

NTSB investigating Oklahoma train crash

By Ken Miller, Associated Press

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OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Federal investigators want to know why a freight train streaking across the [Oklahoma Panhandle](#) failed to pull into a side track and instead charged down the main line and collided head-on with another train approaching from the opposite direction.

Three Union Pacific Railroad employees remained missing after the crash. The [Oklahoma Highway Patrol](#) suggested they had died, and the [National Transportation Safety Board](#) said there was "no survivable space" in the locomotives' cabins following the Sunday morning collision.

An early review found no problems with the signal system along the tracks near Goodwell, 300 miles northwest of [Oklahoma City](#), NTSB member Mark Rosekind said Monday night. The track, too, appeared normal. The NTSB will check phone records to ensure that workers were not distracted from their duties by cellphones, and the agency also hoped to analyze data recorders similar to those found aboard airplanes, he said.

The Union Pacific trains collided just east of Goodwell, triggering a diesel-fueled fireball that appeared to weld the locomotives together. Two engineers and a conductor are missing. Rosekind referred questions to state medical officials but said there was "no survivable space" in the workers' compartments. One conductor jumped from his train and suffered only minor injuries. The NTSB plans to interview him.

The investigator said one of the trains was supposed to have been on a nearby side track as the other passed. There are sidings at Goodwell, one mile west of the accident site, and at Guymon, eight miles east, but it was unclear which train had the obligation to yield.

"One train had the right of way," Rosekind said. "We're still getting the data to figure out what was scheduled to happen. There was a side track, and we're trying to figure out who was supposed to be where and when."

The eastbound train, hauling mixed goods from [Los Angeles](#) to Chicago, had three lead locomotives and one following. The westbound, taking cars and trucks from [Kansas City](#) to Los Angeles, was pulled by two locomotives and pushed by one. Video had been recovered from the rear locomotives, and the remnants of what is believed to be one of the so-called black box data recorders has been pulled from one train.

"Those are critical to our investigations. We can ... virtually see what happened," Rosekind said in a telephone interview from Guymon.

Rosekind said the trains' brakes appeared normal and no cellphones were found in the

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Shawn Yorks, The Guymon Daily Herald/AP
Union Pacific crews work to repair damaged track at the site of a head-on train collision near Goodwell, Okla.

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wreckage. The NTSB would check the crew members' recent work schedules and rest periods, and also their evaluations, he said. It was also looking into the track's speed rating after a cross-country truck driver said he was "pacing" the train at 68 mph shortly before the crash. Freight can travel at speeds of up to 80 mph, but only on tracks with the highest ratings for cargo. Passenger trains can travel faster on higher quality rails.

A preliminary report could come out within two weeks, though it could be a year before a final report is released, Rosekind said.

A witness to the accident, Gary Mathews, of Independence, Mo., said neither train blew a horn or signaled with lights as they barreled toward each other over the stark Panhandle landscape.

"I was thinking, I'm going to see a train crash unless somebody does something," Mathews said Monday in a telephone interview with The Associated Press.

Mathews was traveling from Phoenix to Missouri along U.S. 54 beside the ribbon of rail. The westbound train seemed to slow considerably before the crash, but the eastbound was still traveling at "65 or better" when the trains hit about 50 yards from him, he said.

"A blast of hot air came through the side glass, and it put a burn on you like you step out of an air-conditioned bar into 110 degrees, through the glass," he said. "There was a thud and it was over. Smoke was rolling. Smoke went up so high it was like a foundry on fire, and it was barreling straight up," he recalled.

"After I seen it, the feeling went through me, it scared the tar out of me, and I didn't stop until I reached Emporia" in Kansas, about 350 miles away. He was interviewed Sunday by the Guymon Daily Herald newspaper and reached Monday by the AP.

"I didn't even stop," Mathews said, as he recalled watching the scene unfold in his rearview mirror.

Betsy Randolph, a trooper with the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, described a "tangled, mangled burning mess."

