

Industry Related Safety

Tow Truck Safety Measures

Introduction

A tow truck (also called a wrecker, a breakdown truck, recovery truck or a breakdown lorry), is a vehicle used to transport motor vehicles to another location (generally a repair garage), or to recover vehicles which are no longer on a drivable surface.



Towing services are generally provided by an emergency road service operator. Vehicles are often towed in the case of breakdowns or collisions, or may be *impounded* for legal reasons.

Types of Towing Equipment

Five general types are in common usage, usually based on the type or size of vehicle to be towed truck chassis:

- **Boom** - not specifically for towing, many trucks are equipped with an adjustable boom winch for recovering vehicles that are in a ditch, culvert, over an embankment, or any place the vehicle cannot be safely backed-up to.
- **Hook and chain** (also known as a "sling" or "belt lift") - chains are looped around the vehicle frame or axle, which is drawn aloft by a boom winch to rest against a pair of

heavy rubberized mats so the customer's vehicle can be towed on its other axle. Slings are not used much today because they can scratch the bumpers of cars. But they are sometimes used for towing vehicles that have been in an accident or have one or two of the front or rear wheels missing or for pickup trucks and other vehicles that have steel bumpers.

- **Wheel-Lift** - evolved from the hook and chain technology to produce a large metal yoke that can be fitted under the front or rear wheels to cradle them, drawing the front or rear end of the vehicle clear of the ground by a pneumatic or hydraulic hoist so it can be towed. This apparatus generally picks up the drive wheels of the vehicle (i.e. the front wheels if it is front wheel drive, the rear wheels if it is rear wheel drive) touching only the tires.
- **Flatbed** (also called a Rollback or a Slide) - the entire back of the truck is fitted with a bed that can be hydraulically inclined and moved to ground level, allowing the customer's vehicle to be placed on it under its own power or pulled by a winch.
- **Integrated** (also referred to as a "Self Loader" Snatcher, Quick Pick or Repo Truck) - boom and wheel-lift integrated into one unit. Used in light duty trucks to repossess vehicles or move illegally parked vehicles. Most have controls for the apparatus inside the cab of the tow truck to make quick pickup possible without the inconvenience of exiting the truck to hook up the vehicle. Heavy duty trucks are also manufactured with integrated lift.

These are the most common arrangements, but are by no means exclusive, as there are flatbed units that offer a wheel-lift, boom trucks that can recover but not tow, and wheel-lift units that offer a combination boom with sling.

Operations

Tow trucks are usually operated by private businesses, except for major highways and toll roads, where the road authority may operate the tow trucks for that stretch of road. Businesses who operate a large fleet of vehicles, such as school bus companies or package delivery services, often own one or several tow trucks for the purposes of towing their own vehicles.

Government departments with large fleets (such



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as the police departments, fire departments, transportation authorities and departments of public works of major cities) may similarly own tow truck(s). Police department tow trucks may also be used to impound other vehicles.

Dispatching

Requests for service are placed to a dispatching center. Dispatch is a procedure for assigning employees (workers) or vehicles to customers. Some tow services communicate with drivers using wireless telephone equipment. In others, the dispatching center contacts an available tow truck driver via mobile radio or by sending a text message using a mobile data terminal. Recent technology includes the use of GPS and on board wireless equipment to dispatch drivers via an LCD screen receiver.

With vehicle dispatching, clients are matched to vehicles according to the order in which clients called and the proximity of vehicles to each client's pick-up location. Telephone operators take

calls from clients, then either enter the client's information into a computer or write it down and give it to a dispatcher. In some cases, calls may be assigned a priority by the call-taker. Priority calls may jump the queue of pending calls. In the first scenario, a central computer then communicates with the mobile data terminal located in each vehicle, the dispatcher communicates with the driver of each vehicle via two-way radio.

Impounds and storage

Many tow companies have the capability to store vehicles that have been wrecked or impounded by police agencies. In these circumstances, police agencies notify a contracted towing provider to



secure the vehicle and tow it to a storage lot. The tow company will sometimes prevent access to the vehicle until the law states the owner can claim it (usually after any fines are paid).

Nearly all tow companies charge a fee for storing vehicles.

