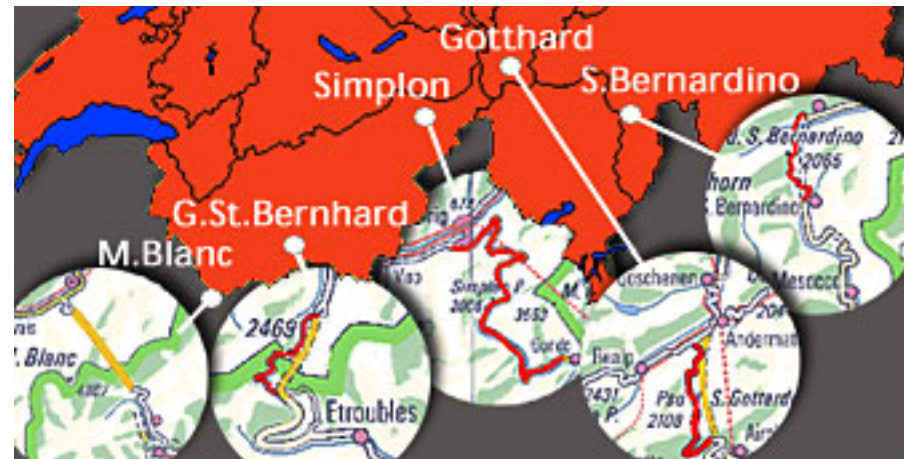


November 23, 2001 - 3:52 PM

Gotthard disaster reveals limits of tunnel safety



The Gotthard is one of Europe's main gateways to the South (swissinfo.ch)

Swiss safety experts say that installing sprinkler systems in tunnels would reduce the risk from fires, but that not much more can be done to improve tunnel safety.

"Compared with other tunnels in Europe, and all over the world, the safety level in the Gotthard Tunnel is quite high," says Hubert Roegg, director of the Swiss Institute for Safety and Security. "But there is certainly more that could be done."

Safety measures in the Gotthard were overhauled in the wake of the Mont Blanc tunnel fire in 1999, which killed at least 39 people.

Currently, the Gotthard has an evacuation tunnel running alongside the traffic lanes, and this is connected to a series of pressurised, smoke-proof emergency chambers, which can each accommodate 70 people.

The evacuation tunnel enabled several motorists, whose vehicles were trapped by Wednesday's fire, to escape to safety.

Other safety features include a ventilation system, which can replace the air inside the tunnel within 15 minutes, as well as video surveillance equipment.

What's missing, in Roegg's view, is a sprinkler system, which could be "very effective" in improving the tunnel's safety. "There are no European standards that say you must have sprinklers in tunnels," Roegg told swissinfo.

Europe-wide legislation

The Federal Office for Roads says it is lobbying hard for European-wide legislation to improve tunnel safety. "We are pressing for legislation for designing and operating tunnels, and to control the types of vehicles passing through tunnels," Michel Egger, vice-president of the Federal Office for Roads, told swissinfo.

However, Egger warned that no amount of safety measures could prevent road accidents.

"We have been putting in a lot of effort to improve the safety of the Gotthard tunnel, but this was had a head-on collision which no safety measure can avoid," says Egger.

Both Egger and Roegg point to the necessity of training road users to react to emergency situations in order to reduce the number of fatal road accidents in Switzerland, which currently stands at 350 per year.

"The behaviour of the road user is essential," says Egger. "In a tunnel, as soon as you see smoke you have to head for the exit and not stay in your car, or you will become a victim."

The European Union's transport commissioner, Loyola de Palacio, said on Thursday that Europe would take a long hard look at tunnel safety, in the wake of the Gotthard fire.

"After the disasters in the Mont Blanc tunnel and Austria's Tauern tunnel [in which 12 people died in May 1999], we are once again brutally confronted with the issue of safety in tunnels."

At the same time, the European Commission said it would propose a directive to improve road and train tunnel safety at the beginning of 2002.

Gilles Gantelet, a spokesman for the Commission, warned that imposing European-wide safety measures would involve taking "draconian political decisions", such as imposing time slots to separate incoming and outgoing traffic so as to have only traffic travelling in the same direction at any one time.

He also suggested that electronic devices could monitor the distance between heavy-goods vehicles and fine any drivers violating those distances.

"There are means available [to improve safety], but we also need political decisions to be taken," said Gantelet.

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