

THE FED PAGE



The NTSB concluded that this 2009 plane crash outside Buffalo was the result of pilot error and that the pilots were probably fatigued.

A lag for fatigue-related safety rules

Efforts to ensure pilots, drivers get enough rest often languish

BY TESSA MUGGERIDGE AND CHARLIE LITTON
News21

Accidents happen in a matter of seconds.

An airplane pilot takes a moment too long to react in an emergency. A trucker who has been on the road all day wanders across the median. A train engineer is lulled to sleep by the monotony of the job and misses a signal.

Fatigue can't be measured like the level of alcohol in a person's system, but it is frequently cited by investigators as a factor in accidents in the air, on the water and on railroads and highways.

Over the past four decades, more than 320 fatigue-related incidents have taken nearly 750 lives in airplane crashes alone, according to an analysis by News21, a national university student reporting project, and the Washington-based Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization.

Scientists, lawmakers, industry executives, safety advocates and operators themselves all say fatigue is an issue that needs more attention, but the regulatory process sometimes allows proposals to languish for decades.

The National Transportation Safety Board, created in 1967 to help safeguard U.S. travelers, has issued 138 fatigue-related safety recommendations since its inception. Only 68 have been implemented, according to the analysis.

Some of the proposals are still pending decades after they were issued. In other cases, the NTSB has simply given up.

"We need to quit talking about fatigue and we need to start trying to do something about it," said NTSB board member Robert L. Sumwalt, a former commercial pilot.

Transportation Department Deputy Secretary John Porcari, who heads the department's new Safety Council, said the Obama administration considers fatigue "an urgent safety priority." Its efforts include establishing new rules and expanding education efforts for truckers and proposing new rules for pilots.

"We are going to continue doing all that we can to make sure roads, skies and rails are as safe as possible for travelers," he said.

A problem in the air

Pilots, flight crews and air traffic controllers who report safety problems through an anonymous NASA database frequently mention fatigue as a problem.

Sumwalt said one in five reports submitted to the database is fatigue-related. "I've been there where you literally do a little tap dance with your feet and then nod off," said Roger Nielsen, a retired US Airways captain. "What you try to do is you read each other, you constantly check on how each other is doing, and then if one person says, 'I'm totally bugged' ... it's not uncommon to let somebody take a nap."

Since 1972, the safety board has issued 37 recommendations that address fatigue. Only 12 have been implemented.

The crash of Continental Connection Flight 3407 outside Buffalo in February 2009 heightened concerns about pilot fatigue. Four crew members, 45 passengers and one person on the ground were killed when the plane crashed into a house.

The NTSB found that the accident was the result of pilot error and that the pilots were probably fatigued. The captain had been awake at least 15 hours, and the first officer had gotten at most 8 1/2 hours of sleep in the preceding 34, according to the report.

Seventeen months after the crash, the FAA released a proposal to reduce flight and duty time requirements for pilots, similar to measures introduced in 1972 and 1995 that failed after encountering industry opposition.

"We pulled together a cross section of the aviation community to help craft changes to pilot fatigue rules that haven't been updated since the mid-1980s," FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt said.

According to FAA documents, the rules would require pilots to rest for nine hours rather than eight before reporting for duty. Pilots also would be limited to 13 hours of work between rest periods and get more consecutive time off during the workweek. They would be able to decline assignments without penalty if they felt too fatigued to fly. And airlines would be encouraged to establish individual fatigue risk management systems.

NTSB spokeswoman Bridget Serchak said the agency will be reviewing the proposed flight-duty rules and that the board "is pleased that the effort has gotten this far along."

On the roads and rails

In 1993, the NTSB commissioned a study expecting to learn about the role of drug and alcohol use in trucking accidents. Investigators made an unexpected discovery: Fatigue turned out to be the bigger problem.

The study found 3,311 heavy-truck accidents killed 3,783 people that year, and between 30 and 40 percent of those accidents were fatigue-related.

"Drivers are paid by the mile — that's an incredible incentive to drive as far and fast as you can," said Jacqueline S. Gillan, vice president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, a coalition of insurance companies and consumer, health and safety groups.

The NTSB has issued 24 recommendations regarding fatigue on the nation's roads. Seventeen have been followed.