GPS and AVL

Navigation systems are becoming more commonly used to tell the location (of stranded vehicles) to tow trucks. Automatic vehicle location (AVL) systems are sometimes used to help the dispatch center staff determine the closest tow truck. AVL may use GPS technology. It may display the location of all tow trucks on a map or may feed data directly to a computer-assisted dispatch system which automatically recommends the closest available units

Predatory Towing

Predatory towing is a practice of towing companies that remove vehicles without the consent of the owners and sometimes overcharge them, damage their vehicles and carry out other abusive practices. The companies involved may enter into contracts with lot and private property owners to tow away vehicles, lawfully and unlawfully, and keep a portion of the money received (splitting part with the owner of the lot/property).

Predatory towing increases insurance costs (damage to vehicles is common), is unfair to vehicle owners in that the companies charge more than the market rate for towing, and vehicles are not released until the fees are paid.

In the first decade of the 2000s, many States in the United States began to regulate these practices more stringently.



The towing company has little incentive to be reasonable in its practices because they have the vehicle and can keep it until the owner pays the towing and storage fees. The towing companies retain an attorney to make things difficult for pro se litigants to handle the matter on their own, using technicalities and their knowledge of the legal system to deny justice for the pro se litigants. Frequently the vehicle owner's loss is too small to warrant hiring an attorney of their own.

In 2005, Representative Christopher Cox introduced a bill that would allow states such as California to enact legislation regarding towing practices on private property. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that tow companies station trucks at parking lots to identify cars parked illegally, and tow the cars even though they do not have permission from the property owner to operate in

the lot. The Newport Beach, California Police Department reported that more than 2,000 cars had been towed from 13 parking lots in a 15 month period from 2003 to 2004.

A Maryland state task force devoted to the issue was told at its first meeting in October 2008 by representatives of the towing industry that the bulk of complaints of overcharging and over-aggressive towing can be blamed on what they called on "gypsy towers" and "snatch-and-grabbers", who under existing law can purchase a tow truck and start towing cars.

In October 2008, McHenry County, Illinois rescinded an earlier decision to put the Illinois Commerce Commission in charge of towing. The change had been intended to deal with the problem of predatory towing,



with car owners charged into thousands of dollars to have their vehicles returned after a tow.

Tow Prevention Methods

Many motorists have sought ways to prevent their vehicles from being towed. Methods often include the use of hand brake locks or wheel clamps. However, in cases where towing away is made difficult, the vehicle can still be lifted onto a Flatbed truck, so that the wheels are not on the ground. It is not possible to fully prevent a vehicle from being towed.

Safety Precautions

Towing requires expertise not only in business operations but in actual driving skills. To engage in the towing activity, be aware that towing requires extreme safety precautions. Here are some of the most notable safety tips that tow truck drivers and operators should be aware of.

Riding in Trailers

When towing any kind of vehicle, it is extremely essential to make sure that there are no one is sitting in the trailer. If passengers are allowed in trailers, you will put them in danger and may also invite accidents to happen while the vehicle is being towed.

Trailer Loading

The vehicle must be loaded properly on the trailer to avoid sways and shakes when driving. When loading the towed vehicle, make sure that the heavy part lies ahead of the axle. Also, be sure that the load on both sides is balanced. To prevent shifting, make sure that chains, hooks, and slides are attached firmly to the trailer.



Check the tongue weight. This is the downward force produced by the trailer to the hitch ball. Most of the time, the tongue weight is equivalent to 10 to 15 percent of Gross Trailer Weight or the actual weight of the trailer once it is fully loaded. Note that if the towed vehicle tongue weight is too low, the trailer may sway. However, if the tongue weight is quite heavy, the trailer might not be able to function properly. Make sure that the trailer is heavier on the front side.

Proper Driving

When driving a tow truck, you are not just driving the truck alone. The vehicle that you are towing will affect your driving performance. Keep in mind that the weight of a trailer will affect the acceleration, speed, and brake power of your tow truck.

So, when driving a towing truck, make allowances for additional time needed when passing other vehicles, stopping, or changing lanes. If possible, avoid passing on rough roads. If there is no alternative, be sure to drive slowly as severe road bumps cannot only damage the towing vehicle, it will also damage the trailer.

If the trailer starts to sway, stop and make the necessary changes

In general, sways cannot be completely prevented. It may be caused by a sudden wind gust, or a sudden change in the speed of the tow truck. However, if the trailer sways excessively, you will have to stop and check the cause of the swaying. You should check the trailer load and secure the harness equipment.



Tow Truck Incidents

Here are some examples of tow truck incidents that have occurred. In some cases, the safety precautions that were not observed are immediately apparent and possible preventative measures are noticeable.

