

WHEN THE TRUCK LEAVES THE DOCK UNEXPECTEDLY.

**By: Terry E. Morgan, DLP & CTL-AST&L* &
Registered Transportation Practitioner****

All too many accidents happen when a truck unexpectedly moves away from a loading dock. This type of accident is referred to as “an early departure accident.” They are so common, they have even been named. In virtually all cases, early departure accidents are preventable. When a cargo carrying vehicle unexpectedly moves away from a loading dock, an accident can follow shortly thereafter. Either a forklift falls to the ground below, injuring and even killing the forklift’s operator or material handlers and often the cargo they are handling rains down upon them causing further injury. Typically, truck loading docks and cargo carrying motor vehicles are about 48 inches above ground level. Forklifts of the type used for loading and/or unloading commercial motor vehicles and manually operated pallet jacks can weigh several hundred pounds on up to over 10,000 pounds and more if they are carrying cargo at the time of the accident.

Numerous devices have been developed to prevent cargo vehicles from prematurely departing from a loading dock. They range from wheel chocks which are triangular shaped blocks eight to twelve inches long that are placed just forward of a truck’s rear wheel to prevent it from moving unexpectedly away from the dock to dock locks which are a large steel hook which is mechanically positioned to hold the vehicle’s underride protection bar (a/k/a ICC bar) to the loading dock until it is released by loading dock personnel. Dock locks are frequently accompanied by a red light/green light system at each dock which can be seen by the truck driver in his mirrors and are also activated by loading dock personnel. Some facilities have mounted caution flags on long poles on a heavy base and position them against the front bumper of the truck, not to be moved until loading dock personnel approve. These devices are effective if used and enforced properly, however, something as simple as requiring drivers to shut their trucks off and giving their keys to loading dock personnel can also work with little or no cost to implement. Many locations require loading dock personnel to close dock doors except when trucks are actually being loaded or unloaded so material handlers will not inadvertently enter a cargo vehicle that has been released for movement. The most effective systems incorporate a number of these procedures, practices and devices.

Early departure accidents can be caused by the truck driver or faulty instructions from loading dock personnel. Many operators of loading docks will not allow truck drivers on their loading docks. Shippers with policies of this nature may be making a mistake. It can be difficult to hold truck drivers responsible for who or what is going in or out of their truck if they are not permitted to view it.

Like many accidents, it is more productive for someone to take steps to avoid an accident than it is to place the blame. A driver should never move his truck away from a loading dock unless the door to the dock is closed, regardless of who told him to move it. Any facility that has open docks (docks without doors) should have a stanchion or sign placed on the dock indicating no one should enter any truck placed at that dock until the dock supervisor says it is safe and a failsafe system has been implemented assuring personnel the truck cannot be inadvertently moved.

There is nothing subtle about an early departure accident. Injuries and/or death are almost a certainty. From the perspective of litigation, they are an avoidable accident, usually caused by the driver, facility policies, procedures, practices, or loading dock personnel.