Workers, investigators search for answers in fatal Vancouver Island train derailment

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A union representing logging workers says mechanical failure, not human error, is being blamed for the forestry train derailment in Woss on Vancouver Island, that killed three people and injured two. TIMES COLONIST/CHEK NEWS
A union representing logging workers says mechanical failure, not human error, is being blamed for the forestry train derailment in Woss on Vancouver Island, that killed three people and injured two.

The train, carrying a large load of logs, somehow rolled away from the reload yard and collided into a rubber-tired backhoe and railway maintenance car where the five men were working, said Brian Butler, president of United Steelworkers Local 1-1937.

“Members who were working in the reload area indicated there was a mechanical failure, but I can’t expand on that as to what exactly happened,” Butler said.

Roland Gaudet, who has been with Western Forest Products for 27 years, was one of the five men working on the tracks and was pronounced dead at the scene. Gaudet, 59, was planning on retiring in the next year, said his brother, Mike Gaudet.

“It’s really hard,” said Mike Gaudet, who has worked on the rail line for 32 years. “We’re looking for answers.”

The son of Woss’s fire chief, Brad Galeazzi, also died at the scene.

Clement Reti was airlifted to Victoria General Hospital but succumbed to his injuries.

Two other men remain in hospital.

One man was trapped under the logs and it took about 60 loggers, firefighters, police and paramedics just under five hours to free him.

Island district RCMP senior investigating officer Insp. Dave Hall said it’s too early to determine what caused the train to derail.

“In the case of a workplace fatality, the police are looking for obvious criminality or negligence. It’s too soon to say what we think the cause is. We haven’t ruled anything out at this stage.”
Gaudet has two grandchildren whom he adored, four-year-old Jacob and three-year-old Sylvia. The youngest was named after Gaudet’s wife, who died in 2013.

Gaudet met his wife, Sylvia, in 1999 in Alert Bay, where the two lived.

“He was just the love of her life,” said Svea Svanvik, Sylvia’s sister.

The two were married on Aug. 1, 2003, in a joint ceremony with Svanvik and her husband Mel Rocchio, the fisherman who died when a boat capsized off Comox on March 6.

Gaudet didn’t have children, but treated Sylvia’s three children, Cara Isaac, Leon Isaac and Vanessa Kaspar, as his own.

“From the moment he met my mom, he treated us like we were his,” Kaspar said.

The couple loved to travel, visiting the Yukon and Alaska and making trips to Nova Scotia, where Gaudet’s two sisters and mother live.

Kaspar said counsellors have provided support to the family.

Counsellors from Upper Island Counselling Services Society were in Woss on Friday offering support to family and friends of the victims.

Woss has a population of less than 200 people.

“It’s a small community and there are many generations of forest workers in that community, so it’s tough to deal with,” Butler said.

The Steelworkers Union and Western Forest Products will be investigating the cause of the derailment, but as of Friday, RCMP and WorkSafe B.C. still had control of the scene.

Western Forest Products closed all timberlands operations Friday out of respect for employees and their families. The company said critical-incident stress counsellors are on site and available to anyone who needs help.

Butler cannot recall any fatal accidents involving the Englewood Railway, a 90-kilometre logging line that runs from Vernon Lake, through Woss, past Nimpkish Lake Provincial Park to Beaver Cove. The railway is believed to be the last operating logging railway in North America.
“I think they have a stellar safety record on the rail operation, no history of safety issues and certainly nothing of this magnitude,” Butler said.

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