"They have to let the metal cool ... to see if they can get in there and find the bodies of the missing, and that may never happen," said Randolph.

The [United Transportation Union](#) identified those aboard the trains as conductor Brian L. Stone, 50, of Dalhart, Texas; engineers Dan Hall and John Hall; and conductor Juan Zurita, who escaped virtually uninjured. The Halls are not related.

Rosekind said the NTSB wanted to interview Zurita and said the conductor will not see federal sanctions for abandoning the train when an accident was imminent.

Rosekind said railroads may have their own policies. Union Pacific declined to comment, citing the federal investigation.

Workers toiled Monday in an effort to restore the line to a working condition. In the meantime, rail traffic southwest from Guymon was shut down.

"It will be a slight inconvenience," said [Scott Robertson](#), the superintendent at Farmers Elevator Inc. in Goodwell. "The wheat harvest is nearly done, and I haven't seen anything at any of the elevators around here sending (wheat) out. It's going to delay some deliveries, but it's not going to have that much of an impact."

Many freight lines don't run on a set schedule and the number of trains through an area can vary from day to day, said Rob Kulat, a spokesman with the railroad administration. He and railroad officials referred questions to the NTSB.

Associated Press writer Justin Juozapavicius contributed to this report from Tulsa, Okla.

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11 comments



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**Leonard W Dobbert**

This a very sad situation. I will pray for the family of those killed. I think I might have known one of the Engineers. I have a few questions about who runs the switches and Redblocks. A dispatcher should be questioned. Sound like someone was asleep.

Reply · 2 · Like · June 26 at 8:34am

**Barry Lewis** · Clovis High, Clovis, NM

Sounds like you are speculating when you should just wait and see what develops. If you had ever in your life ridden a train, you would know there are mechanical failures. Maybe even an exhaust leak in the cab. In other words, speak from knowledge not your lack of knowledge.

Reply · 4 · Like · June 26 at 9:30am

**Kelly Baker**

Barry Lewis hey barry hows retirement hope all is well.. just a long lost cherokee yard student of yours ,, barry do you know if thats track warrent or ctc/twc ect ect

Reply · 2 · Like · June 26 at 10:00am

**Hans-Joachim Marseille** · Top Commenter · Community College of the Air Force
Barry Lewis

"Maybe even an exhaust leak in the cab."

This sounds like it is YOU doing the speculating. in other words, don't give someone grief for a perceived lack of knowledge when you yourself have none.

Reply · 2 · Like · June 26 at 10:17am

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**Kelly Baker**

hey barry hows retirement hope all is well.. just a long lost cherokee yard student of yours ,, barry do you know if thats track warrent or ctc/twc ect ect

Reply · Like · June 26 at 9:59am

**Donald L. Streu Jr** · Works at CSX Railroad

thats what I would like to know too

Reply · Like · June 27 at 8:51am

**Louis Lambolely** · Top Commenter

I hope they can piece it all together and tell us how they did it.

Reply · Like · June 26 at 10:38am

**Dave Speener** · Top Commenter · Driver at Precision Air Cargo

This is like a real life example of the age-old riddle about two trains meeting after starting out from different locations - and they'll never be able to identify the engineers.

Now I see why the riddle has never been solved.

Reply · Like · June 26 at 10:55am

**Elizabeth Anderson** · Top Commenter · Stebbins High School

people lost their lives and you JOKE, what is wrong with you!!!

Reply · 2 · Like · June 26 at 11:27am

**Dave Speener** · Top Commenter · Driver at Precision Air Cargo

Lighten up, shrew.

What would you have me do? The page has already been written.

Don't judge me - you don't know mw.

Reply · Like · June 27 at 12:46am

**Elizabeth Anderson** · Top Commenter · Stebbins High School

you make a joke when people died, you are sick! its not funny!!

Reply · Like · June 27 at 12:49am

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**Alex Briedau III** · Top Commenter · American University

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