Runaway Train Hits Another Head-On; 2 Die

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FORT WORTH — A runaway Union Pacific train rolled nearly 10 miles with no one aboard and collided head-on with another train, killing two crew members and setting off a spectacular fire as more than 8,000 gallons of diesel fuel leaked from the engines and ignited, authorities said.

Two crew members survived the Fort Worth crash, which occurred about 11:30 p.m. Wednesday after the four-locomotive, unmanned train somehow rolled from a side track onto the line being used by a westbound freight train that had five locomotives and 114 cars, officials said.

Investigators were trying to determine what caused the unmanned train to roll free.

"That's really the central focus of the investigation: why these locomotives rolled downhill a little over 9 miles," said Union Pacific spokesman Mark Davis.

Officials were trying to determine the speed the trains were traveling when they collided.

The track was overseen by a centralized, traffic-control system, one of the more modern forms of signaling in train movement, Davis said.

About 60 firefighters brought the blaze from the crash under control in about three hours.

Crews spent Thursday extracting the remains of the two engineers who died.

Cranes and other heavy machinery were used to remove the victims, identified as Ray V. Jagers, 45, and Roy W. Adams, 54.

Of the two crew members who escaped, one was uninjured. The other was treated for second- and third-degree burns and an injured elbow. A firefighter was treated for heat exposure.

Union Pacific's safety probed

August 26, 1997: 1:54 p.m. ET

Three fatal collisions in 10 weeks have federal officials worried

NEW YORK (CNNfn) - NEW YORK (CNNfn) - The Federal Railroad Administration on Tuesday said it has launched around-the-clock safety

inspections of the nation's largest railroad, Union Pacific, after three collisions in 10 weeks left seven people dead.

The agency said it found "critical safety deficiencies" at the railroad, which has 36,000 miles of lines crossing the western two-thirds of the country.

"Immediate action across the entire UP system is necessary," said FRA Administrator Jolene Molitoris. The FRA is part of the Department of Transportation.

John Bromley, a spokesman for the Omaha, Neb.-based company, insisted the railroad is safe and that the number of accidents is statistically small.

"We're happy to have [inspectors] here and we're cooperating to the fullest extent," Bromley said.

The string of fatal crashes started June 2 in Devine, Texas, when two freight trains collided head-on, killing two crew members and two stowaways.

Then on July 2 in Kenefick, Kan., a freight train crashed into the sixth car of a passenger train, killing the freight train's engineer.

Four unattended locomotives moving at 60 mph in Fort Worth, Texas, barreled into another train as it left the yard, killing the engineer and engineer pilot.

The National Transportation Safety Board and the FRA are investigating the accidents.

Bromley said human error was to blame in the first two crashes and the likely cause of the third. He pointed out that the railroad operates 2,000 trains a day.

"Any accident is an accident too many," he said. "The common thread was human error."

Teams of 60 federal and state investigators will do continual, 24-hour inspections within the next 10 days in Chicago, Denver, Fort Worth, Houston, Los Angeles, Kansas City, Omaha, Pocatello, Idaho, Portland, Ore., Sacramento, and San Antonio.

Inspectors will ride with some UP crews on trains throughout the system and specialists will oversee operations in Omaha and Denver. Inspectors will also interview local rail officials, train crews, labor representatives managers and contractors.

Molitoris will meet later this week in Washington, D.C. with Jerry Davis, chief executive of UP, and other company executives.

The FRA hopes to have a preliminary update within 48 hours, Bolger said.

Efforts to reach someone at the United Transportation Union, which represents 60 percent of the company's workers, were unsuccessful Tuesday.

The company and the union in July announced a joint effort to improve safety. Part of the plan included derailment and injury prevention.
UP last year merged with Southern Pacific in a $5.4 billion deal that created the nation's largest railroad. The FRA said it has identified problems in SP's train control, operating practices, training, and inspections since the merger.

Bromley doesn't think the merger, or questions about Southern Pacific's safety record, played a role in the crashes. All three accidents took place on UP rail lines. The companies are still operating separately in Texas, he added.

"We really haven't physically merged the railroads at all," Bromley said.

But David Bolger, a spokesman for the agency, said investigators will study the merger's impact on safety.

"You're merging two cultures: two corporate cultures and two safety cultures," Bolger said. "We want to make sure the safety culture is consistent across the new railroad."Back to top

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