

Amtrak #501 Derails in DuPont, WA - Yet Another Avoidable Wreck

In the days after the wreck of Amtrak Train #501, derailed on a curve outside of DuPont, WA on Monday, December 18th, killing 3 and injuring scores of others, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) announced that the train was exceeding the proscribed speed limit for the curve, rated at 30 mph. Coming on the heels of at least five major passenger train wrecks in the U.S. over the course of the last decade, this latest wreck begs the question, why do these tragedies continue to occur?

Train wrecks are no different than most disasters in that they are often the result of a constellation of factors, many hidden from view, and often years in the making. We miss the point when we simply pinpoint the worker who “screwed up” and fail to further scrutinize the situation. Most – if not all – of these factors are sometimes hidden from view of the individual worker, who usually has little or no control over any of them. These factors have to do with corporate and government policy, and include, but are not limited to: poor work schedules, chronic fatigue, limited time off work, inadequate staffing, lack of training, lack of adequate qualifying, task overload, deferred maintenance, antiquated infrastructure, failure to implement available safety technology, and the list goes on and on. It is almost *never* just one of these, but some very complex array of procedural and policy failures that – when taken together – can result in disaster.

Training, Rest, Qualifying

The first place to look to better understand what might have gone wrong is to see if the train’s crew was properly trained, and had in their grasp the “technical proficiency” to carry out the job safely and efficiently. Was the train crew provided with a schedule that ensured adequate rest and time off the job? Finally, is the question of “qualification.” All conductors and engineers must – by law and company policy – be “qualified” on the physical characteristics over which they operate their trains. Once technically “qualified” – and this is crucial – crews should now be “familiar” with this territory. From what we have learned from preliminary reports, the crews were “group” qualified in a very unprofessional and slipshod manner which failed to render crews “familiar.” John Risch, the national Legislative Director for the SMART Transportation Division, a rail union made up of engineers and trainmen, including Amtrak conductors, believes that, “All the railroads in the country, including Amtrak, do not require training like they should. Time and time again we have urged the railroads to allow more training trips before they go out, and they will say one or two trips is enough. It’s a cost issue ... That’s something that has been a problem.”

Adequate and Proper Staffing

The major passenger train wrecks in the past decade in the United States include Metrolink #111 at Chatsworth, CA (2008); Metro-North #816 at Spuyten Duyvil, NY (2013); Amtrak #188 at Frankford Junction, PA (2015); New Jersey Transit Train #1614 at Hoboken, NJ (2016); and now this week’s crash of Amtrak #501 at DuPont, WA (2017). Worthy of note in all five crashes is the fact that there was a lone operator in the cab of the locomotive. (Note: In addition, the worst freight train disaster in the history of Canada – MM&A Train #2 at Lac-Mégantic, QC in 2013 – was likewise in the charge of a single crew member). While the rail industry and its allies may discount this fact, it obviously is a question worthy of further consideration and investigation. Passenger jet airliners have two qualified and certified operators in the cockpit. Is it not time to consider that passenger trains might also require such staffing? (Note: In the case of the recent crash in Washington state, there was a second employee in the cab. But ironically, not only was this employee *not* a crew member and *not* qualified on the physical characteristics and therefore *not* aware of the upcoming speed restriction, his presence in the cab was potentially distracting to an engineer who himself was apparently poorly qualified and unfamiliar with the territory).



The destroyed lead locomotive of Amtrak Train #501 is hauled away following yet another needless tragedy. RWU maintains that all of the major passenger train wrecks in the last decade in the U.S. could have easily been avoided through a combination of adequate train staffing, proper training and qualification, train control technology, and reasonable work schedules.

Train Control Technology

Following the Chatsworth wreck in 2008, Congress passed the Rail Safety Improvement Act (RSIA) which among other things, mandated that a sizable percentage of US rail trackage – including those tracks which were used by passenger trains – must be protected by a technology known as Positive Train Control (PTC) by the end of 2015. While the rail carriers dragged their feet on implementation, the number of potentially preventable wrecks have added up in recent years. Then in December of 2015, the rail carriers literally threatened to shut down operations (and hence the country) if they were not granted an extension. Congress acted, and extended the deadline to the end of 2018, with possible extensions for yet another two years! Could many, most, or all of these wrecks have been prevented had PTC been in place? There is of course no way to know, but given the consensus on its capabilities, quite likely. But ironically, with or without PTC, off-the-shelf technologies known collectively as Automatic Train Control (ATC) has existed for a century, and is very effective at preventing such accidents like the one at DuPont, WA. In bygone days, it protected thousands of miles of mainline trackage in the U.S. but in recent decades has mostly been ripped out by rail carriers as a “cost-saving” measure.

Lack of Infrastructural Commitment

Today, railroads around the world have been making significant advances in efficiency, safety, and general infrastructure. Not so in the U.S. Railroads mostly continue to operate on gradients laid in the 19th century, full of curvature, steep grades, and other impediments to safe and fast operation. When upgrades are made, they are often inadequately funded, leading to unsafe conditions for employees, passengers and those living trackside. Unless and until this nation can make a commitment to advancing modern passenger train transportation through adequate and necessary funding, we will continue to lag behind the rest of the world, and continue to suffer tragedies like the one in DuPont, WA. One need only look to the example of the Japanese Bullet Train – the Shinkansen – which in its 50-plus year history, carrying over 10 billion passengers since 1964, has suffered no passenger fatalities due to derailments or collisions, even despite frequent earthquakes and typhoons.

Conclusion

The wreck on December 18th of Amtrak train #501 is yet another example of a needless tragedy, that has been – like others before it – in incubation, years in the making due to a myriad of irresponsible and reckless actions and attitudes on the part of the rail carriers, federal regulators, and Congress. While we might respect the expert analysis and conclusion of the NTSB, due in the coming months and years, we understand and appreciate the fact that the agency is limited to a tactical analysis of the latest wreck. Larger questions of ideology, policy, economics and politics generally do not enter that agency’s equation when attempting to analyze the cause of this or that specific train wreck. But as railroad workers, we are free of those constraints, and as a result, have a more unobstructed view of the bigger picture. Rank & filers experience day-in-and-day-out the carriers’ cynical view of safety, the push for profit, the demand for increased stock prices, the budget cutting, the recklessness, the total disregard for workers’ lives. THIS is why Train #501 wrecked. THIS is why we continue to have Chatsworths, Lac-Mégantics, Frankford Junctions, and all the rest. It is time our society make a real commitment to modern, green, efficient, and safe rail transportation, and do what it takes to achieve it.