2007 accidents: another year of the truck driver

By Niels de Hoop

As our safety programs have successfully focused on injuries in the logging woods, it appears that we really need to turn some attention to truck driver safety. As in the past, the critical areas for safety awareness for log truck drivers are still mounting/dismounting, binding loads, walking around the truck, and highway safety.

Each year, logging companies that are members of the Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Louisiana Logging Council (LLC) and the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) send their accident reports to the LLC. I take those reports and analyze them as a group. The reports for 2007 just came in from the 280 partner companies. I have received no reports of fatalities, although I have already received a report of a log truck driver fatality in early 2008.

Ninety-two percent of the Strategic Partnership member companies reported that they had no accidents during 2007. Of the accidents that were reported, all involved log trucks or log truck drivers.

We might expect that highway accidents would be the most common type of accident for truck drivers, but most of our truck driver accidents have happened while the truck driver was outside the cab. This is still the case, although this year 43% of the accidents were highway type accidents on public roads.

Several of the accidents this year involved rollovers. The center of gravity for a loaded log truck is high. When making a turn or curve, a bump on the inside track or a dip in the outside track of a curve can cause that center of gravity to shift too far to one side. The result is a truck flipped on its side.

The quickest and most obvious way to prevent rollovers is to slow down. Even the recommended speeds on highway signs in curves may be too fast for a loaded log truck. Pushing the speed limit eliminates that extra buffer of safety in case something unexpected happens.

Most of the highway accidents involved excessive speed or inattentive driving. Loggers are always pushed for production, so we naturally hurry as much as possible or try to do more than one thing at a time. A good example is cell phones, which save us a lot of time, but can be dangerous to use while driving or operating machinery.

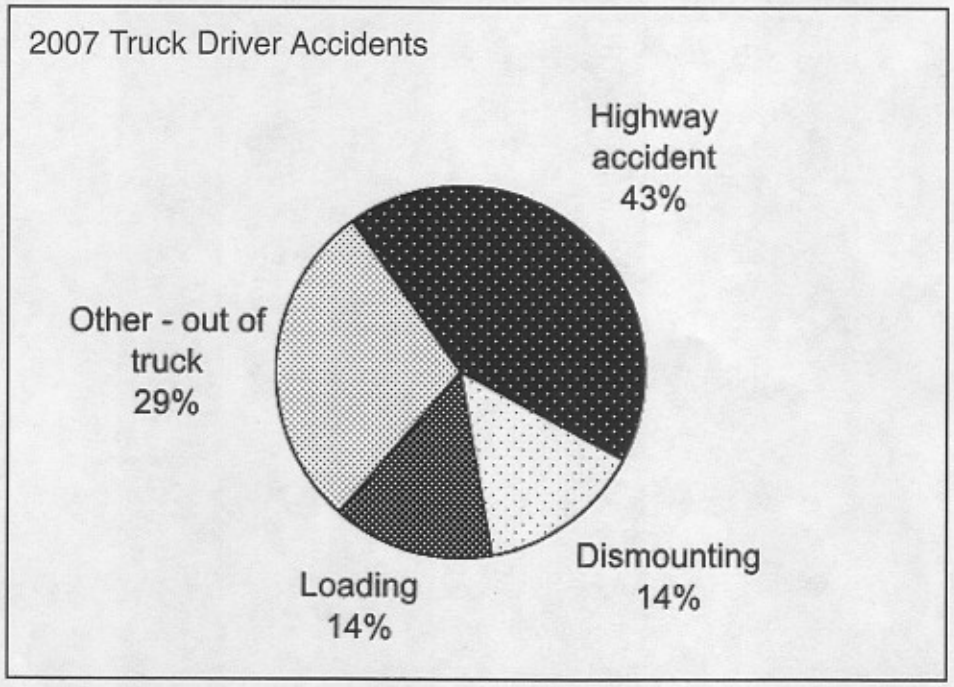
Truck drivers still need to be vigilant when mounting or dismounting the truck, binding loads, walking around the truck (rough terrain) and during loading and trimming.

Not only should the three-point mounting and dismounting procedure be used to prevent slips and falls, but wood chips or dust can easily blow into the eye.

Consider whether eye protection is warranted. Perhaps a few seconds hesitation after stopping and before opening the door will give chips and debris time to settle. Each operation should have a policy about where the driver can wait while the truck is being loaded. This policy should be strictly adhered to and enforced. Each job site should have a clear work plan that everyone knows and abides by.

Some health problems can be aggravated by the strains involved in binding or trimming loads or by the shaking and vibration of a truck. I have known cases where hernias, hemorrhoids, being overweight and back problems started out as minor irritations that became problems that affected the drivers' ability to work. Good diet, exercise and encouraging doctor's checkups should be considered as possible elements in a safety program.

If a log load extends beyond the back axles, be sure to mark the back of the load so that it is highly visible. I know of two fatalities already that happened this year. One involved a rollover in which the log truck driver was killed. The other involved a vehicle running into the back of a log truck; the passenger in that vehicle was killed. I believe we should support programs that help the general public become better drivers.

Truck driver safety needs to be an important component of a logging safety program. Defensive driving, thorough driver training, safe equipment, up-to-date site workplans, good communication, frequent safety meetings and public awareness are elements we should consider in our safety programs.

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