

Inside: Manufacturer Profile — Jerr-Dan Corporation

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YOUR TOWING AND RECOVERY BUYER'S GUIDE

PLUS:

Driver Shortage page 35

FACE Program page 88

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Towing Company Owner's Death Spurs Safety Recommendations



Tow truck that was struck by a box truck. The towing company owner at the controls was killed.

As many of you are aware, towing is one of the most dangerous jobs out there. A review of the 2010 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration safety data reveals that emergency responders, which includes tow truck drivers, have an occupational fatality death rate that is more than twice the national average for all industries. It's all too familiar that we hear of tow truck drivers being seriously injured or killed on the roadside when just trying to do their jobs. Many times, these incidents can be prevented.

The Kentucky Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program strives to bring awareness to these types of hazards and to help prevent them in the future by collaborating with professionals in the field to help make safety recommendations. In acknowledgment of cases that have happened right here in the Bluegrass state, they have developed a tow truck driver safety awareness toolkit. The first part of the toolkit is a video that documents a particular incident that happened in Kentucky and what recommendations for prevention can be taken from that incident.

The second part of the toolkit is a written report that outlines the same case and recommendations in further detail. Please feel free to use this toolkit in your safety meetings, or to share with your peers.

— Angela Roper, Training Specialist
Nationwide Safety Consulting

PHOTOS: KENTUCKY FACE

Each day, between 12 to 13 U.S. workers die as a result of a traumatic injury on the job. Investigations conducted through the Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) Program allow the identification of factors that contribute to these fatal injuries. This information is used to develop comprehensive recommendations for preventing similar deaths (www.cdc.gov/niosh/face/).

The purpose of FACE is to aid in the research and prevention of occupational fatalities by evaluating events leading to, during and after a work related fatality. Recommendations are made to help employers and employees have a safer work environment.

For more information about FACE and the Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center, visit their website: www.kiprc.uky.edu 8.

Editor's Note: The content of this report has been edited for space requirements.

Background

The towing company involved in this incident provided roadside assistance and towing services. The company went out of business after this incident occurred.

The box truck involved in this incident was owned and operated by one man, the 24-year-old driver in the incident.

Investigation

On a summer day, a towing company was contacted to retrieve a sport utility vehicle whose owner was traveling from Kentucky to South Carolina, when the SUV became disabled. The SUV was approximately 225 miles away from the towing company's yard.

To retrieve the vehicle, the owner of the towing company, 49, and his two sons, ages 2 and 18, settled into one of the company's three tow trucks and began the 225-mile route that would take approximately 3 1/2 hours. The tow truck was a 2000 model equipped with a rollback trailer, and had a gross vehicle weight of 17,500 lbs.

Upon arriving at their destination, the SUV was loaded onto the rollback using three anchoring points. The tow truck



A worn securement site on the tow truck.



Worn securement site with chain on the tow truck.



The box truck that struck the tow truck.



operator engaged the vehicle warning lights and he and his two sons headed north toward home.

After traveling approximately 1 1/2 hours, the tow truck operator thought the load felt different. It was just before 4 a.m. and the father pulled the tow truck over to the right shoulder of the interstate next to a guardrail. He exited the cab and proceeded to the back of the driver's side of the trailer, where the winch controls were located, and began to tighten the cable. It was dark, the pavement was dry, and there was no precipitation. The tow truck vehicle warning lights were engaged and functioning but there were no hazard signs or flags on the roadway adjacent to the rollback.

Meanwhile, a box truck driver (owner-operator) was traveling to an auction approximately 6 1/2 hours away from his origin. The vehicle was a 2008 white, single cab truck with a gross vehicle weight of 12,500 lbs. The cargo space was empty. Approximately one hour into the journey, around 3 a.m., the driver was pulled over by a state trooper and issued a citation for speeding.

About one hour later, the box truck approached the mile marker where the tow truck driver was snugging up the winch on his load. As the box truck driver approached the parked tow truck he veered right, crossing the solid white line onto the shoulder. The front right side of the box truck struck the rollback section of the parked towing vehicle where the tow truck operator was standing and where the winch controls were located.

