



## Three railroad employees killed in collision with BNSF train



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Three railroad employees died Wednesday and a fourth is in critical condition after a northbound freight train struck their vehicle at a crossing off Talley Way in South Kelso, according to the railroad and other sources.

"This is an extremely tragic situation," said Gus Melonas, a spokesman for Burlington Northern Santa Fe. "We are deeply saddened."

The cause of the crash is under investigation, and Melonas said railroad officials will not speculate.

Cowlitz County Coroner's Office officials said they will release the names of the deceased this morning. The three are from a Seattle-based BNSF crew that was bound for Vancouver in a vehicle that resembled a Suburban. It was not immediately known why they stopped in Kelso.

About 75 emergency responders converged late in the afternoon to the crossing south of the Harry Morgan Bridge, an area of the railroad known as Longview Junction. The crash occurred at 4:32 p.m. and was expected to disrupt train traffic until midnight, according to Melonas.

The vehicle had left a rail yard and was crossing the tracks west to east when it was struck by the Burlington Northern freight train in a private crossing, Melonas said. The crossing has no lighted signals but is equipped with crossing signs and stop signs. The train did not derail.

The driver of the vehicle and two other BNSF employees died. A fourth employee was taken to the Oregon Health and Science University in Portland and was listed in critical condition Wednesday night, Kelso Police Capt. Darr Kirk said. Two died at the scene. The third died after being taken by Life Flight helicopter.

There were no reported injuries on the train, which had three locomotives and was carrying 106 carloads of grain, Melonas said. The train was from Crookston, Minn., and was headed to Seattle.

The vehicle landed at the bottom of the approximately 25-foot embankment, more than 50 feet from the rail intersection. A roll of paper towels, wrappers and other debris were strewn across the hillside.

Police blocked Talley Way traffic at the on and off ramps to State Route 432 (Tennant Way) for about two hours to extract the bodies from the vehicle, which landed upright in a marshy area about 15 feet from a pond. The rear and both sides were crumpled, but the front fender was nearly undamaged.

About a half-dozen responders stood holding a rope at the top of the hill to guide others down the embankment. After about a half-hour, the rescuers pulled a survivor up the hill and whisked them to an ambulance.

All four victims were cleared from the vehicle by about 6 p.m.

Wednesday's accident is the first fatal train/vehicle accident in Cowlitz County since four people died at the Dwight Road crossing north of Castle Rock in July 2006.

Responders from Cowlitz 2 Fire and Rescue, the Kelso Police Department, Cowlitz County Sheriff's Office, Washington State Patrol and Washington State Department of Transportation were at the crash site.

Attracted by the sirens, a handful of people wandered near the crash site. Kalama resident Jason Mickelson, who was there about an hour after the crash, said the crossing should have had a better signal, even though it is used primarily by railroad employees.

"Somebody died in another crossing without a signal on it," said Mickelson, who has friends who work on the railroad in the

area.

About a dozen Burlington Northern employees arrived throughout the evening to conduct the crash investigation. One BNSF employee was crying as he looked at the vehicle below the tracks.

Kirk, the Kelso police captain, said the responders from all agencies and Burlington Northern did good work at a difficult time.

"It's never easy, but everybody really worked hard on this one. We had a lot of people here to support them."