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Trump Admin Cancels Plan to Test Truck Drivers, RR Engineers for Sleep Apnea: Cameron on Transportation

Author : David Gurliacci

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Your daily commute just became more dangerous, thanks to the president.

In his zeal to kill unnecessary federal regulations, President Donald Trump has ordered the cancellation of a plan to require mandatory sleep apnea testing for truck drivers and railroad engineers.

The Federal Railroad Administration and its sister agency covering truckers said they would still recommend testing but would not require it. Why? Perhaps it is the Trump administration's campaign promise to cut two regulations for each new one imposed.

I'm all for "draining the swamp," but this exercise in cutting red tape will likely cause deaths.

It wasn't until December 2013 when railroad officials began giving serious thought to sleep apnea. That's when Metro-North engineer William Rockefeller ran his train at 82 mph into a 30-mph curve at Spuyten Duyvil in New York, sending the cars off the tracks and killing four passengers.

Rockefeller initially said his brakes failed. Then he said he'd been "sort of dazed, mesmerized," comparing it to highway hypnosis. When he realized what was happening, it was too late. His emergency brake application, coupled with the momentum of the huge locomotive pushing — not pulling — the train made derailment inevitable.

Rockefeller was a 15-year veteran of Metro-North and spent 10 years as an engineer. But he had also recently changed his work shift. On the morning of the accident, Rockefeller left his home at 3:30 a.m., after going to bed at 8:30 p.m. the night before at the end of a nine-hour shift.

But not only was he tired, he was also overweight. Subsequent testing showed he suffered from undiagnosed sleep apnea. Federal investigators said his medical condition meant he was an accident waiting to happen, and criticized Metro-North for not testing its employees. The FRA then proposed mandatory testing and Metro-North complied.

Rockefeller is now earning a \$3,200 a month lifetime disability pension because of his sleep apnea, and has filed a \$10 million lawsuit against Metro-North, claiming it was responsible for allowing him to speed.

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There was another railroad crash in 2016 when an engineer "spaced out" when entering the station in Hoboken, N.J. The accident killed one person and injured 14 others. Investigators believe the engineer may also have had sleep apnea.

Neither of the trains had Positive Train Control, which might have prevented speeding that caused the accidents. That technology is still months away due to railroad officials dragging their feet.

Sleep apnea may affect up to 20 percent of the population, with obesity being a contributing factor. In sedentary jobs like truck driving and railroad engineering, obesity is a big problem.

So why not test for it? We test airline pilots' vision and health, including potential sleep apnea. We also should test railroad engineers and truck drivers. Our lives are in their hands and we have a right to know they're not drunk, blind or falling asleep at the wheel.

An average Metro-North train at rush hour can carry 1,000 passengers, the equivalent of two fully-loaded 747s. Don't we have a right to know that the engineer is in good health? Not according to the Trump administration, which sees such mandatory medical testing an unnecessary burden on business.

Metro-North says 18 percent of the 320 engineers who have been tested suffer from sleep apnea. To its credit, the railroad says it will continue testing all crew members, even without the FRA requiring it.

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Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for 25 years. He is the founder of the Commuter Action Group and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com

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