Amtrak train on wrong track collides with freight train; 2 dead, 116 injured

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An Amtrak train traveling on the wrong track collided into the back of a CSX freight train early Sunday in South Carolina, killing two Amtrak employees and injuring more than 100 people, authorities said.

It was the third deadly wreck involving Amtrak in less than two months.

“They weren’t supposed to be meeting like that, clearly,” South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster said. "It appears that Amtrak was on the wrong track.” He said the CSX train seemed to be on the track it was supposed to be on.

In this image from video, train cars are smashed and derailed Feb. 4, 2018 near Cayce. S.C. The crash left multiple people dead and dozens ...

WLTX TV VIA AP
The wreck involving Amtrak Train 91, heading from New York to Miami, occurred at 2:35 a.m. in Cayce, S.C., about 10 miles south of Columbia, according to Derrec Becker of South Carolina Emergency Management.

The CSX train was parked on a side track when the Amtrak train slammed into it at about 59 mph, McMaster said.

Lexington County Coroner Margaret Fisher identified those killed as Michael Kempf, 54, of Savannah, Ga., and Michael Cella, 36, of Orange Park, Fla. Kempf was the Amtrak engineer and Cella was the conductor, she said.

Speaking reporters, Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson said the signal system was not operational and the train’s movements were being managed by a CSX dispatcher when it rear-ended the freight train. Although the train was behind schedule, it was not speeding to make up time, Anderson said.

National Transportation Safety Board Chairman Robert Sumwalt said a critical question investigators were looking into was why track switches in the crash area were "locked and lined" in a position that took the Amtrak train off the main track, where it struck the CSX train.

"For whatever reason, the switch was lined and locked to divert traffic to the side track. The key to this event is to learn why that (switch) was lined that way," he said.

Sumwalt said a forward-facing video recorder from the Amtrak train had been recovered and shipped to Washington for inspection. He said investigators were still searching for event data recorders from both trains. Data from those devices could indicate whether the Amtrak train braked before the impact, he said.

Sumwalt said the speed limit for passenger trains in the area is 59 mph.
He said 145 people were on the Amtrak train. That figure includes 136 passengers and nine Amtrak employees, including Kempf and Cella. Passenger injuries ranged from scratches to broken bones, Lexington County spokesman Harrison Cahill said.

One of the injured was in critical condition, and two were listed as serious, with the rest having minor injuries like cuts and bruises, said Steve Shelton, Palmetto health director of emergency preparedness.

“We know that they are shaken up quite a bit, and this is unlike anything else they’ve ever been through before,” Capt. Adam Myrick with the Lexington County Sheriff’s Department told The State newspaper in Columbia, S.C. “We wanted to get them out of the cold, get them out of the weather.”

Temperatures were in the upper 30s at the time of the collision.

McMaster described the freight train engines as "all torn up," and the Amtrak engine as "barely recognizable" from the impact.

Sam Rodriguez was a passenger on the Amtrak train, traveling from New York to Tampa with his mother. Rodriguez described "shaking from the back" of the train, then smoke and screaming.

"I said: 'Ma, you all right?'" he said. "Don't move."

He said that his mother had a leg injury.

He said he helped a child get back to its mother after the crash and then tried to help another child with a head injury.

"Everything's a disaster," he said, describing piles of twisted metal and overturned toilets as he tried to move around the train after the crash.

President Trump "was briefed on the train accident in South Carolina and is receiving regular updates," deputy White House press secretary Lindsay Walters said. "Our thoughts and prayers are with everyone that has been affected by this incident."
About 5,000 gallons of diesel fuel spilled at the scene, Becker said. Hazmat crews were dispatched, and the spill was being contained. There was no threat to the public, he said.

The Red Cross set up an emergency shelter at a nearby school to assist with the injured, the Lexington County Sheriff's Department said on Twitter.
It was the second major crash for Amtrak in less than a week. On Wednesday, a train carrying Republican members of Congress to a retreat in West Virginia hit a garbage truck in rural Virginia. The crash killed one person in the truck and left others wounded.

In December, a passenger train derailed on an overpass near Seattle, with cars crashing into the highway below, killing three people.

In 2015, an Amtrak train derailed in Philadelphia, killing eight people and injuring more than 200.