

News Digest

By The Associated Press

Hazardous materials handling said to be lax

WASHINGTON — Three-fourths of the nation's police and firemen are inadequately trained to respond to accidents involving transportation of hazardous materials, a new congressional study says.

And even if a trained team reaches the scene of a ruptured tank truck, improper labeling of the vehicle's contents can produce a wrong, dangerous response, the Office of Technology Assessment said in a study released Monday.

OTA quoted state officials as saying that from 25 percent to 50 percent of the identification placards required on hazardous material shipments are incorrect and that shipping documents "are sometimes incomplete or inaccessible."

"Emergency crews must assess the risks of the hazardous material and make decisions on

how to respond based on information that may or may not be accurate," said OTA, a nonpartisan congressional agency.

"The wrong response to a hazardous material endangers both emergency personnel and the neighboring communities," said the study, which urged adoption of federal training and response standards to replace a mishmash of state requirements.

Asked why so many placards are incorrect, Edith Page, who directed the study, said: "In some cases it's ignorance. In some cases it's carelessness."

OTA said the most pressing need is to develop better ways of training safety personnel to handle accidents involving the 500,000 daily shipments of hazardous materials on U.S. highways, rail lines and waterways.

"Three-quarters of the first responders are not adequately trained to deal with hazardous substances," Page told a news briefing.

She said that a joke among response personnel is that you bring tennis shoes and binoculars to a toxic or nuclear material spill — using the shoes to quickly get a safe distance away and the binoculars to read the placard.

"Then you call for expert help," Page said. "This is often said in jest, but there's a strong element of truth in it."

OTA said that while some states and metropolitan areas have good response programs, "most first responders in smaller urban and rural areas have not been trained to deal with hazardous materials, despite many existing training programs."

Although it did not specifically urge more

federal spending, OTA said continued support for state enforcement programs "is important, since federal inspection forces are shrinking due to budget constraints."

OTA recommended better training and a national license for operators of vehicles carrying hazardous substances in an effort to reduce the average of 11,462 accidents the Transportation Department says occurred yearly between 1973 and 1983.

In most states, Page said, a truck driver needs no special license for hazardous cargoes. "The nephew or son of the owner can drive a gasoline truck," she said.

Page said OTA doesn't trust Transportation Department figures indicating that the incidence of accidents involving hazardous materials is decreasing.

FAA admits more trained controllers are needed

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Aviation Administration acknowledged Monday that more fully trained air traffic controllers are needed, but insisted its existing workforce is keeping the skies safe.

FAA Administrator Donald Engen was to appear before a Senate "air safety task force" to respond to a critical report by the General Accounting Office. The study suggests there are not enough controllers for peak traffic loads in some parts of the country — and that flights should be curtailed.

The congressional report released last week has renewed lawmakers' concern about air safety. The Senate task force, part of the Republican Conference, includes a number of senators involved in aviation issues.

Meanwhile, a House investigations subcommittee on aviation has scheduled a hearing next week on the GAO's findings.

Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn., chairman of the investigations subcommittee of the House Public Works and Transportation Committee, said the GAO report "... shows clearly that there are serious stresses on the nation's air traffic control system."

An FAA spokesman conceded that controllers still are working "too much overtime" at some busy control centers

and that FAA planners know "they don't have enough controllers, including enough full performance level controllers."

Buckhorn said that in the meantime, air traffic is being regulated through flow control techniques designed to keep controllers from being overburdened.

The GAO study, however, suggests that those flow control measures should be examined to determine whether they are adequate.

"The track record of air traffic control is excellent," Buckhorn said. He cited statistics which show a 3 percent increase in air traffic in 1985, but an 18 percent decline in flight delays and a 26 percent drop in operational errors, instances where controllers allow planes to come closer to one another than regulations permit.

The GAO report urges the FAA to impose restrictions on air traffic until the agency gets as many fully trained controllers into the workforce as it wants, and overtime is reduced.

"Limiting air traffic before conditions worsen seems to be the prudent choice," said the study, which was based largely on questionnaires sent to more than 5,500 controllers and supervisors, as well as interviews with the respondents.

In Brief

Rulo trial

OMAHA — A man whose body was found on a survivalist cult's southeast Nebraska farm was skinned alive, a prosecutor said Monday at the murder trial of a father and son accused in the torture slaying.

In his opening statement, Otoe County Attorney Randall Rehmeier said cult leader Michael Ryan and his son Dennis used a "razor-like" instrument to skin the legs of James Thimm, 26.

The bodies of Thimm and 5-year-old Luke Stice were found in unmarked graves last August at the farm near Rulo. Michael Ryan will be tried later on a first-degree murder charge in the death of young Stice.

Both Ryans sat impassively during the opening statement. Dennis Ryan, 16, yawned several times.

Herb in Hastings

KEARNEY, Neb. — A Hastings man who won \$5,000 for spotting Burger King's Herb in the fast-food chain's Kearney restaurant says he'll spend his winnings on his family.

John Coats, 25, said he was in Kearney on Sunday with his wife Renee, and their infant daughter, Ashley, to visit his sister.

Coats said he was on his way to the restroom when he spotted Herb, decked out in his usual black-rimmed glasses and too-short trousers.

"He came in the side door and I followed him from the door, probably 20 feet," Coats said. "I grabbed him by the arm and asked him if he was Herb."

"He said, 'Congratulations. You've just won \$5,000.'"

Teaching test

AUSTIN, Texas — Teachers may be used to flunking students, but Monday the instructors themselves faced that prospect as an estimated 205,000 teachers took a state-mandated test.

About 10,000 were expected to fail, but early finishers said it wasn't so tough.

Teachers protested the Teachers Examination of Current Administrators and Teachers, which was mandated by the 1984 public school reforms passed by the Legislature in an effort to improve the quality of instruction in Texas schools.

Hostage photos

BEIRUT, Lebanon — Islamic Jihad Monday issued photographs it claimed depicted the body of Michel Seurat, the French hostage the underground terrorist group claimed to have killed last week.

The Shi'ite Moslem fundamentalists said the photographs, one showing Seurat lying bare-chested with his eyes half-closed and another showing a blanket-wrapped body in a coffin, were issued because of "skepticism about the seriousness of our earlier claim."

Yurchenko rumor

WASHINGTON — The Soviet Embassy denied reports Monday that Vitaly Yurchenko, the Soviet KGB agent who returned to Moscow last November after three months in CIA custody, has been executed.

"Vitaly Yurchenko is alive, in good health and he works in Moscow," said Boris Malakhov, the embassy spokesman. He called the report that Yurchenko had been killed by firing squad "a crude concoction," and a "deliberate, malicious lie."

The account of Yurchenko's alleged death was first reported by National Public Radio, quoting unidentified Reagan administration sources. NPR's report said that Yurchenko's family had been billed for the ammunition, according to Soviet custom.

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