

Reprinted from MercuryNews.com, Wednesday, April, 29, 2009
Last Modified: Wednesday, April, 29, 2009 - 9:47 pm

Tour bus crashes lead California to seek crackdown

By Don Thompson, Associated Press

SACRAMENTO — California lawmakers said Tuesday's fatal crash of a tour bus near Soledad shows the need to strengthen regulation of the industry.

Investigators do not yet know the cause of the crash, which killed the driver and four French tourists and injured dozens. But legislators said it was the latest in a string of fatal charter bus crashes in Northern California.

"This tragedy underscores the urgency of making sure bus transportation is safe," **Assemblyman Dave Jones, D-Sacramento**, said Wednesday.

The California Bus Association is supporting bills by Jones and fellow Democratic Assemblyman Ted Lieu of Torrance. The association supports the legislation because it wants to weed out substandard companies, lobbyist Josh Pane said.

The lawmakers say current penalties aren't enough to deter carriers that put profits ahead of passenger safety. Jones' bill would give bus companies no second chances if they knowingly use improperly licensed drivers or buses.

"We don't know enough about this particular crash to know whether that was the case," he said. "We do know, though, that last year's crash that killed 10 was the direct result of a bus driver who was not properly licensed and a bus that was not properly licensed."

Last October, a charter bus carrying patrons to a Colusa County casino overturned, killing 10 and injuring about 40. The investigation found the driver did not have a proper license.

Later that month, a charter bus carrying the Alameda High School varsity football team crashed in Pinole. No students were hurt, but investigators found the driver was not properly licensed and the bus itself had not been registered since 2005.

Driver fatigue is suspected in a bus crash near Truckee earlier this month that killed one passenger and injured 24 others who were on their way to work at the Resort at Squaw Creek.

In February, the California Highway Patrol conducted surprise inspections of 13 charter buses bringing gamblers to a Sacramento-area casino. The inspection found all but one had violations that included problems with their brakes and steering.

"We've looked at this issue and there are a surprising number of buses that violate safety standards," Lieu said. "It does highlight the need for increased bus regulation."

After Tuesday's crash, investigators are reviewing the inspection and driving records associated with Orange-based Orion Pacific. Its charter bus overturned on a Highway 101 overpass in Soledad as it was carrying tourists to Los Angeles.

Any serious violations could mean the end of the charter company if the penalties in Jones' bill were already law.