

**TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL ERVIN, SR.
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SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. SENATE**

MAY 22, 2002

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My name is Sergeant Mike Ervin. I live right outside of Los Angeles. I am a police officer with the Pomona, California Police Department. I have been a police officer for 22 years.

Before becoming a police officer I was a professional truck driver. I drove tractor trailers – either 48 foot long single trailers or short double trailers – on the interstates in Southern California for five years and logged about half a million miles.

I realize that this hearing is about the proposal to transport and store nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain in Nevada. I have been asked to tell you what I know about truck driving and truck safety.

When I was 23, I became a police officer. I had always wanted to be one, and thought that I had better do it when I could. I am still licensed to drive trucks though. I can drive Class I or combination vehicles or a bus. I take a written test every four years or so, before my license expires. There is no requirement that I take a road test. I have never hauled hazardous materials, although if I wanted to drive a combination vehicle carrying hazardous materials, I could. All I would have to do is to take another written test. In California, that is all that is required for a truck driver to be licensed to drive a truck carrying hazardous materials – pass a written test and a have clean driving record.

As a truck driver and as a police officer, I have seen a lot of truck crashes. I have concluded that there are two elements to truck safety. The first is mechanical – the truck itself. It is important to understand that an 80,000-pound 18-wheeler is inherently dangerous. This fact is borne out by statistics: According to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 457,000 large trucks were involved in traffic crashes in 2000.

There are a number of factors that make trucks so dangerous. The first is the weight of a truck. Heavy tractor-trailers tend to have a high center of gravity because the extra weight is typically stacked vertically. The higher center of gravity increases the risk of dangerous rollovers. Heavy tractor-trailers are likely to accelerate more slowly and have difficulty maintaining speed on upgrades, increasing speed differentials with other traffic and increasing the risk of accidents.

If a truck is perfectly maintained it will be a lot less likely to be involved in a crash. Some trucking companies do an excellent job of maintaining their trucks. The trucks are checked thoroughly every night and needed repairs are made immediately. However, I have to operate in the real world. And there are other trucking companies that are not so scrupulous. They put off some repairs because they are expensive. In addition, sometimes with even the best-maintained trucks, mechanical things go wrong. The way I see it, the only way to have a perfectly maintained truck is if God turns all the wrenches.

What does this mean? It means that when brakes that need adjustment are pumped, that great big heavy truck barreling down the highway may need hundreds of more feet to stop. It means that steering those heavy trucks, which is always difficult, will be more so. It means that a sharp turn, made to avoid a too close motorist, will result in a rollover. I think of a tractor-trailer rig as a missile. The question is, is it under control or out of control?

These are all factors that this Committee should take into account when considering any proposal to transport nuclear waste on public highways.

The second element to truck safety is the human element. Again, there are many very good, experienced, responsible drivers who work for trucking companies which are very strict about limiting the hours that their drivers are on the road, and which insist that they get enough rest. Some of these companies do not put sleepers in their cabs because they do not want their drivers sleeping in their trucks. They give them hotel vouchers – they want them sleeping in beds and getting a good night's rest. But again, there are other trucking companies that are not so careful. And truck drivers often feel that they must keep moving in order to make enough money to support themselves. They cannot afford to stop by the side of the road to rest when they are tired. These tired truck drivers make the roads unsafe for all of us.

Long haul truck driving is extremely stressful and tiring. You have to monitor your speed, make sure you keep a safe distance from the car in front of you, and adjust for any wind or rain or bumps in the road, all with the knowledge that you are the heaviest vehicle out there. That is a huge obligation. You always have to think about what could go wrong and what you would do if it actually happened.

Besides truck drivers, there are other human elements that make the road dangerous. Trucks must share the roads with automobile drivers. Most auto drivers are not trained to deal with trucks that take up most of a lane. They are not as aware as we would like them to be of the "no-zone" area around a truck where they are hidden from a truck driver's view. There are automobile drivers who can be careless, and some that are just plain weird. I can remember a number of instances where I was driving along, tired, fighting the wind, when a car would pull along right beside me so that the driver could peer into my cab. He would stay with me, very close, peering. It was nerve wracking. The fact is, all truck drivers run into strange people on the road. Dealing with them is part of the job. But, it makes truck driving more dangerous, and if you throw in congested traffic

conditions, poor roads, inclement weather, it seems almost impossible for truck accidents not to occur.

I feel that truck driving is a profession. A driver must be licensed, and I personally felt a great responsibility to everyone on the road. I felt that while I was driving, everyone on the road with me was depending on me to do my job faithfully and carefully. If I drove past my skill level or beyond my truck's capacity, the result would be disaster.

I understand that the trucks in question would be typical 80,000-pound tractor-trailers, but that heavier trucks may be used, as well. Everything I have said here today about the mechanical and human elements of driving heavy trucks is even more important as trucks get heavier. The University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute found that there is a strong statistical link within the same truck configuration between higher weights and a greater risk of fatalities. As weights go from 65,000 to 80,000 pounds the risk of an accident involving a fatality goes up 50%. Just imagine the fatality rate at 120,000 pounds or more. In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, there are hundreds of thousands of truck crashes every year in this country. In the real world, there is no such thing as a perfect truck, a perfect road and perfect weather conditions. Even if there were, you will always have the human element. You can have the best-trained truck drivers, but they may be tired. And you can never predict how the truck and its driver will interact with the motorist.

I am happy to answer any questions.