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IN BRIEF

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Truck Safety

INTRODUCTION

During the past five years, the issue of truck safety has received a great deal of attention from the public and all levels of government. This is especially true in light of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the rapid escalation of truck traffic carrying freight throughout North America. This has given rise to increased competition, more and bigger trucks on the road, and a general perception that safety may be compromised in order to compete more effectively (i.e., if something has to be sacrificed for the “bottom line,” then perhaps safety is diminished).

Experts and stakeholders in this field believe that this is a simplistic approach to the problem. Truck transportation safety is a multi-faceted issue. If Canada is to have a safer road transport system, the country must address a number of factors, including:

- highway renewal;
- trucking regulations (hours of work, load limits, etc.);
- driver error;
- substance use; and
- uniform rules of operation.

SAFETY ISSUES

A. Highway Renewal and Repair

The 1997 Report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Transport, entitled *A National Highway Renewal Strategy*, stressed that a safe and competitive national highway system is essential to the promotion of trade and tourism. It also emphasized that Canada’s national highway system is in urgent need of extensive reconstruction expansion and repair. The Coalition to Renew Canada’s Infrastructure (CRCI, a broad-based,

coalition from various sectors of the economy) has called for the rehabilitation of the country’s national highway system in order to increase safety and promote Canada’s economic competitiveness. The Trans-Canada Highway was built over 30 years ago and now is in need of critical upgrading and expansion to keep pace with the increased traffic volumes. If this work is not done, safety and competitiveness will be compromised.

B. Trucking Regulations

There has been much discussion over the past few years concerning both the content and enforcement of trucking regulations. Criticisms have been levelled at regulations covering hours of work, load limits for trucks, and substance use (e.g., alcohol/drug use by drivers). Despite the lack of definitive information on the cause of truck crashes, these factors all contribute to the “causal profile” of trucking accidents. The debate over how long truckers can drive without rest (the current standard is 13 hours) has been an ongoing subject of debate among federal/provincial transport authorities for a number of years; to date, there is no resolution. Several studies have concluded that driver fatigue is a significant contributing factor in truck accidents. However, there is some disagreement as to what causes the fatigue – the time of day a driver works, hours of rest in a weekly driving cycle, etc. More study is required in this area.

Load limits are also a controversial issue. With expanding truck operations throughout North America, some jurisdictions (e.g., provinces/states) have pushed for higher-capacity trucks and the loads they can carry. This has raised the concern that if load limits are increased, then the accidents will be more severe.

C. Driver Error

As noted above, a number of factors are involved in trucking accidents. This being said, some U.S. studies have shown that driver error (among both car and truck drivers) is the greatest single factor in trucking accidents. In testimony (23 February 1999) before the Subcommittee on Transportation and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations (House of Representatives), the United States General Accounting Office (GAO) stated that:

Although no definitive information on the crashes involving large trucks exists, several factors contribute to these crashes. These contributing factors include errors on the part of car and truck drivers; truck driver fatigue; and vehicle defects. Of these factors, errors on the part of car drivers are cited most frequently as contributing to crashes involving large trucks. Specifically, errors by car drivers were reported in 80 percent of the crashes, while truck driver errors were reported in 28 percent of the crashes.

Obviously, if driver error is a critical factor in truck accidents, then improving safety will require placing more emphasis on both truck and automobile driver education and training.

D. Substance Use

The use of drugs and alcohol in all transportation modes has been the subject of much debate over the past few years. Some stakeholders have called for random drug and alcohol testing of truckers in Canada, while others have stated that this is not a problem and random testing is not required. To date, the federal government has not introduced legislation calling for such action, as it does not believe there is a sufficient problem in Canada to warrant it.

In the Canadian trucking industry, companies tend to recognize the negative impact of substance use on transportation safety. Many companies have instituted their own programs, including education and employee assistance programs, to deal with substance use.

The U.S. has a program of mandatory random drug and alcohol testing for the trucking industry, and it applies to Canadian truckers crossing into the United

States. Those in favour of random testing make the point that if Canadian truckers are subject to this procedure when they enter the U.S., then they should be amenable to this process in Canada. On the other side of the issue, some people say they are concerned about ensuring privacy protection for employees as well as the accuracy of the testing process.

Currently, both the trucking industry and the government are looking at this situation with a view to doing "what is best suited" for enhancing the overall safety of the industry.

E. Uniform Rules of Operation

During the past ten years, the federal and provincial governments have been attempting to come to an agreement on a National Safety Code with uniform trucking regulations across the country. Such stakeholders as the Canadian Trucking Alliance believe that the issues related to improving truck safety – driver fatigue, load limits, hours of work, driver error, unsafe roads, etc. – can best be dealt with through the adoption of a set of uniform rules for the trucking industry that apply equally across Canada.

Proponents of this approach believe that the adoption of a National Safety Code, with consistent national standards, would result in everyone being on a level playing field. Uniformity is the key element of the Code and is important for a consistent approach to safety enforcement across the country as well as compliance from the trucking industry.

This being said, because highways are basically a provincial responsibility, successfully adopting a National Safety Code will require the cooperation of the provincial and federal governments.

PARLIAMENTARY ACTION

Since 1999, the Sub-Committee on Transportation Safety (of the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications) has been examining the issue of road and truck safety. It is looking at such issues as hours of work, driver fatigue, substance use, driver training and a national Safety Code. The Sub-Committee is expected to report by June of 2001.