Locomotive Engineer in Amtrak #501 Wreck Sues the Rail Carrier

The Amtrak engineer at the throttle of Train #501 when it de-railed on a curve near Tacoma, WA on December 18th, 2017, has filed a personal injury lawsuit against the company. The suit claims that the carrier failed to properly train the engineer, Steven Brown, in the operation of the locomotive and did not provide adequate “qualification” on the train’s new routing, known as the “Fort Defiance Bypass.”

In addition, the suit also claims that Amtrak failed to install Positive Train Control (PTC), which allowed the train to exceed the speed limit by nearly 50 MPH as the train entered a sharp curve. The train had 77 passengers, five Amtrak crew members and a technician from the train’s manufacturer on board. Three passengers died and 57 others were injured.

According to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) official investigation, the train’s speed was 78 mph at the time it left the tracks in a curve rated at just 30. But the NTSB concluded that Brown wasn’t familiar enough with the new Siemens built Charger type locomotive he was operating that day, nor with the new Point Defiance bypass route “physical characteristics.”

Apparently, engineers and conductors had been “batch” qualified, with up to 5 or more in the cab of the locomotive, while conductors rode in the rear looking backwards. Neither are typical nor acceptable means of qualifying train and engine personnel. As the NTSB Chair Robert Sumwalt stated, “The engineer was set up to fail.”

Train & Engine crews across the country are outraged that such blatantly shoddy “qualifying” was undertaken by the carrier. At the first of a series of civil trials of passengers and surviving family members of the deceased, Amtrak assumed full responsibility. “We’re here because Amtrak was negligent,” the carrier’s attorney Mark Landman told the jury in his opening statement at the federal courthouse in Tacoma, Washington, last year. “It never should have happened.”

Landman’s statement of course begs the question, why the hell did it happen? There is a lot of speculation as to why service on the new line was seemingly rushed. Certain funds were supposedly in jeopardy had the service not commenced by year’s end. In addition, there is speculation that that the numerous agencies involved in the initiation of the service – Amtrak, Washington DOT, Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority and the FRA - failed to properly coordinate with one another, with neither assuming responsibility for general oversight. Further, there is a suggestion that the management reshuffles, imminent “buyouts” and furloughs of some 500 managers systemwide at Amtrak may have factored into the slipshod management at that time. Announced by new Amtrak CEO and President Richard Anderson just a few weeks earlier, the budget cutting scheme of the former airline CEO called for the elimination of 500 managers systemwide from all regions and levels by year’s end.

John Hiatt, of the Bremseth Law Firm which is representing the engineer in the lawsuit, stated that, “This case of inadequate training is not simply a “one off”. The company, behind its CEO, is making drastic cuts in safety related personnel and programs while losing thousands of years of railroading knowledge.”