

# SARF: Statement by the South African Road Federation, on the recent fatal road accident at the bottom of Fields Hill (12/09/2013)

## STATEMENT

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The South African Road Federation (SARF), the leading organisation representing the roads industry, is extremely concerned at the growing incidence of road accidents and consequent deaths especially where heavy vehicles are involved. The recent fatal road accident at the bottom of Fields Hill is just a symptom of a wider epidemic facing the road freight haulage industry and its effect on the broader public, especially other road users.

For many years now the SARF has been at the forefront of efforts to suggest ways to improve safety on our roads. It is common practice to address the problem of road safety with a three pronged approach – Education, Engineering and Enforcement. On the whole, though with some exceptions, the Engineering component, as opposed to maintenance of our roads is adequate. Even last week's accident on Fields Hill would probably not have occurred had the driver of a roadworthy vehicle observed the posted speed limits.

It is in this instance that the education and enforcement areas need to be addressed. Considerable effort has been put into educating heavy vehicle drivers and operators during the past two decades with no noticeable improvement in driver behaviour. SARF considers, and has long maintained that far stricter enforcement of the laws in terms of the operation of road vehicles is necessary for the driving culture to be changed for the better.

Hardly a day passes without a heavy accident causing a traffic blockage somewhere on our road network. Sections of the N3, the country's primary arterial road as well as many others have been blocked for up to a day at a time and in at least two of the incidents petrol tankers have burst into flames leading to deaths of innocent persons. Three years ago in the Durban area havoc reigned as the main road entry into Durban from the West was blocked for a full day because of an accident between a heavy freight vehicle and a petrol tanker with a motorist being killed. The alternative route was also a scene of chaos because of the diversion of N3 traffic onto it and a resultant accident also involving a heavy vehicle. This type of accident involving heavy vehicles and regular blocking of the road to traffic has become commonplace throughout the country.

It is apparent that the legal speed limit for heavy vehicles is seldom observed but traffic police seem not to notice. Some of these heavy vehicles are transporting hazardous chemicals.

Regular spot checks of the mechanical condition of heavy goods vehicles on our major highways by a group of concerned bodies, including SARF and the Brake and Tyre Watch initiative of the Fleetwatch magazine has revealed that 312 of 450 (69%), freight haulage vehicles tested across South Africa, had defective brakes or tyres or both, and as such were unroadworthy. The defects identified were horrendous in their implications for the safe operation of the vehicles.

Apart from the lack of roadworthiness of heavy vehicles there is the problem related to drivers and malpractices by some operators. These problems include but are not limited to, driver fatigue as a result of driving for up to 12 hours at a time, with little rest between trips, drivers being paid on the basis of distance travelled rather than on a monthly salary, driver health (a higher than country average of HIV and AIDS), driver incompetence as a result of inadequate training, overloading of vehicles, speeding, often poor load securement and consequent load shedding and grossly inadequate maintenance of vehicles.

The SARF calls on the Minister to urgently address these matters through inter-alia: (1) Enforcement of the law in respect of heavy vehicles through more visible road policing. The SARF suggests that the only way to change our poor and irresponsible driver behaviour is through full implementation of the laws of the road. Operators of unroadworthy vehicles should be charged with criminal negligence for allowing these vehicles onto the road; (2) The movement of freight from road to rail, reducing the amount of heavy vehicles on our road in line with Government policy; and (3) Frequent truck stops with healthcare services along the route enabling a safe environment for truck drivers to stop and rest thus ensuring driver wellbeing.

In line with the Decade of Action Strategy for Road Safety, SARF calls upon all of us to join hands in addressing this scourge on our country's life. The time for talking and strategising is past.

Edited by: Creamer Media Reporter