

Transportation Safety, in Perspective

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The writer of this page is frequently chided by friends about train wrecks. Not once do I recall any of them mentioning truck wrecks. Aviation, maybe; pipeline never. Let's face it, transportation is not, and never will be, 100% risk free. Great strides have been made in safety improvements in all modes, but there are still too many incidents causing loss of life and serious injury. The absolute worst is carnage on the highways.

Commercial aviation has made amazing strides in safety, so much so that the experts are now worrying about "automation addiction", i. e., air crews momentarily forgetting how to manually respond when confronted with usual situations that unexpectedly and suddenly present themselves. The NTSB is apparently on the verge of finding that to have part of the problem -- along with more basic human error -- in the Asiana Airlines' Boeing 777 crash at SFO back in July. Three dead, 180 injured.

Despite AAR statistics that reflect a very significant reduction in train accidents and resulting deaths over the past three decades, there is no denying that we've had too many headliner train wrecks this year, including the terrible July oil train disaster in Quebec, which took the lives of 47 innocent victims. On the first of December, it was the Metro North Commuter train accident in New York, which claimed four lives and injured about 60. In between, before and after, rail freight accidents continue to occur, including the dramatic oil train accident in Alabama in early November (fortunately, no human casualties), a little-noticed CSX freight train derailment in northern Ohio that caused the evacuation of 600 near-by residents, and a freight train derailment in New Mexico that reportedly killed three on-board rail operating employees. These last two freight accidents shared the same newspaper pages with Metro North, but only as side-bar items.

It is gratifying to note the improvement in the safety record of big trucks, especially those operated by responsible businesses, whether for-hire commercial carriers or private commercial operators. A recent WSJ article (11/14/13) reported that "fatalities in large truck crashes declined 26% in the decade ending 2011". Yet there were still 3,757 such deaths in 2011, according to FMCSA statistics. Think about it; 3,757 deaths each year associated with trucking; more than in the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks.

Locally, we read almost daily of big truck accidents that often cause spectacular traffic tie-ups, property damage, personal injuries, and all-too-often result in loss of life. Just a short way down the road, on a recent afternoon, an out-of-state commercial rig was involved in an accident that killed a local woman. The trucker is charged with reckless driving, not having a valid operator's license, having a logbook violation, operating a commercial vehicle while disqualified, and operating a commercial vehicle with alcohol inside the vehicle. Subsequently, it was determined by authorities that the truck driver is wanted in his home state on numerous other charges. This

may be an extreme case, but others like him are probably out there. Let's just hope we don't meet them. We must do better in transportation safety, across the entire spectrum.
