

Instructor Notes: Shredded truck tires and Aunt Ellie's couch can often turn otherwise beautiful highways into unsightly garbage dumps, but this road-borne litter is more than just harmful to the eyes, it's a serious threat to safe driving. Use this topic during your next towing safety meeting to discuss how your towing operators can avoid losing their load as well as avoid hitting someone else's.



Safety Meeting 2016 #10 – Steering Clear of Road Debris



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Recently the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety completed a study of debris-related crashes that occurred on U.S. roadways and found some very surprising results. Between 2011-2014 road debris was a factor in more than 200,000 police-reported crashes that resulted in approximately 39,000 injuries and 500 deaths.

What Is Road Debris?

Road debris is a general term used to describe any material lying in a road that normally doesn't belong there. Common examples include mufflers, mud flap brackets, tire shards, wooden boards, tree branches, furniture, scrap metal or just about anything that fell off the truck in front of you. According to the same AAA study, about two-thirds of debris-related crashes are the result of items falling from a vehicle due to unsecured loads and improper maintenance.

Prevent Unsecured Loads

Truck drivers, including towing operators, are required to secure their loads for the safety of pedestrians, bicyclists and other drivers. A failure to do so may result in a finding of negligence, making the truck driver legally responsible for the harm they caused. Specifically, Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulation §392.9 – *Inspection of cargo, cargo securement devices and systems* states:

- Your truck's cargo must be properly distributed and adequately secured.
- Your truck's tailboard, doors, spare tire and other equipment used

in its operation (such as chains and straps) must be cleared, closed or secured.

- Drivers must check their load within the first 50 miles of their trip, whenever they change their driving status, or after they have driven for three hours or they have driven 150 miles (whichever occurs first).

When checking your load, look for loose straps, things dragging (i.e., safety chains, air lines, light cords, etc.), items rubbing, things flapping in the wind or anything that could break free and fall onto the road. Keep in mind that you have a responsibility to secure the load of the vehicle you are towing as well.

Maintain Your Trucks

Crashes involving vehicle related-debris increased 40 percent since 2001, according to AAA, and the most common types of road debris are parts becoming detached from a vehicle. Badly worn or under-inflated tires often suffer blowouts that can leave pieces of tire on the roadway. Exhaust systems can rust and corrode, causing mufflers and other parts to drag and break loose. Potential tire and exhaust system problems as well as other problems can easily be spotted and corrected during routine vehicle maintenance.

Avoiding Road Debris

Drive defensively. Continually search the road at least 12 to 15 seconds ahead looking for debris. If you are about to make contact with debris, safely reduce your speed as much as

possible prior to making contact. Slowing down may reduce damage and lessen the chance of your truck's tire throwing the debris onto another motorist.

Limit high-speed swerving. Nearly 37 percent of all deaths in road debris crashes resulted from the driver over-swerving to avoid hitting an object.

Pay extra attention during the day. More than one in three crashes involving debris occur between 10:00 a.m. and 3:59 p.m.

Change lanes. If the vehicle in front of you appears to be hauling loosely-secured items, avoid driving directly behind them and change lanes if possible.

Training and Precautions

There is no sure-fire way to avoid a lawsuit caused by road debris, but towing companies can minimize their exposure by training their staff and establishing safety policies pertaining to vehicle maintenance and load securement. Generally, the best course of action is simply to act responsibly and take appropriate precautions – secure your load, periodically check for loose chains, tools and straps and avoid debris in the road.

If you need ideas on how to prepare and present this information to your drivers, please call me at 847-894-0042 or email me at patrick@towingexpert.com.

This article is a part of TowSafe, a safety program designed for towing operators. For more information contact April at 407-706-6796.