

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of October 13, 2014 – Is Being in Compliance Enough?

Nationally, crashes involving a large truck or bus killed 4,281 people in 2013. Unfortunately, this number has not changed in the past four years.

A few weeks ago, on Friday September 26, a tracker-trailer crossed a southern Oklahoma highway median and plowed into the side of a Texas college softball team's bus, killing four team members and injuring more than a dozen others.

Investigators said that the truck showed no signs of braking or maneuvering out of the way before it slammed into the team's bus.

National Transportation Safety Board investigators said that the truck drove through the median for 820 feet on a shallow angle before colliding with the bus. It did not brake or appear to take any action to avoid the crash. They found no apparent problems with the truck's brakes. The truck driver (also injured in the incident and was later on released from the hospital) told investigators he was distracted by something inside the truck's main cabin, but investigators declined to release more information.

Earlier this year in June, comedian Tracy Morgan was injured while fellow-friend/comedian, James McNair, was killed on a New Jersey Freeway when a Wal-Mart tracker-trailer crashed into their vehicle. While the driver of the truck was reportedly awake for 24 hours prior to the crash, the National Transportation Safety Board stated that he was within his hours-of-service limits, both in on-duty time and in driving time. However, the driver had to commute in his personal vehicle 700 miles to the Wal-Mart terminal in Delaware where he worked. Therefore, from a strict interpretation of DOT regulations, his commute is not calculated as on-duty. Nevertheless, the trucker was feeling tremendous fatigue as a result of his extended time behind the wheel.

Federal regulations limit truckers to 11 hours of driving during a 14-hour work day, with no more than 70 hours a week on the road without extra breaks. However, regulations state that drivers who are too sleepy to drive safely must pull over.

Regardless of whether these two cases result in investigations that determine DOT regulations were violated or not, both resulted in tragedies that could have been prevented.

In his book, "Why Planes Crash," David Soucie tells the tale of when he was the director of maintenance for a helicopter company and the pilots were asking that "wire-strike" kits to be installed on all their units. Wire-Strike Kits are like giant scissors that are positioned in the front of a helicopter to cut through electrical and communication cables before they can snare the rotor or body of the helicopter, causing it to crash to the ground. David tried to explain to the crews that buying these items was not economically justified. Such equipment was not typically included in their costs and was not even considered as optional equipment during the initial purchase (at least, not in 1985 when this story takes place). Because, their company never had a



TerranearPMC Safety Share

wire strike or even a close call, the risk of such an event occurring was considered to be too minimal to justify such expenditure. As a final argument for not purchasing the wire-strike kits, it was brought up that such devices are not required by the Federal Aviation Administration. The story continues two months later on Christmas Eve when one of the company pilots was killed due to the very scenario that David said was a low risk.

When performing a job task such as driving a big rig or operating a helicopter, as well as working on a drilling project, we are told that safety and health must always be a priority. But how does one determine what is considered safe or, at least an acceptable risk? After all, there is always some level of risk that will remain when performing a work task. So what is considered acceptable? We understand that when we work from an elevated surface, there is a risk of falling. So we develop controls to reduce that risk. Maybe it is using a ladder correctly (ascending and descending using three-points of contacts, not standing on the highest rung), while inspecting the ladder for any damage (and removing from service if damage is noted – a missing foot or rung or degraded section) and verifying it is the right type of ladder (not using a metal ladder when working with or around electricity). Many times we can use OSHA regulations to help us develop proper controls; but we need to understand that following regulations or procedures blindly will not guarantee our health and safety. We need to be cognizant of what we are doing 100% of the time, including what is happening outside of our immediate work area that might influence what we are doing. For instance, we may be working with flammables and therefore we ensure no open flames and combustible materials are in our work area: but what about the crew that is performing hot work next to us?

In the case of the aforementioned tragedy involving the women's collegiate softball team, the investigation shows that according to federal data, the company that owns and operates the tracker-trailer has been assessed with a safety record as being good in recent years. Records with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) indicate that the company had not been involved in a fatal accident in at least the past two years through Aug. 22. The company, which has 327 trucks registered and 436 drivers, had not faced federal safety-related penalties in at least six years. The company's out-of-service rate for safety violations — those that would lead a driver to be pulled off the road — was 7.5 percent. That is below the national average of 20.7 percent.

Question: do these statistics really provide a true sense of assurance that this company operates its trucks safely? These numbers only tell us that they operated to within regulatory requirements and their safety numbers are better than other commercial carriers.

When we perform our work, attention to details is very important. If we recognize that something is wrong or we cannot perform our work as instructed, then we need to stop work and examine how we need to revise our work process and have the appropriate approvals and authorization to proceed.

You must not only aim right, but draw the bow with all your might.

Henry David Thoreau

