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The Region

## 2 Track Workers Struck and Killed by Amtrak Train

*Investigators are trying to figure out how the victims -- part of a crew for Metrolink -- failed to hear or see the oncoming danger.*

April 02, 2003 | Dan Weikel and Kimi Yoshino | Times Staff Writers

Two workers inspecting railroad tracks for Metrolink were struck and killed by a fast-moving Amtrak train Tuesday in Laguna Niguel.

Adam Underwood, 40, of Fountain Valley, and Antonio Almanza, 61, of Los Angeles, died instantly, authorities said.

The deaths of the two men, part of a five-member contract crew checking clips and pins in the track, are believed to be the first time a Metrolink employee or contractor has been killed in a train accident, leaving officials wondering what went wrong. "We're always looking at how to keep people safe," Metrolink spokeswoman Sharon Gavin said.

"That is our biggest concern. So how something like this could happen is what the investigation is looking into."

The men were struck about 1:45 p.m. by a southbound Amtrak train on the Pacific Surfliner route, which travels between San Luis Obispo and San Diego.

Amtrak officials did not know how fast the train was going but said the speed limit in that area near Camino Capistrano and Avery Parkway is 90 mph.

"Usually the engineer blows the horn if there's something on the tracks and if they're going through the crossing.

"I have no reason to believe that is not the case here," Amtrak spokeswoman Sarah Swain said.

Investigators at the scene released little information Tuesday, including whether the engineer saw the men or blew the horn, although several witnesses reported hearing a horn.

Rick Stephens works at the Mobil gas station near the tracks.

He said he was smoking a cigarette and watching two groups of workers who walked the tracks while they bent down to inspect them.

"I saw the train coming; I heard the train horn," Stephens said, adding that when he looked over he didn't see two of the men.

"I thought they had simply walked out of my view. Then, next thing I know, firetrucks are coming by.

"One thing led to another and pretty soon I figured these two guys had been hit," he said.

Other witnesses also heard the horn sound but said the area is very loud because of the nearby junction of the San Diego Freeway and San Joaquin Hills tollway.

Authorities closed two lanes on Camino Capistrano, and train traffic was delayed or diverted by bus.

Paramedics, sheriff's and coroner's officials as well as employees from Amtrak, Metrolink and the men's employer, Herzog Contracting Corp., were at the scene.

The accident also is being investigated by the National Transportation Safety Board.

Herzog officials in Oceanside referred questions to Metrolink.

Counselors were brought in to console the men's co-workers.

Investigators from the Orange County sheriff's major accident reconstruction team paced the grim scene, using yellow tape to mark body parts that were strewn several hundred yards down the track.

"These guys work on the tracks," said Chris Vardakostas, night manager at the nearby A's Burger. "They work around trains every day. I don't understand it."

Orange County sheriff's spokesman Jim Amormino agreed:

"The question is how come these two workers did not see or hear the train coming."