Incident #1

A man was killed when the tow truck he was driving veered off the freeway and overturned in a canal running parallel to the westbound lanes. The tow truck driver was trapped in the tow truck as it went underwater at 7:30 a.m. and was unable to get out. Rescue workers removed him from the truck about 40 minutes later, and he was pronounced dead at the hospital. A passenger was able to get out to safety. Neither person was wearing a seat belt.

The report indicated that the truck suffered tread separation, causing loss of control and travel into the canal. When they pulled the truck out, the right front tire was blown.

The vehicle was a tow truck designed to tow large vehicles. The wreck caused \$500,000 in damage to the tow truck. The tow truck was submerged in 27 feet of water and it took multiple tow trucks working together to remove the truck from the canal.

Incident #2

A 30-year-old California man died from injuries he suffered in a tow-truck accident; cause of death, massive head injuries. For an unknown reason, the



truck veered to the right and ran off the highway, down a dirt embankment and through a fence, and landed facing north. The fatality involved the passenger, who apparently was not wearing a seat belt and was thrown from the truck. The tow truck driver suffered minor injuries.

Incident #3

A teenager was flown to UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester for injuries suffered when her car collided with a tow truck. The teenager was alone in her car when the crash happened just before 7:30 p.m.

The Mitsubishi Eclipse was headed west when it collided with the tow truck. The tow truck driver was not injured. Police noted, "It appears he had the right of way," adding the crash is still under investigation. Initial indication was that the teenager did not stop at a stop sign. The driver's side door the car was pushed in about 15 inches from the impact with the truck.

The teenager was conscious when taken to the emergency room and was flown by Life Flight helicopter to the Worcester hospital. She was in stable condition and being evaluated in the emergency department.



Incident #4

A 16 year old driver was listed in critical condition Monday morning after a car accident involving a tow truck. Police say the driver ran a stop sign and the tow truck slammed into the side of her car. Another teenager in the car has minor injuries.

The driver of the tow truck was not hurt.

Incident #5

Tow-truck driver's death sparks call for legislation

Tow -truck drivers expect to clean up accidents — not become part of one. The death of a driver renewed interest in tow -truck safety legislation that has been buried for more than a year (Article, May 2008). A tow truck driver was struck and killed by a hit-skip driver while picking up a car that had hit a deer on I-71 just south of the Franklin-Pickaway county line. The State Highway Patrol has not yet found the driver who fled the scene.

The tow truck driver's death brought tow-truck driver safety to the legislature's attention. House Bill 21 would add tow -truck drivers to Ohio's "Move Over, Slow Down" law. Under the current law, drivers must change to the lane away from a parked public safety vehicle with flashing lights. Violators can be fined up to \$150. Twenty-six states include tow-truck drivers in similar laws, according the American Automobile Association.

The Towing and Recovery Association of America estimates that about 55 tow truck drivers are killed each year in the United States. Another local driver knows the next time he is struck by a vehicle whizzing past his tow truck might be the last. He already has been hit four times, and this driver's death has been a reminder about the job's dangers.



Incident #6

Tow truck drivers face danger with little recognition

With the summer driving season at its peak, a tow truck company owner holds his breath every time one of his drivers has to help a stranded motorist. "In this business, accidents can happen to

anyone at anytime," the business owner said. "One minute you could be hooking up a car and the next, you are being dragged down the freeway."

Dangers of Towing

The tow-truck-driving son was working on a stalled car on the shoulder of Interstate 215 when he learned how dangerous towing can be. "The sound wall (near the Fourth Avenue exit) is so close to the shoulder you don't have anywhere to maneuver," he said. "Drivers hate this area."

A CHP cruiser, with its lights flashing, was a few yards behind the truck. But as the 24-year-old worked the controls of his truck along the freeway he heard the CHP officer yell. "I jumped onto my truck and a car scraped my truck right where I had been standing," he said. He was one of the lucky ones.

Incident #7

A would-be robber got more than he bargained for last night when a tow-truck driver fought back.

Wichita police say the suspect walked up to a man sitting in a tow truck and threatened him with a knife. The suspect demanded the man's wallet. That's when the driver hit the suspect with a tire iron, striking him on the head and neck.



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The suspect ran to his vehicle but the driver chased him in the tow truck, ramming the suspect's car twice on the passenger side.

The robber got away. There is damage to the passenger side and its missing the driver side mirror.