

Fatality Investigation Report

OR 2003-33-1

Farm driver overturns truck in irrigation ditch and drowns

SUMMARY

On October 11, 2003, a 20-year-old Hispanic farm truck driver was killed when his truck full of potatoes overturned in an irrigation ditch at the edge of a farm field. The driver had been driving the potato truck for 2 weeks prior to the accident. The incident occurred about 9:30 p.m., 13 hours after the driver began work in the morning of his sixth full day in a row. Weather was windy and overcast. The 1970 truck had no seat belts. Traveling an estimated 15-25 mph on a hard-packed dirt road, the truck verged into the loose soil at the edge of the ditch, and continued off the road until the vehicle overturned and came to rest with the cab submerged in the water in the ditch. The water was 4-7 ft. deep. Another driver passing along the same road noticed the victim's truck overturned in the ditch and alerted the foreman. First responders called a dive team to the scene to remove the body. Cause of death was probably drowning. The medical examiner reported the victim's blood-alcohol level at 0.03 percent.



CAUSE OF DEATH: Drowning

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **While driving along an abrupt edge, keep your eyes on the road at all times. If distracted, even momentarily, stop the vehicle.**
- **Do not use alcohol during or immediately prior to work hours.**
- **Employers and employees should be alert to the hazards of fatigue due to extended work hours.**

INTRODUCTION

On October 11, 2003, a 20-year-old Hispanic farm truck driver was killed when his truck full of potatoes overturned in an irrigation ditch. OR-FACE was notified of the incident by a news report on October 14. This report is produced from information provided in the local sheriff's office, OR-OSHA, medical examiner, and newspaper reports.

The employer is a farm, primarily engaged in growing, harvesting, and packing potatoes. The farm employed 11 full-time employees, and up to 20 employees during peak season at harvest time. Farm laborers were mostly Hispanic, but included a few non-Hispanic truck drivers. The victim arrived in Oregon from Mexico 3 years prior to the incident. During the summer, he worked at manual labor in the farm fields moving irrigation pipes. He had been driving a potato truck for about 2 weeks when the incident occurred.

The victim had experience as a truck driver, and had displayed the ability to control the truck while traveling with the tractor through bumpy fields with a full load, and backing up the truck to a conveyor for unloading at the farm cellar. Drivers were reportedly warned to stay on hard-packed field roads. Drivers had heard of incidents with trucks leaving the roadway at other farms, and it was "common knowledge" that leaving the road surface was extremely dangerous. The employer did not maintain a formal safety committee to discuss and correct safety issues.

INVESTIGATION

The truck driver in this incident began work at 8:30 a.m. for a sixth full day of work in a row. After a morning break, a lunch break, and a long break at about 7 p.m., plus intervals between loads, the driver was given a final full load of potatoes at about 9:30 p.m. It was dark, and weather was windy and overcast. The driver drove from the field toward a cellar, where the potatoes were to be unloaded. The truck was a 1970 International 2-ton truck, without seat belts.

The truck was traveling an estimated 15-25 mph on a hard-packed dirt road, 11-14 feet wide, alongside an irrigation drainage ditch that divided the private road and fields from a public roadway. The dirt road was flat, straight, and unobstructed. The left wheels of the truck moved off the road into the loose soil at the edge of the ditch, and continued off-track until the vehicle overturned and came to rest upside down, with the cab of the truck submerged in the water in the ditch. The ditch was reportedly up to 8 feet deep and the water 4-7 feet deep. The victim was about 4 feet below the surface.

Another driver passing along the same road in the opposite direction did not notice the truck in the ditch, but after loading in the field about ¼ mile away and returning by the same road, the coworker noticed tracks veering off the roadway and saw the victim's truck overturned in the ditch. The coworker stopped another driver coming out to the fields, and they looked on the banks of the ditch to see if anyone had escaped before contacting the foreman operating the harvesting tractor in the field. The foreman called for emergency response, and went to the scene, where he entered the water, opened the driver's door with help from a coworker, and

located the victim in the beam of a flashlight. The foreman concluded the victim was deceased and took no further action. First responders called a dive team to the scene to remove the body and confirm no one else was in the vehicle.

Also recovered from the cab of the truck were an empty beer 12-pack box, two empty beer cans, one full beer can, and two empty soda pop cans. The medical examiner reported the victim's blood alcohol concentration at 0.03 percent.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

Recommendation #1: While driving along an abrupt edge, keep your eyes on the road at all times. If distracted, even momentarily, stop.

While driving along a dangerous abrupt edge or soft shoulder, maintain full attention on the road. While an OR-OSHA investigator was onsite investigating this incident, another loaded potato truck traveling on the same road ran off the road into the irrigation ditch. Estimated speed of the truck was 10 mph. The driver in the second incident claimed he was momentarily distracted. The truck remained upright, because the loaded box of potatoes broke the welds on the frame as it overturned.

Recommendation #2: Do not use alcohol during or immediately prior to work hours.

The legal limit of blood alcohol concentration while driving in Oregon is 0.08 percent, but the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration defines a traffic accident as alcohol-related with a concentration as low as 0.01 percent. Alcohol poses a more serious risk for younger drivers, because they have comparatively little experience with alcohol (tolerance) or with driving.

Recommendation #3: Employers and employees should be alert to the hazards of fatigue due to extended work hours.

Drowsiness and other driver distractions are common factors in motor-vehicle crashes. Young males, aged 16-29, are at highest risk. For this age group, adequate sleep may not be a priority. Work at night, overtime work, and any alcohol increases the risk of drowsiness. Inexperience and unfamiliarity with the vehicle or its handling characteristics contribute to the hazard.

REFERENCES

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For More Information

The Center for Research on Occupational and Environmental Toxicology at Oregon Health & Science University performs Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (FACE) investigations through a cooperative agreement with the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Division of Safety Research (DSR). The goal of these evaluations is to prevent fatal work injuries in the future by studying the working environment, the worker, the task the worker was performing, the tools the worker was using, the energy exchange resulting in fatal injury, and the role of management in controlling how these factors interact.

Oregon Fatality Assessment and Control Evaluation (OR-FACE) Program

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