

## Crew struggled to slow runaway train before it derailed

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BAXTER, Calif. (AP) — Crew members on a runaway maintenance train found themselves on a harrowing ride down a steep Sierra slope as they tried frantically to slam on the brakes before it derailed in a fatal pileup, investigators said Friday.

They noticed the train began picking up speed on its descent toward the Sacramento Valley but could not slow it down using its regular braking system. The emergency brake slowed it just slightly before the train's supervisor — in a final, desperate move — threw the locomotive engine into reverse, said Dave Watson, the investigator in charge of the incident for the National Transportation Safety Board.

The train kept rolling and gathering speed, eventually hitting a curve at about 50 mph — twice the recommended speed for that stretch of tracks.

"This was a runaway train," Watson said.

He spent Friday interviewing the locomotive operator and supervisor who were aboard the train.

"They were pretty much shook up. They were heart-broke," he said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press.

Two crew members who tried to apply the emergency brakes were killed, and their bodies were pulled from the smoldering wreckage early Friday morning. The other eight workers aboard the train were not injured.

The crash also spilled thousands of gallons of fuel and ignited a fireball that burned for hours after the train derailed on Thursday in a thickly forested ravine about 60 miles east of Sacramento.

Watson said the stretch of track leading to the crash site is one of the steepest in the country, running straight before it curves where six of the train's 10 cars derailed.

The only aspect investigators have come close to ruling out is the possibility of faulty tracks at the crash site, he said. The investigation instead is focusing on the speed of the train.

"They experienced increasing speed (and) they applied some brake," Watson said. "At some point, they put the brakes into emergency, again it slowed, but it did not stop. It continued to accelerate until it derailed."

On Sunday, investigators will comb over two locomotives and two other cars that have been transported to a Union Pacific rail yard, where they hope to find the train's so-called events recorder, akin to a jetliner's black box.

Watson said a more thorough report on the cause of the crash is likely to take six months to a year to complete.

It was expected to take until Monday to positively identify the dead workers, Placer County Sheriff's Lt. Chal DeCecco said.

One body was recovered from inside a burned-out train car, while the other found was underneath the zigzag tangle of fire-charred steel.

"It's just a tragedy," said Ken Julian, spokesman for Harsco Track Technologies, the South Carolina-based contractor that employed all but one of the 10 crew members aboard the train. "We're going to do everything we can to support the families and get to the bottom of the cause."

The dead crew members were employed by Harsco. The lone Union Pacific employee aboard the train was the conductor, who was not seriously injured.

The train carried 11,000 gallons of diesel and 6,000 gallons of hydraulic fluid, acetylene, oxygen and propane. It was transporting a piece of maintenance equipment called a grinding machine from Reno, Nev., to the Sacramento suburb of Roseville when it derailed about two miles south of Interstate 80.

The locomotive, rail cars and maintenance equipment were owned by Harsco, which was operating under contract to Union

Pacific Railroad.

The maintenance train's purpose is to smooth out worn-down sections of track. It was likened to a "rolling mechanic's shop," with a tanker carrying diesel fuel for the locomotive and the other rail cars carrying equipment and drums filled with an assortment of fuels and fluids.

Earlier Friday, DeCecco said crew members provided investigators a general outline of events leading to the derailment.

They said the train was passing through a tunnel when they noticed something amiss and tried to slow it down about three miles before the crash site.

"There was some discussion among the crew about applying brakes or reducing speed," DeCecco said. "There (were) some irregularities near the tunnel."

Cleanup crews were clearing the tracks on Friday, and the railroad hoped to restore full service on the busy east-west corridor over the weekend. A 600-foot section of track will have to be replaced, Union Pacific spokesman Mark Davis said.

Officials from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and California Department of Fish and Game also were on scene, trying to keep the spilled fuel from running into a tributary of the north fork of the American River.

Associated Press Writer Robin Hindery in Sacramento contributed to this report.