For the nation's railways, 25 of 39 fatigue-related recommendations have been implemented. But even when action is taken it often comes too late.

A 1991 recommendation to

This project

This article is one of several from a project detailing troubles with the U.S. transportation system. It was reported by journalism students in the Carnegie-Knight News21 program in collaboration with the Washington-based Center for Public Integrity, a nonprofit investigative journalism organization.

The News21 program is based at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. Leonard Downie Jr., the former executive editor of The Washington Post, is now the Weill Family professor of journalism at the Cronkite School.

Eleven student journalists traveled to nine states, the District, Mexico and Canada; talked to hundreds of officials, industry leaders and safety experts; and analyzed thousands of pages of documents, reports, and accident and investigation data from the National Transportation Safety Board and regulatory agencies.

Complete coverage, with stories, graphics and videos, is available at washingtonpost.com.

equip train locomotives to devices to alert conductors to dangers might have helped prevent a fatal accident six years later.

Shortly after 2 a.m. outside Delta, Kan., an engineer apparently nodded off at the controls as his train rolled through several signals and flashing lights. His train lurched through a switch that connects two sets of rails and into the side of an oncoming train.

In their report, NTSB investigators said they thought the conductor was too sleepy, startled or disoriented after he awoke to realize he needed to apply the brakes. They suggested a mechanical system that could sense an engineer's lack of movement and rouse the engineer in enough time to avert a crash, but no such system has been implemented.

Former NTSB managing director Peter Goetz said that under rails' seniority system, veteran engineers get to select their schedules first and often pack more hours into the workday so they can have more days off.

"They're the guys with seniority, who are older, generally overweight, generally with health problems, generally with stuff going on in their lives," Goetz said. "It's exactly the wrong people you want on duty at that time."

Trouble at sea

In the maritime industry, the NTSB has issued 21 fatigue-related recommendations. Nearly half have not been followed.

One of these is a 1988 recommendation that called for the U.S. Coast Guard to establish watch and duty time limitations for crew members aboard ferries and other inspected passenger vessels.

Seven years after that recommendation, a cruise ship ran aground off the Alaskan coast after its pilot erred while trying to guide the ship over a well-known and charted rock just before 2 a.m. The pilot hadn't slept more than 5 1/2 hours the previous day.

When the vessel shuddered from hitting the rock, the pilot did not immediately realize the error. "Under normal conditions, such an experienced pilot should have immediately deduced that he had not safely passed Poundstone Rock when he felt the vessel shudder," the NTSB said.

The pilot, who was later diagnosed with severe sleep apnea, suffered from "chronic fatigue," according to the NTSB report.

When tired, people react more slowly, struggle with attention lapses and take more unnecessary risks. The problem is compounded by a culture "that places a lot of value on burning the midnight oil," said Jana Price, an NTSB fatigue transportation research analyst.

And public attitudes toward fatigue are about the same as attitudes toward drinking and driving 20 years ago, NTSB investigator Malcolm Brenner said.

"At one time, there was a sense that if you're under the influence of alcohol you can power your way through it, but that's no longer tolerated," he said.

Safety advocates hope that, in the near future, operating under the influence of fatigue will be just as unacceptable.

News21 reporters Ryan Phillips and Ariel Zirinick contributed to this report.

Ex-postal workers return for more pay

Audit: USPS executives, others boost salaries as private contractors

BY ED O'KEEFE

Who says you can't go back? Apparently you can at the U.S. Postal Service.

Dozens of former top executives and hundreds of former employees have returned to the service in recent years as private contractors, sometimes making double the salaries they made as full-time workers, according to one of three watchdog audits released last week.

The reports said the cash-strapped Postal Service is doing a poor job tracking its use of no-bid contracts, contributes more to worker health and life insurance benefits than federal agencies and should consider closing more of its regional offices to help address an expected \$230 billion, 10-year budget gap.

The Postal Service is set to report billions of dollars in losses this week because of declining mail volume. It is also awaiting permission from regulators to raise postage rates and is locked in negotiations with two of its largest unions.

The Postal Service has awarded more than 2,700 contracts to former employees since 1991 and awarded 17 no-bid deals to former executives between 2006 and 2009, according to one of the audits. Most of those executives earned six-figure sums, the report said. One unnamed executive received a \$260,000 no-bid deal in July 2009 to train his successor for two months after retiring.

