NTSB Holds Public Hearing on Texas Motorcoach Accident

The National Transportation Safety Board conducted a public hearing on October 6-7 as part of its ongoing investigation into the cause of a fatal motorcoach accident that occurred early this year near Victoria, Texas.

The accident occurred on January 2, 2008 on U.S. Route 59 near Victoria, Texas when the northbound 47-passenger motorcoach overturned and struck a guardrail. One passenger was fatally injured, and 46 passengers and the driver sustained injuries ranging from minor to serious. The motorcoach had entered the country from Mexico and was being operated by a Houston charter bus company. The bus was registered in Texas and was displaying Texas vehicle tags.

The hearing, which was chaired by Member Debbie Hersman, focused on the safety aspects of the inappropriate U.S. entry, registration, and operation of passenger carrying commercial vehicles that do not comply with the U.S. Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS).

Questioning the witnesses was conducted by the Board of Inquiry, a technical panel composed of the NTSB investigative staff, and representatives from the following parties: Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, National Highway Traffic Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation Inspector General, United States Customs and Border Protection, Volvo/Prevost Car, Inc., American Bus Association, United Motorcoach Association, and IRP, Inc.

Witnesses at the hearing included representatives from the following organizations: Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, State of California Department of Motor Vehicles, State of Texas Department of Transportation, State of Texas Department of Public Safety, U.S. Department of Transportation Inspector General, IRP, Inc., 5 Star Specialty Programs (division of Crump Insurance Services), and United States Customs and Border Protection.

Information from the hearing will be used by the Safety Board to prepare a final report on the accident, including safety recommendations aimed at preventing similar accidents in the future.

NTSB Praises Passage of Rail Safety Act

NTSB Acting Chairman Mark V. Rosenker praised Congress and President George W. Bush for passage of the Railroad Safety Improvement Act of 2008 (HR 2095), saying that it will help bring about safety improvements long sought by the Safety Board.

“For 30 years, the NTSB has been calling for development and installation of an automatic system that would protect passengers, crew members and communities from the dangers of collisions or over-speed derailments,” Rosenker said. “Such a system, called Positive Train Control (PTC), will now be mandated for Class 1 railroads and passenger railroads for installation by the end of 2015. An implementation plan is due in 18 months. We continue to see accidents every year - such as last month’s commuter rail collision near Los Angeles - that could be prevented with such a system.

“The new law also addresses many train crew fatigue issues that the Safety Board has examined over many years, including hours of service, so-called ‘limbo time’ and work schedules.” Railroads would have to limit shifts to 12 hours and give workers at least 10 consecutive hours off in a 24-hour period.

Another element of the law addresses the need for train crews to have emergency escape breathing apparatus in locomotives when freight trains are carrying hazardous materials that could pose a threat of inhalation damage, and strengthens track inspection requirements.

In addition, the new law has designated the NTSB as the primary agency for coordination of federal resources to assist families of passengers involved in rail passenger accidents. The provisions of this legislation mirror those responsibilities assumed by the Board in 1996 following the passage of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act.
NTSB Presents at Distracted Driving Symposium

NTSB Acting Chairman Mark V. Rosenker and Kevin Quinlan (SRA) both delivered remarks before the International Symposium on Distracted Driving, in Arlington, VA on October 16.

In his speech, the Acting Chairman emphasized the importance of recognizing the many hazards that are caused by driver distractions and the need to prevent these types of crashes. He also noted that many of the Safety Board’s recommendations stem from crashes involving distracted driving by commercial and school bus drivers carrying passengers and by teen drivers distracted by interactive wireless communications devices (cell phones) and by teen passengers. The Safety Board has investigated six crashes in which distractions played a major role in the cause of the crash. Three of those crashes involved school bus drivers, one a charter bus driver with student passengers, and two involved young and inexperienced drivers.

While the focus of the symposium was on highway safety, Rosenker also took the opportunity to highlight distraction problems in other modes of transportation, most notably in the recent commuter rail collision in California that killed 25 people; the engineer was engaged in text messaging almost up to the moment of the accident. However, Rosenker was quick to note that the vast majority of transportation fatalities occur on the nation’s highways.

Kevin Quinlan spoke on the Board’s Most Wanted Safety Recommendations to the States related to distracted driving, including teen passenger and wireless communications device restrictions and cellular phone use restrictions by school bus drivers and CDL holders that carry passengers. He noted the competing priorities and difficulty that State legislatures have in adopting safety legislation, the time frames involved, and the roles of both legislators and advocates. He provided guidance on how to work with legislators derived from the Board’s extensive experience in promoting the Board’s recommendations in the States and in working with national, State, and local coalitions.

Acting Chairman Rosenker Addresses Aviation Safety Group

In the opening address to the 2008 Bombardier Safety Standdown in Kansas City, Missouri, Acting Chairman Mark V. Rosenker said that improving runway safety, crew resource management, and addressing human fatigue will enhance safety in business aviation. The Acting Chairman cited the NTSB’s review of accident trends and the potential for human error in emphasizing the importance of these safety areas. The Safety Standdown seminar is a partnership between the FAA, NTSB, NBAA, and Bombardier, and it is designed to initiate and sustain positive changes in behavior and cultural norms in the business aviation industry. Jeff Guzzetti (AS-2R) assisted in preparing the Acting Chairman’s remarks. Investigators from the NTSB Office of Aviation Safety were also present for the week long seminar, including Tim LeBaron (CEN), Josh Cawthra (WPR), and Dennis Diaz (ERA).

NTSB Participates in Air Medical Conference

Members Robert Sumwalt and Kitty Higgins, along with Jeff Guzzetti (AS-2R), Bob Dodd (RE-10), Heather Eilers-Bowser (M-RLS) and Stephanie Matonek (M-RLS), participated in the 2008 Air Medical Transport Conference (AMTC) held this week in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The 1-week conference, hosted by the Association of Air Medical Services (AAMS) involved thousands of professionals, and offered hundreds of educational sessions, and numerous forums that addressed all facets of air and ground emergency medical services (EMS). Several sessions addressed safety, and, in particular, the recent spate of fatal EMS helicopter accidents. Member Sumwalt gave an informative and stirring presentation to a packed conference room regarding the Safety Board’s previous and current actions to address EMS safety issues. He also announced that the Board will be conducting a Public Hearing to address these concerns in the near future.

Office of Marine Safety Conducts Training Class

On October 7 & 8, the Office of Marine Safety conducted a Marine Industry Overview training class. The purpose of the class was to provide an overview of the Safety Board and the Office of Marine Safety, to executives, supervisors, and other members of the marine community. Forty three students from a variety of marine sectors, including two cruise lines, the Coast Guard, several inland waterway operators, a marine pilot’s association, and port police attended. The class included segments on the history of the Safety Board, Office of Marine Safety investigative procedures, the role of the Board Member, legal aspects of marine investigations, safety recommendations, and the roles of the Offices of Research and Engineering, Public Affairs, and Transportation Disaster Assistance in marine accident investigations. Jack Spencer, Barry Strauch, Joe Kolly, Terry Williams, Mike Brown, and Erik Grososf taught various sessions of the class, and Joe Osterman introduced the class and also taught a session on the role of the Board Member in marine investigations. Bridget Serchak assisted by drafting several press releases and contacting industry personnel on the class. The class was well received, and several students expressed an interest taking the 5-day marine accident investigation training class in January.