Authorities ID man who fell into Mississippi at Dubuque

EAST DUBUQUE, Ill. -- Authorities today identified the Canadian National Railway Co. employee who is presumed to have drowned in the Mississippi River on Monday as Jim P. Wagner.

East Dubuque Fire Chief Joe Heim said he believed that Wagner was from Dubuque, though he wasn't positive. Wagner's job included opening the railroad bridge that connects Dubuque and East Dubuque, in order to allow barge traffic to pass through, and he fell from that bridge early Monday.

Heim referred questions seeking additional identifying information, such as the man's age or confirmation on his hometown, to Canadian National. A spokesman for the company declined to release additional information. The Jo Daviess County Sheriff's Department referred questions to the East Dubuque Police Department. Police said they could not supply a hometown or age.

Authorities have not recovered the man's body, despite dozens of searchers on the Mississippi both Monday and today. Heim praised their efforts, especially on a day where many people were off work.

"The majority of the people who were here today were out here yesterday," he said. "I think it demonstrates their dedication to the community.

"They understand when you sign up for fire and emergency services, that sometimes the holiday is a busy time. They're dedicated to coming out and helping people. That is what they do."

Law enforcement said a barge pilot passing through reported seeing Wagner at about 3:30 a.m. Monday. Ten minutes later, surveillance video captured his fall from the bridge. Officials believe it was an accident.

But the disappearance of Wagner, who was working alone, wasn't noticed until a shift change later that morning, officials said today. Canadian National spokesman Patrick Waldron said an employee arriving to work at the bridge realized Wagner wasn't there.

"When it has discovered that Wagner was missing, emergency services were called immediately," Waldron said.

The East Dubuque Fire Department was notified of the missing man at about 7:15 a.m., and crews from multiple agencies soon were on the water searching for him.

About 50 emergency responders spent more than 10 hours Monday combing the river as far south as Bellevue, Iowa. About 25 took to the water again today, searching until about noon before officials called off the efforts for the day. A helicopter aided the search both days.
Heim said searchers would "be out periodically the rest of the week and into next week."

Despite the number of entities working together, he noted that such a search is extremely difficult.

"The difficulty with this search is the size of the river and the complexity of the river," he said. "And right now the current is swift."

Recovering a body from the river often is challenging. Officials still have not recovered the body of Allison M. Morgan, 19, of Dubuque, who witnesses saw jump from Julien Dubuque Bridge into the river on Dec. 31.

Meanwhile, Waldron today again emphasized that Canadian National is investigating.

"We are continuing to investigate the circumstances surrounding this tragic incident, and we are continuing to work with local authorities," he said.

ORIGINAL

EAST DUBUQUE, Ill. — A Canadian National Railway Co. employee fell from the railroad bridge that connects Dubuque and East Dubuque early Monday and is presumed to have drowned in the Mississippi River.

Authorities have not released the name of the man, whose job included opening the bridge for barge traffic.

“We’ve moved from a rescue attempt to a recovery operation,” said East Dubuque Fire Chief Joe Heim.

Emergency responders spent more than 10 hours combing the river as far south as the Bellevue, Iowa, area in an effort to recover his body. Barring discovery overnight, crews will head back out on the water this morning.

Search operations closed a stretch of the Mississippi for hours, but it had reopened to traffic by mid-afternoon — well ahead of the 32nd annual Fireworks and Air Show Spectacular in Dubuque.

Canadian National spokesman Patrick Waldron said the company is working with local officials on the recovery effort.

“We’ve launched an internal investigation into the circumstances surrounding the incident,” he said.

FALL

Officials were told that surveillance video on the railroad bridge showed the man fell from the bridge at 3:40 a.m. Monday, according to Heim.

“We believe it’s accidental at this time,” Heim said.
Local law enforcement had not viewed the footage as of early Monday afternoon. Jo Daviess County Sheriff Kevin Turner said a barge pilot passing north through the bridge at about 3:30 a.m. saw the man wave.

“That was the last visual contact someone had with him,” Turner said.

Heim said his department was notified at about 7:15 a.m. Monday that the man was missing. The man was working alone on the bridge at the time of his fall.

Heim said he was not sure why rescuers were not called until several hours after the incident. It was only after that call that several agencies started a search of the river.

Waldron would not comment on what caused the delay. He said rail traffic across the bridge was temporarily stopped due to the incident, but it resumed early Monday afternoon.

Turner said Canadian National is cooperating with local authorities.

SEARCH

The swift river current prompted emergency personnel to expand their search south to Bellevue.

“If it’s a pretty sandy bottom and (the body) doesn’t hit anything or get hooked on anything, (the body) could easily move down the river quickly,” Heim said.

Several agencies, including the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Bellevue Fire Department, used sonar equipment to scan the river.

Turner estimated about 50 people were involved in the search. Among the assisting agencies were the Dubuque, Key West and Galena fire departments and a helicopter crew from Mercy Medical Center-Dubuque.

Turner said it is difficult to guess when the man’s body might be found, but he hopes to find closure quickly for his family.

“Since the subject did fall off the train bridge at 3:40 (a.m) and EMS was contacted at 7:30 (a.m.), there is some time lapse there, so you don’t know where he could be,” he said.