



Testimony

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COMMERCIAL MOTOR VEHICLES

Significant Actions Remain to Improve Truck Safety

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Typically, about 5,000 people die each year in truck-related crashes. This Subcommittee and others have been critical of the Department of Transportation's (DOT) progress in reducing this death toll. In May 1999, in part as a response to this concern, the Secretary of Transportation announced a goal of reducing these fatalities by 50 percent over a 10-year period, 2000 through 2009.

I am here today primarily to discuss the efforts being undertaken by DOT's newly established Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (motor carrier administration) to reduce the number of large truck-related fatalities. At your request, I will also talk about similar efforts to improve the safety of commercial passenger vehicles, including buses and vans. The information in my testimony is based on our ongoing work for this Subcommittee. Specifically, I will discuss the motor carrier administration's progress in (1) developing an overall strategy to reduce large truck-related fatalities by 50 percent by 2009 and (2) carrying out its safety activities for large trucks and commercial passenger vehicles.

In summary:

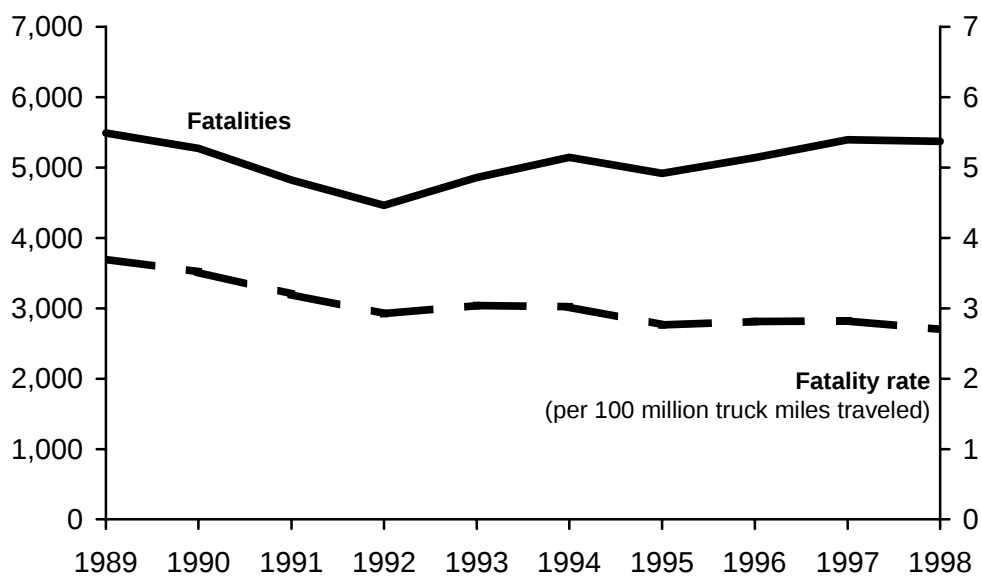
- The Department has not yet developed a comprehensive strategy to achieve its goal of reducing large truck-related fatalities by 50 percent by 2009. First, although the motor carrier administration has developed a draft Safety Action Plan to serve as its blueprint for achieving this goal, it has not determined the degree to which specific actions, or sets of related actions, in the plan would measurably improve motor carrier safety. Second, the Department has not fully implemented the recommendation we made in June 1999 to prioritize individual initiatives contained in its draft Safety Action Plan according to their potential for reducing truck-related fatalities. Finally, DOT has not adopted our recommendation to determine whether it can reasonably expect to accomplish all the actions in its draft plan with its expected budgetary and human resources. For example, motor carrier administration officials told us that an initiative that will provide states with the information needed to suspend or revoke registration for motor carriers with poor safety performance might not meet its 2003 implementation goal, in part, because of a lack of staff devoted to the effort. We believe that developing a comprehensive, prioritized strategy is necessary, especially because of the magnitude of reductions in truck-related fatalities that DOT hopes to achieve.

- Since we appeared before this Subcommittee a year ago, DOT has made some progress on activities to improve truck and commercial passenger vehicle safety. To meet the requirements of the Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act of 1999, DOT established a new organizational structure to place greater focus on enforcement and compliance with motor carrier safety regulations; it also has established a separate division for commercial passenger vehicle safety. Moreover, over the past year, DOT has conducted more compliance reviews and assessed more civil penalties for violations of truck safety regulations. (Compliance reviews are on-site reviews of motor carriers' compliance with federal safety regulations.) DOT has also made some progress in obtaining the crash-related data that it needs to make informed decisions about the actions most likely to improve truck safety. It will be important for the Department to demonstrate that it can follow through on these efforts over the long term to meet the Secretary's goal of reducing large truck-related fatalities.

