



Autonomous Trucks are Coming to Mining Operations: What are the Safety Implications?

Insights

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Most of the media attention paid to autonomous vehicles relates to the capabilities of passenger vehicles. But other companies are moving ahead with producing autonomous vehicles for use in commercial settings, such as the mining industry.

Volvo, the Swedish automotive company, has been in the process of developing and manufacturing commercial trucks for years. And just last month, the company announced a deal with a Norwegian mine, Brønnøy Kalk, for the use of its autonomous trucks to transport limestone along five kilometers of mines and tunnels from the mine to a port.

While moving to use of autonomous vehicles may be an important step for some companies to increase their efficiency, companies also should consider the safety implications for switching to AVs. While the impact of these vehicles on a company's safety environment will vary from employer to employer and use to use, companies should generally consider the following:

1. First, you will want to consider whether use of an autonomous truck will be possible given your work environment. The trucks that Volvo is providing to Brønnøy Kalk, for instance, will be traveling on a specific route and performing a very specific task. At this stage in AV development, use of these trucks likely will be more beneficial for companies requiring simple tasks—such as loading and unloading materials at the same locations on a repetitive basis. Where the tasks or routes may vary, AVs may not yet be ready for your company.
2. Second, you will want to consider updating your safety policies to incorporate different risks associated with autonomous vehicles. Employees will need to be trained regarding what the autonomous vehicles can and cannot do, as well as how to interact around them. For example, if there are to be pedestrians near where the autonomous trucks operate, those individuals need to be aware of the trucks' ability to sense their locations and act accordingly. Moreover, in the mine setting, sufficient berms will need to be constructed at all areas where the AV will travel.

Depending upon how your company intends to use autonomous vehicles, any number of additional safety considerations could come into play. If you have specific concerns or questions regarding using autonomous trucks at your company, contact Travis Vance or David Klass or any member of our Fisher Phillips' Autonomous Vehicles Practice Group.

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