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Fatal Texas Crash Puts Focus on Federal Oversight Flaws

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WASHINGTON — The federal government froze all approvals for new bus companies on Tuesday because a fatal crash in [Texas](#) last Friday exposed a flaw in regulations that allowed banned companies to re-open under new names.

Officials have linked a bus crash that killed 17 people last week to a Houston man they say operated under two corporate names.

Iguala Bus Ltd. and Angel Tours share the same address in Houston.

The head of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, John H. Hill, said the freeze would stay in place “until I get my hands around this.” Mr. Hill promised an effort to check addresses, fax numbers and other details. The agency ordinarily approves about 100 bus companies a month.

The crash that killed 17 people early Friday morning near Sherman, Tex., has highlighted the spotty enforcement of federal bus regulations and the often weak communication between regulators and state law enforcement.

The bus belonged to a Houston man, Angel de la Torre, who was operating charters under two corporate names, federal officials said. Mr. de la Torre started a new company, Iguala Busmex, three days after federal investigators banned his other company, Angel Tours, from interstate travel after finding safety violations.

The bus hit a guard rail and careened off a bridge early Friday after a retreaded front tire blew out and the driver lost control, officials said. Retreaded tires cannot legally be used on front wheels, investigators said. The driver had a checkered history, having been stopped for drunken driving and speeding, federal investigators said.

Mr. Hill acknowledged that enforcement of bans by his agency had been inconsistent. The federal government relies on state police agencies to take buses off the road if they stop one that federal regulators have ordered out of service.

Mr. Hill said that his authority extended only to interstate operations, and that many states had no mechanism for applying federal findings to buses operating within their borders.

The federal Department of Transportation has both interstate and intrastate responsibility for regulating the carrying of hazardous materials and for commercial driver licenses, but only interstate responsibility for buses. If an operation does not cross state lines, Mr. Hill said, "it's a state issue."

Under Texas law, the bus company was not allowed to operate anywhere in the state from the moment the federal government banned it from interstate service, said Tom Vinger, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Yet Texas authorities did not learn of the order against Mr. de la Torre's first bus company until after the accident, Mr. Vinger said.

"Occasionally we are notified when an interstate carrier is put out of service, but to the best of our knowledge we were not notified in this case," he said.

One issue in the investigation is which corporate entity had control of the bus. Mr. Hill said Mr. de la Torre had denied any connection to Iguala Busmex, though the two companies have the same address and telephone number.

No one answered the telephone Tuesday at Angel Tours headquarters on Telephone Road in Houston.

At the American Bus Association, the trade association of the motor coach industry, Peter J. Pantuso, a spokesman, said companies barred by Washington from interstate commerce should not be allowed to operate anywhere. If Mr. Hill does not know what the practice of the states is, "that's a problem by itself," Mr. Pantuso said. "He is the chief federal enforcement officer for commercial vehicles."

There are about 3,500 active bus companies, he said, running about 35,000 buses. Most are quite small.

Mr. Hill said his investigators went to the headquarters of Mr. de la Torre's company and were "thrown out of the premises by the owner and his attorney."

The Transportation Department's inspector general, which has subpoena powers, later gained access, he said. Investigators are documenting interstate trips made by the company after the ban; each can carry an \$11,000 fine and other criminal penalties, he said.

Matthew L. Wald reported from Washington, and James C. McKinley Jr. from Houston.