Background

In 1998, 5,374 people died on our nation's roads from crashes involving large trucks. (See fig. 1.) The number of fatalities is slightly less than the 5,398 truck-related fatalities in 1997, but it is still 20 percent higher than in 1992. In addition, the fatality rate—the number of fatalities per 100 million miles traveled by large trucks—has remained fairly constant over the past several years at about 2.8 deaths per 100 million miles traveled after decreasing by over 20 percent between 1989 and 1992.

Figure 1: Fatalities From Large Truck Crashes and Fatality Rates, 1989-1998



Source: DOT.

The number of fatalities involving commercial passenger vehicles is significantly fewer—typically less than 30 (commercial passenger vehicle occupants only) each year—but recent crashes in Louisiana and New Jersey, among others, have also heightened public concern about the loss of life in such incidents.

DOT's motor carrier safety responsibilities primarily reside in its Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, created by the December 1999 Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act. The act established this new modal administration to give motor carrier safety increased attention and stature within DOT. It also authorized additional funding for grants to state agencies to help ensure compliance with federal and applicable state motor carrier safety rules (primarily through roadside inspections and compliance reviews), provided additional enforcement tools, and required a strategic plan and periodic progress reports. Prior to the motor carrier administration's creation, DOT's motor carrier safety responsibilities were administered within its Federal Highway Administration.

DOT Has Not Yet Developed a Clear Strategy to Reduce Large Truck-Related Fatalities

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has developed a draft Safety Action Plan aimed at reducing large truck-related fatalities by half by 2009. However, it does not yet have a clearly defined strategy to achieve this goal, which DOT set 10 months ago. As a result, the Department's efforts fall short in three ways. First, the motor carrier administration has not articulated how individual actions, or sets of actions, in this plan will measurably contribute to reducing truck-related fatalities. Second, the Department has not fully implemented our June 1999 recommendation to prioritize the individual initiatives contained in the plan according to their potential for reducing truck-related fatalities.¹ Finally, the motor carrier administration has not developed multiyear estimates of the human and budgetary resources it will likely need to carry out its Safety Action Plan.

To meet the Secretary's goal of reducing truck-related fatalities by 50 percent, DOT has developed a draft Safety Action Plan that it views as its blueprint for this effort. The latest draft of the plan was created in March 1999 and contains 67 individual action items, such as gaining an in-depth understanding of the causes of truck-related crashes. These 67 items--that are either underway or planned--address a variety of areas related to large truck safety. The motor carrier administration considers the plan's 67 items, which include enforcement, regulation, and advanced technology, to be the most important activities--in terms of reducing crashes, injuries, and fatalities--that it has underway. DOT expects to issue a revision to the plan this spring.

In response to requirements contained in the Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act of 1999 and the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993,² the motor carrier administration has prepared a draft annual performance plan that contains, among other things, estimates of the resources it needs for fiscal year 2001.³ The motor carrier administration anticipates issuing a strategic plan as part of the Department's overall strategic plan in September 2000.

¹Truck Safety: Motor Carriers Office Hampered by Limited Information on Causes of Crashes and Other Data Problems (GAO/RCED-99-182, June 29, 1999).

²The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 requires that executive agencies prepare multiyear strategic plans, annual performance plans, and annual performance reports. The strategic plans are to include a mission statement, general goals and objectives, and the strategies the agency will use to achieve those goals and objectives.

³The strategic plan is expected to contain a plan and schedule for, among other things, reducing the number and rates of crashes, injuries, and fatalities involving commercial motor vehicles and numeric or measurable goals that would enable the motor carrier administration to assess its progress toward accomplishing its goals for large truck safety. Typically, a strategic plan would be prepared before an

DOT's draft Safety Action Plan is a useful first step in meeting the Secretary's ambitious goal. However, the motor carrier administration has not articulated how individual actions, or sets of actions, in this plan will measurably contribute to reducing truck-related fatalities. Such an articulation would be useful because it could help the motor carrier administration focus on those activities that have the potential to make the largest contributions in reducing truck-related fatalities, rather than those that might make lesser contributions.

In our June 1999 report to this Subcommittee, we questioned the prudence of DOT's embarking on numerous activities in its draft Safety Action Plan without prioritizing them (such as identifying those activities that would make the greatest contributions to safety or those which necessarily needed to precede other actions). Motor carrier administration officials told us that the revised Safety Action Plan would address our concern about prioritizing its efforts by listing areas of emphasis among the plan's initiatives.