"It appears unethical to hire back former executives at nearly twice their former pay to advise new executives who were placed in their position based on their expertise and years of Postal Service experience," the report said.

"There is also employee morale and public image issues management must consider when the Postal Service is closing post offices and seeking a reduced delivery schedule."

Beyond employment contracts, the Postal Service improperly classified the status of 5 percent, or \$910 million, of its \$18 billion annual contracting costs, according to the report.

"The Postal Service, like the federal sector and private industry, will use non-competitive purchases in those instances when a non-competitive purchase is the best contracting method to meet our business needs," Postal Service spokeswoman Joanne Veto said.

The mail agency is also reviewing its deals with former employees and has instituted new policies to guard against potential

conflicts of interest. Veto said. The federal government procures about 30 percent of its goods and services through contracts, and the Postal Service has stringent approval requirements for non-competitive purchases, she said.

A separate report said the Postal Service's contribution rate to the Federal Employees Health Benefits program is 79 percent for most postal workers, higher than the 72 percent contribution rate the federal government pays for civilian workers. Postal officials involved in labor negotiations hope to win concessions from unions to reduce the rate.

But postal auditors told the office of Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) on Friday that the Postal Service pays 100 percent of health benefits for senior executives, some administrative staffers and directors of its Office of Inspector General.

A bid report presented plans to save between \$289 million and \$894 million in the next decade by merging or closing dozens of administrative offices. Auditors recommended merging several offices into a central location, closing district offices with low work hours and mail volume, or moving regional offices into its Washington headquarters.

The Postal Service has trimmed \$10 billion in costs since 2008, and this year it stopped hiring and promoting administrative staff. Collins and Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.) plan to use the audits to urge an additional \$800 million in cuts in fiscal 2011.

Aides said the senators requested the reports after auditors in June detailed how former post-executive Robert F. Bernstock awarded millions of dollars in non-competitive employment contracts to former colleagues. Bernstock left the Postal Service in May before auditors issued their reports.

Collins called on Postmaster General John E. Potter to immediately consider the recommendations from the three reports.

These IG reports raise extremely troubling questions about the management abilities and core decisions of the Postal Service," Collins said, adding that the mail agency "is at a crossroads in its history. The survival of this institution, which is vital to our country, depends on its regaining its financial footing."

The Maine Republican opposes a Senate bill unveiled Thursday that would give the Postal Service more flexibility to cut Saturday mail deliveries and best contracting methods to meet our business needs. Postal Service spokeswoman Joanne Veto said. The mail agency is also reviewing its deals with former employees and has instituted new policies to guard against potential

ed.okeefe@washingtonpost.com

THE HOMESTEAD UNLIMITED

- GOLF
- FLY FISH
- KAYAK
- CANOE
- ARCHERY
- PAINTBALL
- SKREET
- SPORTING CLAYS
- MOUNTAIN BIKE
- TENNIS
- GORGE HIKE
- HORSEBACK RIDE
- BOWLING
- JEFFERSON POOLS

ACTIVITIES PACKAGE

Discover 3,000 acres of family fun at Virginia's historic luxury resort in the magnificent Allegheny Mountains.

Enjoy the ultimate outdoor playground with the ultimate activities package.

Unlimited Activities Package from Rooms from

\$285* **\$175****

866.847.0758 • thehomestead.com

Taxes and 15% daily resort charge are not included

Best rates available online



HOT SPINGLES, VIRGINIA

*Dining and drinks are extra and available per night for a party. Additional adults and children over 12 are not included. Based on availability. Services are subject to availability. Advance reservations are strongly recommended. Some activities may apply. Not valid for groups. Some dates feature higher rates. **Dining and drinks are extra and are not included. Valid through 9/30/10.

© 2010 THE HOMESTEAD 1866. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. THE HOMESTEAD 1866 IS A REGISTERED SERVICE MARK OF THE HOMESTEAD 1866 CORPORATION. ALL OTHER SERVICE MARKS AND TRADE NAMES ARE THE PROPERTY OF THEIR RESPECTIVE OWNERS.

DONATE YOUR CAR

- * 100% Tax Deductible
- * Free Pick-Up

Support Our Veterans



1-800-Help-Vets

www.HelpOurVeterans.org