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Checkpoint Near Canada Called Unsafe

By AL BAKER

ALBANY, Oct. 22 - Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, federal border patrol agents have been stepping up their use of checkpoints on highways near the country's borders to inspect vehicles for illegal immigrants, narcotics, terrorists and terrorist weapons.

But on Interstate 87 north of here there have been two major crashes on the southbound approach to one of those checkpoints, including a pileup on Sept. 19, which killed four people as drivers failed to slow down for the lines of stopped cars.

After reviewing those crashes, the National Transportation Safety Board issued an urgent recommendation Thursday saying that the warning signs and flashing lights posted along the approach to the immigration checkpoint at North Hudson, N.Y., in Essex County, about 75 miles south of the Canadian border, gave either too little specific information for drivers to know what to do or a dizzying array of directions that could be confusing.

To avoid future accidents, the safety board has urged that the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials develop new guidelines to help law enforcement agencies set up safer checkpoints. There are now scores of such checkpoints. Though the specific number of crashes near the checkpoints was not immediately available, the safety board also cited a fatal accident last year near one in Texas.

While the safety board stressed that the causes of the two recent crashes along I-87 - also known as the Adirondack Northway - were still under investigation, the warning signs used by the United States Border Patrol, in conjunction with transportation officials of the Pataki administration, were "not effective" when evaluated against federal criteria.

"We know that these checkpoints are going to continue; it's just the nature of the environment of the day, so to speak, with terrorists, 9/11 and the work that the Department of Homeland Security is trying to do in stopping these people," said Joseph Osterman, the director of the Office of Highway Safety for the national safety board, on Friday. "But we want to make sure that we are not harming the highway population while we are trying to interdict terrorists."
The safety board's findings came after an accident about 800 feet north of the North Hudson checkpoint last month in which a tractor-trailer crashed on the approach to a line of vehicles waiting at the checkpoint on the Adirondack Northway between Exits 29 and 30.

A 5-year-old girl, Jonelle Adams, and her mother, Natalie, and another adult, all of Uniondale, N.Y., were killed when their car was pushed under a pickup truck and burst into flames. The tractor-trailer then skidded, hitting another tractor-trailer and another pickup, which was towing a camper. The driver of the second pickup, Walter J. Giveans, 53, of Otisville, N.Y., was also killed.

"These checks and things are creating a lot of problems - there is no two ways about it - and I lost a brother and a good friend," George B. Giveans, 55, Walter's brother, said Friday.

When asked what she thought of the highway deaths, Euris Adams, who lost her daughter and granddaughter in the Sept. 19 crash, said she was buoyed by the prospect that things might get fixed.

"I think they should fix it because it could happen again," Ms. Adams said Friday. "It should be studied very hard."

The earlier crash, on Feb. 22, occurred when a tour bus carrying 47 passengers struck the back of a tractor-trailer about 900 feet north of the border patrol checkpoint at North Hudson and pushed the tractor-trailer into a sport utility vehicle, which was in turn pushed into a car. In that crash, more than 50 people were injured.

A spokesman for the state police, Lt. Glenn Miner, said the police report indicated that the February bus accident had been caused by driver inattention and unsafe speed while the September crash had been caused by the driver's disregard of the traffic signs and unsafe speed. In the fatal crash, the driver of the tractor-trailer that hit the passenger car was charged criminally, officials said. Lieutenan Miner said there had also been three minor accidents, with no injuries, near the North Hudson checkpoint, the only one of its kind in the state since December.

Currently there are no national standards for how to set up law enforcement checkpoints, the safety board found. Standards for work zones or accidents, however, require that traffic control devices fulfill a need, command attention, convey a clear, simple meaning, command respect from drivers and give adequate time for proper response. The safety board recommended that new guidelines be specifically tailored for law enforcement checkpoints.

Shane M. Artim, a spokesman for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, said the group understood the safety board's concerns and was working with federal highway officials to prepare an official response. "We're cooperating," he said.
Ron Colburn, the senior associate chief of the border patrol, said officials at his agency would work closely with highway engineers so that law enforcement could do its job safely and cause the least disruption to travelers.

"There has to be a range of standards because it is never one size fits all, because we have over 60 checkpoint locations around the nation, and they range from small two-way routes that lead away from the international border on up to very large multi-state interstates," Mr. Colburn said.

He said that not all 60 checkpoints were operating at the same time and added that he did not have a database immediately available to count the number of accidents at those places. He said, however, that accidents did occasionally happen.

"But there have been no fatal accidents on Interstate 87, in any way linked to a border patrol checkpoint, in its history, until this one," he said.
Fatal bus accident outside Laredo

Updated: Mon 12:25 AM, Apr 21, 2014

A bus rolled over near the Border Patrol checkpoint on I-35 outside Laredo, Texas just before eight o'clock Sunday morning, leaving two people dead.

The bus, marked Los Garcias, was carrying 32 people when it veered over to the right at Mile Marker 29. Two people, a man and a woman, were killed in the crash.

At least one of them is from Houston.

A Texas Department of Public Safety spokesperson the driver of the bus has not been cited.

Investigators are still waiting to talk to people at local hospitals undergoing surgery, and possibly in serious condition.

DPS also says some of the survivors have been flown to San Antonio for further care.