Finally, DOT's planning efforts have also not addressed our June 1999 recommendation on determining whether it can reasonably expect to have the budgetary and human resources necessary to carry out all the activities in the Safety Action Plan. For example, the motor carrier administration recently cited one of its initiatives--the Performance and Registration Information Systems Management (PRISM) program--as its premier enforcement program.⁴ PRISM links state motor vehicle registration and licensing programs with DOT's commercial vehicle safety efforts. PRISM is intended to improve safety by providing states with information that would allow them to suspend or revoke registrations for motor carriers with poor safety performance. Currently, 12 states are participating in PRISM, and the motor carrier administration plans to have an additional 12 states participate by 2003. The motor carrier administration does not believe it can have more states involved before then because, according to agency officials, (1) it has not developed a comprehensive marketing program for PRISM and (2) it does not have sufficient staff to conduct the necessary training, technical assistance, and other administrative tasks needed to respond to every state agency that might express an interest in participating in the program. Currently, the motor carrier administration has assigned only about two full-time

annual performance plan. However, because the Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act was recently enacted, the agency prepared the draft fiscal year 2001 annual performance plan even though a strategic plan has not yet been developed.

⁴The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 mandated the development of PRISM as a pilot program to explore the potential of using the commercial vehicle registration process as a safety tool to address the problems of a growing and diverse motor carrier industry.

equivalent staff to PRISM. As a result, motor carrier administration officials told us that DOT may not meet its 2003 implementation goal.

The Motor Carrier Administration Is Acting to Improve Truck and Bus Safety

Since we last appeared before this Subcommittee a year ago, several developments have occurred that could potentially improve commercial motor carrier safety. These include (1) improved accountability for motor carrier safety within DOT, (2) increases in DOT's enforcement and compliance activities, and (3) the progress DOT has made on some individual initiatives in response to recommendations made by us and the Department's Inspector General.

New Modal Administration Established With More Focused Accountability

After passage of the December 1999 act, DOT moved quickly to set up the new modal administration. In early January, the Secretary of Transportation approved an organizational structure for the new agency. The Secretary of Transportation has installed the former Acting Director of the Office of Motor Carrier Safety as Acting Deputy Administrator and Acting Chief Safety Officer for the motor carrier administration, and staff members are serving in all office director positions on an interim basis. The remaining motor carrier administration staff have also been transferred from its predecessor organization. However, several leadership positions, including the Administrator and four Associate Administrators, are currently unfilled. The agency is currently operating at previously established funding and staffing levels and receives administrative support from the Federal Highway Administration.

The establishment of the motor carrier administration within DOT enhances visibility for motor carrier safety because it places the motor carrier administration on a par with other modal administrations within the Department. Moreover, the agency's new organizational structure—which features an Associate Administrator for Enforcement and Program Delivery (currently, the position is vacant) and an Office Director for Enforcement and Compliance (currently, the position is filled on an “acting” basis)—supports a greater emphasis on enforcement and compliance. In contrast to its predecessor organization, which was within the Federal Highway Administration, field operations now receive instructions directly from the Associate Administrator for Enforcement and Program Delivery, thereby reducing the potential for conflicting instructions. In addition, beginning in fiscal year 2001, the agency will have attorneys

and support staff in four regional service centers whose sole responsibility will be to enforce compliance with truck safety regulations. Previously, these attorneys performed legal work, including truck safety work, for the Federal Highway Administration as a whole.

The motor carrier administration's new organizational structure also features a separate division for commercial passenger vehicles--the Commercial Passenger Carrier Safety Division (the chief of this division is in place). In January 2000, the agency issued a guide to field investigators which, according to the division's chief, should help target investigations to where they are most needed. In addition, the division chief supports the development and use of new safety-related technology, such as electric brakes and self-centering steering, and anticipates improving the data on passenger carriers to, among other things, enable the agency to better identify trucks and commercial passenger vehicles.

Increased Enforcement Activity

Over the past year, in part in response to criticisms by this Subcommittee and the DOT's Inspector General and in response to recent legislative changes, DOT has increased its truck safety enforcement and compliance activities. In April 1999, DOT issued guidance to its enforcement and compliance staff responsible for truck safety that called for increasing (1) the number of compliance reviews (from two to about four or five per month) that each staff member would be expected to conduct and (2) the civil penalties assessed for violations of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations, in accordance with the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century.⁵ For example, DOT increased the number of federal compliance reviews at motor carrier offices by about 30 percent--from 5,147 in fiscal year 1998 to 6,654 in fiscal year 1999. During the same period, the number of enforcement cases that generally stem from compliance reviews rose from 2,444 to 2,899—an increase of nearly 20 percent. Also, the amount of civil penalties assessed per case increased by over 50 percent from an average of \$3,750 in fiscal year 1998 to \$5,775 for the fourth quarter of fiscal year 1999.

