Lessons learnt: stacking on a level crossing - a near miss

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A truck driver followed slow traffic onto a level crossing. The queue stopped, leaving the trailer across the tracks just as the warning lights started. The traffic moved in time - this time. Never enter a crossing unless there's room on the other side for your whole combination. If you're ever stuck, get out and call.

About this lesson

This is an example based on a common type of near miss at level crossings. It isn't a report of one particular incident.

What happened

A driver in a semi-trailer was on a route they drove most days. Just past a level crossing with flashing lights and boom gates, there was a set of traffic lights, and the traffic was moving slowly. The driver followed the car in front over the crossing.

The traffic lights ahead turned red and the queue stopped. The prime mover was across, but the trailer was still sitting over the tracks. A few seconds later, the crossing lights started flashing and the booms began to come down. The traffic moved off just in time, and the trailer cleared the tracks before the train came through.

[Image: Diagram: a truck queued over a level crossing with its trailer stopped on the tracks, crossing lights flashing and a train coming]

Wrong: the truck followed the queue and stopped with its trailer over the tracks.

[Image: Diagram: a truck waiting behind the stop line because the gap past the crossing is shorter than the truck]

Right: the gap past the crossing is shorter than the truck, so the driver waits behind the line.

What could have happened

A train hitting a loaded trailer can derail the train and kill the truck driver, the train crew and passengers. Once a train is close, there's nothing it can do. The ARTC says a loaded freight train can take up to 2 km to stop.

Why it happened

- The driver didn't check there was room on the other side for the whole combination before going.
- Traffic was backing up from traffic lights just past the crossing.
- The driver knew the route well and didn't expect a train.
- The driver was following the car in front too closely to stop short of the crossing.

Lessons learnt

- Never queue across the tracks. Only go when there's room on the other side for your whole combination.
- It's against the road rules to enter a level crossing if you can't drive all the way through because the crossing, or the road past it, is blocked.
- The lights may not be flashing when you enter. That doesn't mean a train isn't coming.
- Familiar routes are where it happens. The ATSB found that in at least 12 of 49 heavy vehicle level crossing collisions, the driver had used that crossing regularly.

What drivers should do

- Look at the road past the crossing before you get to it, not just at the crossing.
- If the traffic ahead is slow or backed up, stop before the stop line and wait for a gap longer than your combination.
- Leave a big gap to the vehicle in front as you approach a crossing.
- Take extra care where there's an intersection, traffic lights or a turn just past the crossing.
- Treat every crossing as if a train is coming.

If you're ever stuck on a crossing

1. Get out and get clear

Get everyone out of the cab and well away from the truck and the tracks.

2. Call straight away

Ring the emergency number on the sign at the crossing - it goes to rail control, who can stop trains - and 000. Tell them the crossing name or number and the road.

3. Don't try to fix it first

Repairs can wait until rail control knows.

What operators should do

- Add level crossings on your regular routes to your risk register - especially ones with an intersection or traffic lights just past them.

- Include "stacking" and "stuck on a crossing" in driver inductions and toolbox talks.
- Plan routes and schedules so drivers aren't rushing through crossings in peak traffic.
- Encourage drivers to report near misses, and act on what they tell you.

Ask your team

- Which crossings on our routes have traffic lights or an intersection just past them?
- What would you do if your trailer was stuck on the tracks right now?
- Has anyone had a close call at a crossing they haven't reported?

Report your near misses

A near miss is a free lesson. Report it so it can be fixed before someone gets hurt.

General information, not legal advice.

Sources

Queensland Government - Common road rules (level crossings) - https://www.qld.gov.au/transport/safety/rules/road/common/index.html

Department of Transport and Planning Victoria - Heavy vehicles at level crossings - https://transport.vic.gov.au/road-and-active-transport/business/heavy-vehicles/heavy-vehicles-road-safety/heavy-vehicles-at-level-crossings

ATSB - Review of level crossing collisions involving trains and heavy road vehicles in Australia - https://www.atsb.gov.au/node/10908