Head On Collision of Two Burlington Northern Freight Trains

Executive Summary
At 6:37 p.m., on May 24, 1972, two Burlington Northern freight trains, Extra 1577 West and Extra 2043 East, collided head-on near Maquon, Illinois. Four of the locomotive units of the trains were destroyed and the fifth was heavily damaged. The engineer and the head brakeman on each train were killed.

Probable Cause
The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of this accident was the failure of the responsible employees to deliver to the crew of Extra 1577 West at Yates City, Ill., a restricting train order which established a meet between Extra 1577 West and Extra 2043 East at Yates City. Two factors contributed to this failure.

First, Extra 1577 West did not stop at the Yates City station to obtain a copy of the train order, in disregard of the stop aspect displayed by the westbound train-order signal of the station. The reason the engineer failed to stop his train could not be determined. The Board, however, considers that because of the effects of alcohol and a misleading phantom clear aspect of the westbound train-order signal, the engineer may have failed to interpret the signal correctly.

Second, the employees involved with the transmission and handling of the restricting train order did not comply with the requirements of the operating rules to take special precautions for the safety of Extra 1577 West, the train which was being restricted by the order.

Recommendation: THE NTSB RECOMMENDS THAT THE BURLINGTON NORTHERN: CHANGE THE DESIGN OF THEIR TRAIN-ORDER SIGNALS SO THAT THERE IS NO POSSIBILITY THAT A PHANTOM ASPECT WILL BE DISPLAYED.

Recommendation: THE NTSB RECOMMENDS THAT THE BURLINGTON NORTHERN: REVIEW ITS OPERATING RULES AND ITS INTERPRETATION OF THESE RULES TO ASSURE THAT TRAIN MOVEMENTS ARE ADEQUATELY PROTECTED. THE MANAGEMENT AND EMPLOYEES OF BURLINGTON NORTHERN SHOULD TAKE ANY ACTION NECESSARY TO INSURE THAT THE OPERATING RULES ARE COMPLIED WITH.

Recommendation: THE NTSB RECOMMENDS THAT THE BURLINGTON NORTHERN: ADOPT A SYSTEM OF SAFETY ANALYSIS OF THEIR OPERATING RULES AND PRACTICES TO DISCLOSE CONDITIONS OF INADEQUATE PROTECTION OF TRAIN OPERATIONS.