STATEMENT OF GEORGE REAGLE
ASSOCIATE ADMINISTRATOR FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY PROGRAMS
NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION
BEFORE THE SURFACE TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION
ON THE NATIONAL DRIVER REGISTER

March 19, 1986

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear today to testify on aspects of motor carrier safety under the auspices of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). I will focus on our efforts to improve the National Driver Register (NDR), the program that identifies drivers whose licenses have been suspended or revoked as a result of serious driving violations, and on other driver licensing efforts which complement the NDR.

The federal government has operated the NDR since 1960 to help states exchange information on problem drivers for driver licensing purposes. In an effort to make the program more effective, the Congress enacted legislation in late 1982 that authorized the development and implementation of an improved driver register system. The legislation requires that the NDR's current batch processing system be converted to an interactive, electronic telecommunications system, and that the system's substantive data be left with the states of record. Thus, the NDR will become an index that "points" to the states which hold data, and the NDR will no longer maintain substantive data.

The law requires us to pilot-test and evaluate this new on-line system before we fully implement it. I must stress that it is indeed a new system, for the technology to manage communications among numerous states, each with differing computer systems, equipment and programs, does not exist in a commercial package. A system such as this has never been tried. We are pushing today's technology.

Nevertheless, this April we expect to finish the process of selecting four states to take part in a pilot test of the new system. The operational start-up for the pilot test is scheduled for mid-1987, and the results of the pilot-testing will be evaluated and reported to Congress during 1988. The final rule establishing the procedures NHTSA will follow for the transition from the current system to the new electronic system was published in July 1985.

In the meanwhile, we have made a number of improvements in the current NDR to make it work more effectively. These improvements include:

- Implementation of an overnight service so that states can send inquiries to the NDR over normal telephone lines and receive replies the next day. Eleven states are now using this service and 11 more are expected to be added by the summer of 1986; and

- Implementation of an on-line computer connection to the existing NDR file that will respond as fast as the planned

electronic pointer system, although with less information. This "rapid response" technology will be offered to all states beginning in mid-1986.

Thus, the states are already identifying problem drivers much faster through the NDR than was possible before 1982, and some states will shortly be able to get driver license information in a few seconds.

The ongoing improvements in the NDR are crucial to our safety efforts, but the NDR is only a small part of the nation's licensing process. The individual state driver licensing systems are the only programs which reach all drivers routinely and, in most states, at regular intervals. These systems have the potential to ensure the proper licensing of the nation's general driver population and to identify problem drivers, including commercial drivers.

In addition to the NDR improvements, the Department has taken positive steps to improve the state driver licensing systems. In November 1985, the Secretary announced a major initiative to improve commercial carrier safety and to ensure that only qualified drivers operate the nation's trucks and buses. The Secretary's goal, in partnership with the states, national organizations concerned with highway safety, the trucking and bus industries, and the American public, is to prevent drivers with suspended or revoked licenses from hiding behind multiple licenses and to keep them from driving on our highways.

In December 1985, the Department joined the American Association of Motor

Vehicle Administrators and the Highway Users Federation for Safety and Mobility in sponsoring a national forum solely devoted to licensing issues. We believe this was a departure point for a cooperative effort to ensure implementation of two additional concepts: the "one record/one license" concept, and the concept of classified licensing. We believe each of these concepts is essential to an effective licensing system.

Under the "one license/one record" concept, each driver is licensed by only one state, and that state maintains a single record on each driver. A commercial driver would have a single license, the same as any other driver, and would have all infractions noted against that license. NHTSA strongly encourages the states to adopt this concept.

As a major part of its effort to implement the one license/one record concept, NHTSA encourages the states to join the Driver License Compact. The Compact is designed to facilitate the exchange of information on driver violations among the member states. If a driver from one state in the Compact is convicted of a traffic offense in another member state, the conviction is recorded in the home state as if it had occurred there. The home state thus maintains a complete history of the driver's violations. In addition, the Compact requires a driver attempting to get a license in a member state to surrender any older license. This reduces the opportunity for a driver to hold licenses in several states. Each of these features has a potential effect on commercial drivers, some of whom may have violations in several states or hold multiple licenses. The Compact has now been adopted by 31 states and the District of Columbia.

Two states -- Missouri and North Dakota -- joined during the past year, as did the District of Columbia.

Under a classified driver licensing system, separate training, testing and qualifying standards are established for operators of different vehicle classes, in recognition of the fact that different vehicles demand different skills and abilities. A commercial vehicle operator would thus be separately tested for each separate class of vehicle that he would be operating. NHTSA advocates the adoption of a complete classified driver licensing system in each state. So far, 31 states have implemented such systems, with Oregon soon to be the thirty-second.

This January, the Secretary wrote to every Governor in the nation, informing them of our efforts on driver licensing and urging them to implement the Driver License Compact and to adopt classified driver licensing systems. I am pleased to inform you that the response from the Governors has been overwhelmingly favorable.

In summary, we are seeking licensing improvements that help the states ensure that only qualified drivers with valid licenses operate commercial vehicles on the nation's highways. We are working cooperatively with the states, the trucking and bus industry, and safety groups to ensure that the licensing system promotes the safe operation of trucks and buses.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. If you have any questions, I would be glad to try to answer them.