The force of the impact against the tow truck sent the box truck careening back onto the interstate in a northward trajectory before flipping onto its side and skidding to a halt some 38 yards away from the tow vehicle. Inside the damaged box truck, the driver remained conscious. The doors in the cab were lodged shut; the driver traversed the back of the cab and the empty cargo space to exit in the rear of the vehicle.

The impact killed the tow truck operator instantly; both tow truck passengers were physically unharmed. Moments after impact, the 18-year-old passenger called 911.

When responders arrived at the scene, they contacted the county coroner who arrived and declared

See Face Investigation on Page 90

Face Investigation From Page 89

the tow truck driver dead at the scene. The box truck driver registered a .115 BAC and was charged with homicide in the death of the tow truck operator.

Cause of Death

The cause of death was due to massive head and chest injuries resulting from being struck by a motor vehicle.

Recommendations and Discussions

Editor's Note: Although the tow truck operator was killed as a result of the box truck driver's negligence, the following FACE recommendations are made to help prevent such incidents in the future.

Recommendation No. 1: Four points of securement should be used when transporting a load.

Four points of securement should be used when transporting a motor vehicle. The truck only had three points of securement. The four points are located on each corner of the tow truck bed and should be properly fastened to the tires on all four corners of the vehicle. Using less than four points of securement may cause the load to shift back and forth and feel unstable. Additionally, not using all four securement sites can put added stress on the remaining ones, causing them to become stretched.

Recommendation No. 2: Towing operators should receive refresher safety and operational training annually.

Many regulations are in existence regarding safety procedures for the tow truck industry, however there are currently no requirements for training before receiving a tow truck operator's license. It is unknown how much training the tow truck operator had prior to the time of the incident. Completing refresher safety and operational training every year could prevent lives from being lost due to workers being unaware of safety regulations.

Recommendation No. 3: The maximum carrying capacity of a tow truck should not be exceeded.

The securement sites on the tow truck were stretched beyond their original shape, suggesting the truck had carried loads beyond its maximum capacity. The excess weight of a load can cause a securement site to become warped and misshapen. This could have caused the load to shift back and forth while on the bed of the tow truck, causing it to feel unstable.

Recommendation No. 4: Portable warning devices should be used when outside of the truck to alert approaching motorists.

Even though it is not required, it is strongly recommended that safety warning devices are deployed anytime that someone is working outside of the tow truck on the side of a road or highway. The device should be displayed throughout the entire time the truck or load is being attended to. Devices with flashers or reflective stripes should be used at nighttime so that drivers can clearly see them. A simple device like this may have prevented the tragedy involved in this incident.



Recommendation No. 5: Appropriate high-visibility vests should be worn by persons working along highways and streets.

The U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD) states that all workers exposed to the risks of moving roadway traffic or construction equipment should wear high-visibility safety apparel. An ANSI Class II vest is required, however it is strongly recommended that an ANSI Class III vest be used whenever possible. A Class III vest has more coverage and offers the greatest level of visibility.

Recommendation No. 6: There should be increased public awareness of the "Move Over Law" in Kentucky.

Kentucky's Move Over Law was enacted in July 2000 and revised in June 2003. The Kentucky Transportation Cabinet installed approximately 100 "Move Over or Slow Down" signs throughout the state in 2005. It is recommended that the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet continue to promote awareness of the law through public service announcements and billboards.

Recommendation No. 7: A proper pre-trip and post-trip inspection should be performed at the beginning and closing of each day.

A Pre-Trip and Post-Trip inspection should always be thoroughly performed to ensure that there are no issues with any of the components of the truck. Doing this routine inspection will help prevent instances in which the driver would have to pull over to the side of the road for mechanical issues. The dual winch controls should be thoroughly checked as a part of this inspection so that they are both in good working condition. This will make it less likely that the driver should have to use the control that is closest to approaching traffic in the event that they are on the roadside.

Recommendation No. 8: Whenever possible, the tow truck driver should pull over at a "safe" location that allows the truck to be out of the way of approaching traffic.

Pulling over on the side of a busy road or highway should only be done as a last resort. Ideally, a tow truck driver should pull his unit off to a rest area, turnout, or even to the nearest exit where they can establish a work area with a safer distance from approaching traffic. Pulling over to a safe location before exiting the cab of the truck would likely have prevented this tragedy.