



Hidden and piecemeal dangers on the roads

Like surprises? So do I – but not all surprises are good. I recently came across a particular type of surprise during a disaster control exercise.

Vehicles carrying dangerous goods – particularly tankers – are commonly presented by the media as "travelling bombs" on motorways and main roads. This ignores the fact that police checks have proved the opposite for years. The few "bad apples" are clearly recognisable and identified under the ADR. On the other hand, it is much harder to spot the often just as risky transport of dangerous goods and hazardous substances in normal general freight transport. Every day, a large quantity of dangerous goods travels along our roads in this way virtually unnoticed. No one notices them, no one sees them and no one attacks them in the media. But they still represent a significant potential risk in the case of an incident. In the Tyrol alone, checks revealed that about 15% of transports were not declared in 2008. About half of these did not comply with the ADR marking requirements and the other half were travelling unmarked perfectly legally. How can that be, you ask? Well, the regulations for limited and exempt quantities allow a lower-cost, less regulated option for transport, which is obviously also cheaper – a sort of "ADR lite". This does not require either vehicle marking or special driver training or extensive emergency equipment or special accompanying documents. Different types of dangerous goods can even be loaded together if the corresponding packaging and packaging marking requirements and restrictions on quantity are complied with. However, the second loophole could become a significant factor if quantities of up to 1,000 litres or kilogrammes are allowed.

This begs the question: Is "ADR lite" really the right approach? If we view the situation not just through the lens of logistics but from the viewpoint of risk, all will become clear: Cost optimisation is being put before public safety. Imagine you are the first to approach a burning truck and don't know what it is carrying. Is it about to explode, is it discharging substances that are extremely hazardous to health or will it just carry on burning? Not a good feeling, is it? This situation, like opening Pandora's box, often happens on Austria's roads and can affect us all. Disastrous in the case of a mass pile-up or an accident in a tunnel. Thankfully, worst case scenarios don't happen too often, although accidents such as the Tauertunnel disaster – which also involved dangerous goods – serve as a warning. Here, it is no use pointing to the minimum quantity or legal requirements if 1,000, 500 or even just 100 litres of highly-toxic substances are released and hazardous substances form dangerous mixtures that are difficult to control, this can have a harmful effect on human health and the environment.

It would make sense for representatives of all sides – consignors, carriers and legislators – to get together and consider economically viable, improved and more transparent regulations for exempt and reduced quantities in the interests of safety. I'm also appealing to you as a consignor: Take your responsibilities seriously when dealing with dangerous goods. So that Pandora's box is never opened and we do not get any unpleasant surprises.

Yours
Philipp Wessiak

Philipp Wessiak is a Consultant und Manager of the Region West at x|vise innovative logistics GmbH in Lauterach/Vorarlberg.