⁵The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century increased the civil penalties that can be assessed for violations of truck safety regulations.

Some Progress Has Been Made on Initiatives Important to Reducing Truck-Related Fatalities

While additional work remains to be done, the motor carrier administration also appears to be making some progress on several initiatives that it considers to be important to meeting DOT's goal to reduce truck-related fatalities:

- Our June 1999 report and previous reports concluded that states were not providing crash data to DOT in a timely manner. This information is needed to allow DOT and the states to make informed enforcement and investigation decisions. In 1997, we recommended that the Secretary of Transportation identify barriers that prevent the states from providing complete and timely data and work with them to develop a strategy for addressing each barrier.⁶ In response to this recommendation, DOT has requested all the states to submit plans to improve their crash data. According to a motor carrier administration official, all of the states and the District of Columbia have submitted plans and, while their quality varied, most of the plans were reasonable and some were comprehensive and well thought-out. Currently, the agency is contacting the states to determine the extent to which they have implemented their plans. To improve the quality of the data used to target its enforcement resources, the motor carrier administration is planning to establish new incentive programs in 2001. These programs would provide the states with monetary awards for (1) providing accident and inspection data within a specified amount of time and (2) reducing the number and the rate of truck-related accidents and fatalities in their respective states.
- Under the Large Truck Crash Causation Project, which is intended to result in a national database on the causes of or contributing factors to large truck crashes, DOT has studied the feasibility of conducting the project and has selected four pilot sites to test their data-gathering methodology. The pilot program is expected to begin this June, and the full test is expected to begin in January 2001. The motor carrier administration views this project to be essential to reaching DOT's long-term goal because the database would enable the motor carrier administration to develop and implement countermeasures to reduce the occurrence and severity of large truck crashes. As we reported last year, having timely, reliable and sufficiently detailed information about the causes of these crashes is essential to develop and

⁶Commercial Motor Carriers: DOT Is Shifting to Performance-Based Standards to Assess Whether Carriers Operate Safely (GAO/RCED-98-8, Nov. 3, 1997).

implement truck safety strategies. The ultimate success of this project will depend on the states' providing this information to DOT.

- The Commercial Vehicle Information Systems and Networks (CVISN) program is intended to provide enforcement officials with greater access to current safety and interstate credentials information (e.g., liability insurance and vehicle titling), the ability to better target problem carriers and commercial motor vehicles, and the ability to check carriers' safety and credentials history at the time of registration. The motor carrier administration's overall goal is to have CVISN deployed in a majority of the states by September 2003. To date, three states are expected to complete initial deployment by the end of fiscal year 2000; two states are expected to achieve initial deployment by the end of fiscal year 2001; and another five states are in various stages of completing deployment. In addition, 20 states are currently participating in a series of workshops designed to provide them with information on how to implement and deploy the CVISN program in their states. The motor carrier administration plans to have at least 16 of these 20 states reach the initial deployment stage by 2003.

Conclusions

Although the Secretary's 10-year goal to reduce large truck-related deaths by over 2,600 per year is admirable, it will likely not be achieved at the pace that DOT has moved in the past. Achieving the Secretary's goal will require more than 20 times as much progress in reducing these fatalities as was made in the previous decade. DOT has begun to take some preliminary steps toward achieving the Secretary's goal. The Department has, among other things, increased the number of compliance reviews of motor carriers, taken a harder line on enforcement, undertaken efforts to improve the data on which it makes decisions, and has moved quickly to put a new organization in place to carry out the requirements of the 1999 Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act. However, other essential steps, such as developing a comprehensive, prioritized strategy to improve truck safety and filling leadership positions, have not yet occurred. Finally, to achieve real and lasting progress, it will be important for DOT to demonstrate to the Congress and to the public that it can follow through on its efforts over the long term to achieve significant measurable improvements in motor carrier safety.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes our testimony.⁷ We would be pleased to answer any questions that you or other Members of the Subcommittee may have.

Contact and Acknowledgments

For information regarding this testimony, please contact Phyllis F. Scheinberg at (202) 512-3650. Individuals making key contributions to this testimony include Leonard Ellis, James Ratzenberger, and Charles E. Wilson, Jr.

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⁷The information in this testimony is based on documents provided by DOT's Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration and discussions with agency officials. We discussed the contents of this statement with DOT and they indicated that it is an accurate portrayal of DOT's actions to improve motor carrier safety. The officials offered some perspectives on our characterization of their planning activities, which we considered in preparing the statement. We performed our work from January 2000 through February 2000 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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