

# On your guard

They may seem simple in their operation, but tail-lifts hold many hidden dangers that could cause operators a lot more problems than just a spilt load. John Challen looks at the latest developments

**R**esearch carried out by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in 2004/5 suggested that most injuries from trips and falls from commercial vehicles were linked to tail-lift operation. The number of accidents that this majority translates to was somewhere in the region of 10,000. What's more, the HSE still believes that the human and economic costs of these falls exceeded £36.5 million.

A sizeable problem, then, but one that the



Although not mandatory, operators are specifying more and more guards and gates for their tail-lifts on new commercial vehicles



industry has got to grips with in the past five or so years and remains committed to further reducing. DEL Equipment, for example, reports a big increase in interest in safety gates and guards on its lifts, and, as such, now offers a range of five tail-lift guards. "Operators are spending more time looking at the guards," states Paul Kelly, the company's marketing manager. "They look at tail-lifts themselves as only one part of meeting their needs, with the guards and operator safety being the other." He also adds that, now more than ever, he and his team are spending time with customers looking for designs that incorporate the best safety features for their specific applications.

Kelly says that a requirement from one operator in particular set DEL Equipment on its way to supplying its current range. "Speedy Hire approached us about a safety guard it wanted for its lifts to prevent items coming off the platform



## Top five tail-lift tips

The HSE recently revised its guidance for reducing the risk of falls from tail-lifts. The main pieces of advice in its current literature are:

Tail-lift surfaces should be slip resistant. Friction values of 0.36Cd or above are recommended, assuming that the tail-lifts are operating on a level gradient.

Footwear choice is a common contributory factor to accidents involving tail-lifts. HSE's research report, 'The underlying causes of falls from vehicles', gives information about the correct types of footwear for tail-lift operators.

HSE promotes the use of safe systems of work, focusing on: providing a lift that is suitable for the goods being carried and moved; planning loads to minimise the time spent on the lift; and designing a loading and unloading pattern that allows operators to push, not pull, goods from the vehicle.

Tail-lift operators should be given training for any type of tail-lift they use. HSE says this training should include proper operation of the equipment, manual handling and potential residual hazards

Maintenance and examinations should take place on a regular basis. HSE reminds fleet managers that any safety defects should be rectified immediately.

"But we are also trying to get away from detachable guards, because it only gives the perception that their use is optional." Ultimately, as Kelly says, it's down to any operator to ensure that they use guards, but a good way forward, he says, is not to give them the choice.

### Working at (low) height

Current standards, however, do not require manufacturers to fix hand rails or guards, if a lift is below 2m from floor level, but HSE is currently working on a revision to its guidance. So, until such time as they become mandatory, companies such as Ratcliff Pallfinger have optional rails for their lifts, and

and also to help keep any bystanders safe," he explains. "We've worked with them to develop a cost-effective guard to adhere to those criteria."

Because Speedy Hire's vehicles are dropside trailers, when its tail-lifts are stowed in the vertical position, the guards remain in place. This means, when the rear is opened, no extra assembly is needed, taking the burden off operators and keeping them safe. Kelly says that DEL is looking to adopt a similar strategy on other tail-lift guards.

"We are now finding that requests for information and the orders [for new tail-lifts] themselves are increasingly specifying guides as standard. About 25% of the lifts we sell are now fitted with guards. Three years ago, it was more like 2%. We expect that number to increase in the next three years to around 40%, helped by people seeing the Speedy Hire vehicles and getting interested," he reveals.



## Tail-lift meets the speed need



When Calor Gas, a regular fridge customer for trailer manufacturer Cartwright, wanted a system to enable faster and more efficient deliveries, it thought of tail-lifts.

In conjunction with Dhollandia, Cartwright developed a full-length tail-lift for Calor Gas' 15-tonne dropside vehicles. Its new 6m-long tail-lift platform allows a much larger working area for operators. There is also all-round access to the vehicle, as a traditional rear tail-lift has also been fitted.

Steven Cartwright, director of the company, says that, while Calor Gas has been the only fleet so far to take the lift, there is huge potential for the brewery industry or any industry needing side access from a dropside truck.

David Ward, Ratcliff's national account manager, says there are numerous applications where it is simply not possible to package a tail-lift with guards permanently in place. Which leaves manufacturers debating the best way forward.

"Tail-lifts seem to be between a rock and a hard place, as the working at height regulations seem to be only applicable to those working at two steps above the ground [and higher]. As long as the tail-lift is within that threshold, it doesn't strictly need gates," comments Ward. That said, like Kelly, he is seeing increasing numbers of lifts supplied either with gates or at least ready-made holes in the lift floor, so that, if or when gates or guards do become a legal requirement, operators' vehicles can be quickly made compliant.

Ward agrees that there remains a division between passenger and commercial tail-lifts, particularly when it comes to wander leads for remote operation. One innovation that Ratcliff Palfinger has adopted on the passenger lift side is a simple hook on the arm of the lift, which enables the lead to be hung safely, so it cannot be damaged. In the commercial world, he says, where control panels mounted on the side of the vehicle are the favoured approach, leads would be damaged, either by the lift itself or by users dropping them on the floor.

Ratcliff Palfinger's sister company MBB is not the biggest fan of wander leads either, says Ward. "MBB

believes it is better to get yourself on the lift and then operate it via foot controls," he explains. One clear advantage is that the operator is out of harm's way.

### Maintain close inspections

Meanwhile, as with any mechanical equipment, maintenance is also a key area for tail-lifts – highlighted by both the HSE, as well as product manufacturers. Bill Stanton, Ratcliff Palfinger's customer services manager, insists that operators should be keeping track of lifts on a monthly basis. Such attention to detail, he believes, could go a



long way to ensuring that lifts remain in good, safe condition.

Inspections, he says, should look for accidental damage – the most likely causes being knocks at loading docks, which are particularly prevalent in the food industry. "We also recommend that all tail-lifts are serviced at three-monthly intervals, depending on their operation," says Stanton.

And he adds that such servicing applies to all lift types – column, cantilever, tuck-away and retractable – and must be in addition to the compulsory LOLER (Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998) testing, carried out every six months. "In the event of an accident, valid certificates of mandatory thorough examination are required by HSE," he warns. And not just HSE, but also investigators, if an accident is very serious.

### More information?

If you're looking for more information about the topic of tail-lifts, the IRTE publication 'Preventing falls and falling loads from tail-lifts' was revised in May 2009. To obtain a copy, contact Ian Chisholm on 020 7630 1111 or [ian.chisholm@soe.org.uk](mailto:ian.chisholm@soe.org.uk)

