gives the operator a false sense of security about the effectiveness of the braking system. The operator may believe that the brakes are fully reliable, when in fact they can go out of adjustment at any time, particularly in the case of vehicles that operate in hilly or mountainous environments. As the Glen Rock and El Cerrito accidents demonstrate, manually adjusting ASAs can create a situation in which brakes will not be capable of responding properly when they are desperately needed.

Although the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance’s Operation Air Brake data indicate that trucks with ASAs are placed out of service for out-of-adjustment brakes only half as frequently as those with brakes that have manual adjusters, ASA-equipped trucks are still being placed out of service for this deficiency, which suggests that ASAs have not solved the problem of out-of-adjustment brakes. Lack of knowledge about ASAs is one reason for the continuing problem. Since the Glen Rock and El Cerrito accidents, Safety Board investigators have questioned a number of randomly selected mechanics on the practice of manually adjusting ASAs. The majority indicated that they manually adjust ASAs when they are out of adjustment, a practice that ASA manufacturers neither suggest nor endorse.

In addition, results of the driver survey conducted in 2000 by the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association<sup>4</sup> showed that a majority of drivers, particularly owner-operators, are performing brake adjustments on both manual slack adjusters and ASAs. The 2003 Operation Air Brake driver survey showed that about half of the drivers responding believed that ASAs never go out of adjustment and about one-third thought that a driver with proper tools could readjust ASAs. The Safety Board therefore concludes that the warnings in existing materials available to owners, drivers, mechanics, and inspectors of air-braked vehicles equipped with ASAs have not been successful in communicating the inherent dangers of manually adjusting ASAs to correct out-of-adjustment brakes. Operation Air Brake Committee members told Safety Board investigators that during the 2003 Operation Air Brake driver survey, drivers who obtained information about air brakes from manuals, rather than classroom training, their companies, or other truckers, knew more about the safe operation of air-braked vehicles and had fewer brake out-of-service violations.

Truck manufacturers’ manuals afford one means of improving industry awareness of the risks associated with manually adjusting ASAs. The Ford owner’s manual for a model 2003 F650/750, which is similar to the Glen Rock accident truck, states that ASAs should be checked for adjustment every 4 months, or 20,000 miles, and more frequently if operated in hilly or mountainous regions or in mud. It does not inform drivers or mechanics about the dangers involved in adjusting ASAs. The Safety Board, through the Truck Manufacturers Association, queried medium-heavy truck manufacturers to determine what information, if any, they provide regarding the manual adjustment of ASAs. Freightliner, the only manufacturer to respond to the inquiry, indicated that its manuals are silent on the subject. (Freightliner advised Safety Board investigators that it will revise its driver, maintenance, and service manuals to include cautions about manually adjusting ASAs when it next updates its manuals.)

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Craig, “The Driver Perspective,” *Report of Proceedings of the North American Brake Safety Conference, September 15-16, 2000* (Toronto, Canada: CVSA, 2001).

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board makes the following safety recommendation to manufacturers of vehicles equipped with air brakes:

Revise your product manuals to include conspicuously placed wording that clearly states that automatic slack adjusters should not be manually adjusted in an effort to correct excessive pushrod stroke, because this condition indicates that a problem exists with the automatic adjuster, with the installation of the adjuster, or with related foundation brake components, which manual adjustment will not fix. Further, the product manuals should state that manual adjustment of automatic slack adjusters is a dangerous practice that could have serious consequences, because it gives the operator a false sense of security about the effectiveness of the brakes, which are likely to go out of adjustment again soon. (H-06-9)

The Safety Board also issued safety recommendations to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, the District of Columbia and the States, the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance, manufacturers and marketers of automatic slack adjusters, the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence, and publishers of National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence certification test study guides. In your response to the recommendation in this letter, please refer to Safety Recommendation H-06-9. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6177.

Acting Chairman ROSENKER and Members ENGLEMAN CONNERS, HERSMAN, and HIGGINS concurred in this recommendation.

*[Original Signed]*

By: Mark V. Rosenker  
Acting Chairman

**Distribution—Manufacturers of vehicles equipped with air brakes**

Mr. Chris Patterson  
 President and Chief Executive Officer  
 Freightliner LLC  
 4747 N. Channel Avenue  
 Portland, Oregon 97217-7699

Mr. Paul Vikner  
 President and Chief Executive Officer  
 Mack Trucks, Inc.  
 2100 Mack Boulevard  
 Allentown, Pennsylvania 18103

Mr. Deepak T. Kapur  
 President, Truck Group  
 International Truck and Engine Corporation  
 4201 Winfield Road  
 Post Office Box 1488  
 Warrenville, Illinois 60555

Mr. Robert J. Christensen  
 Vice President and General Manager  
 Kenworth Truck Company  
 Post Office Box 1000  
 10630 N.E. 38th Place  
 Kirkland, Washington 98033

Mr. Daniel D. Sobic  
 Vice President and General Manager  
 Peterbilt Motors Company  
 1700 Woodbrook Street  
 Denton, Texas 76205-7864

Mr. Peter Karlsten  
 President and Chief Executive Officer  
 Volvo Trucks North America, Inc.  
 7900 National Service Road  
 Greensboro, North Carolina 27409

Mr. Brian K. Pennington  
 Chief Engineer  
 Medium Truck/Blue Diamond Programs  
 Ford Motor Company  
 20901 Oakwood Boulevard  
 MD 182  
 Office - PDC 2H-F65  
 Dearborn, Michigan 48124

Mr. Steve Matsil  
 Chief Engineer, Medium Duty Trucks  
 General Motors Corporation  
 30001 Van Dyke  
 Mail Code 480-210-806  
 Warren, Michigan 48090

Mr. Spencer Nicol  
 National Product Development Manager  
 Hino Motor Sales U.S.A., Inc.  
 2555 Telegraph Road  
 Bloomfield Hills, Michigan 48302-0954

Mr. Larry Schultz  
 Vice President of Service Operations  
 Nissan Diesel America Incorporated  
 5930 Campus Circle Drive  
 Irving, Texas 75063