

NTSB Continues Investigating Fatal South Carolina Train Crash

Courtesy, Rail Passengers Association

Two Amtrak crew were killed when the train they were operating was diverted into a parked CSX freight train in Cayce, SC Sunday (February 4). The incident occurred after a manual switch was left in the wrong position in an area of track controlled by CSX railroad. [The National Transportation Safety Board \(NTSB\) has been investigating the accident](#), and preliminary reports have said that a maintenance crew was working to install Positive Train Control (PTC) on the railway when they set a manual switch that disabled an existing signal system for the track. The change in the switch position diverted the Amtrak train onto the same siding as the CSX freight train.



"This is another tragic accident that should not have happened, and should not have resulted in the loss of two lives," said Rail Passengers Association (RPA) President Jim Mathews. "It highlights the critical need for Positive Train Control to be implemented and utilized by railroads, which we know many times over, can help save lives. It's sobering and disheartening to learn that the accident occurred while the PTC system was being installed."

Robert L. Sumwalt, chairman of the NTSB, said PTC, which can automatically slow and stop trains to prevent accidents, could have helped prevent this most recent incident, as well as the Amtrak derailment in Washington State in December.

Sumwalt also contended that the Amtrak engineer should have noticed that the switch was in the wrong direction. The NTSB is taking a closer look at the switch, and why it was locked in the wrong position.

The NTSB revealed that the Amtrak engineer applied the emergency brake [before the train collided with the freight train at 50 mph](#). The force of the impact derailed the lead locomotive and a couple of passenger cars, injuring 116 passengers. This accident is the third Amtrak accident in less than two months: last week an Amtrak train carrying dozens of Republican lawmakers headed to the Greenbrier resort for a planning retreat hit a garbage truck in Virginia, and in December an Amtrak train derailed in DuPont, WA and resulted in the deaths of three people, including RPA members Jim Hamre and Zack Willhoite.

The recent accidents, though unrelated in their causes, have put a spotlight on the ability of railroads to implement PTC. The technology was originally set by Congress to be installed by the end of 2015, but after a push by the rail industry, lawmakers postponed the deadline until the end of 2018. Several railroads are still struggling to fund and install PTC, and there is a possibility the deadline could be extended to the end of 2020.

With the recent accidents and the deadline looming for PTC installation, [House Democrats urged the Trump administration](#) to fully fund Amtrak's network for the 2019 Fiscal Year. The request (*continued*)

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came in a letter to White House budget chief Mick Mulvaney from Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.), the House Appropriations Committee ranking member, as well as Reps. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.), David Price (D-N.C.), Katherine Clark (D-Mass.) and Pete Aguilar (D-Calif.).

"As you work with President Trump to finalize the Administration's Fiscal Year 2019 budget request, we urge you to fully fund Amtrak's National Network request, including funds for infrastructure to facilitate host railroad Positive Train Control," the House members said in the letter. **"Without this funding, passengers and commerce traveling by rail will continue to be at risk."**

Following the DuPont derailment in December, [USDOT Secretary Elaine Chao warned railroad leaders in a letter](#) that she is concerned that railroads will not be able to meet the 2018 deadline for PTC implementation. Secretary Chao said that her letter should serve as a reminder to the railroads to emphasize that at the end of 2018, railroads are required to meet Congressionally-mandated milestones.

"The coming year is filled with an agenda of rail safety-oriented initiatives, and among the most important is advancing the implementation of Positive Train Control," Secretary Chao said. **"This particular initiative must be executed within the regulatory timelines as extended by Congress."**

Safety on the Rails Matters—Always

By Jim Mathews

On a recent Wednesday morning, I asked my staff to post a cautionary video of a truck driver in Florida ignoring flashing lights and lowered crossing gates to drive across the tracks, narrowly avoiding crashing into a Brightline train. Hours later, Republican members of Congress were involved in an accident when the Amtrak train they were riding hit a garbage truck at a grade crossing outside Charlottesville, Virginia.

The driver appears to have ignored flashing lights and lowered crossing gates in an attempt to beat the train across the tracks.

Was this a premonition? A coincidence? Sadly, neither.

You don't have to be a psychic to predict these accidents. In the U.S., a person or vehicle gets hit by a train every three hours, accounting for 96 percent of rail industry fatalities.

Of course, most of these incidents involve freight trains, and most casualties are not members of Congress, so they don't get the same media attention. But the loss is real, and it begs the question: What needs to be done?

Foremost is public education. Much of this comes down to

unsafe behavior by drivers and pedestrians who ignore common-sense rules. It's why we posted the near-collision video. People need to understand the risks involved in trying to race a train.

There are also real policy prescriptions. Congress enacted Section 130, a federal program that provides states with dedicated funding to make safety upgrades to highway-rail grade crossings. This program has invested \$2 billion over the past decade, and it's produced real results: a 23 percent reduction in fatalities and a 33 percent reduction in rail trespassing fatalities.

That's a drop in the bucket considering the number of rail crossings in the US, and there's much more that can be done. With an absence of federal leadership, some states are leading the way.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation launched the Sealed Corridor Program along the Raleigh-Charlotte corridor to eliminate or improve rail-highway grade crossings. By using enhanced track control devices, crossing closures, and grade separations, they've lowered the number of unprotected crossings from more than 3,500 in 1992 to 1,640 today. A USDOT analysis found a 67 percent to 98 percent reduction in gate violations, saving an estimated 20 lives over a 10-year period. Sealed corridors work, but they require funding — something Congress has proved unable to act on.

It's a familiar story. Congress mandated implementation of Positive Train Control safety technology following a deadly commuter rail collision in 2008. But funding never materialized, so deadlines were extended. More PTC-preventable accidents occurred, and more lives were lost — just this last December two Rail Passengers Association members were killed in a derailment in Washington state.

This Congress seems to require a looming crisis to pass legislation. Even now, there are hundreds of millions of dollars in additional funding for rail safety grant programs, approved on a bipartisan basis in the summer... but currently trapped in limbo because Congress can't pass a budget, instead limping from one short-term continuing resolution to another.

Perhaps this week's train collision will be the crisis Congress needs to take safety seriously, and tackle the much talked about infrastructure bill. For someone who has taken this personally for a long time, I'd say it's long overdue.

Editor's Note: With infrastructure spending included in the just approved federal budget, read future issues of *All Aboard Indiana* for more information on what dollars are allocated for rail.

Jim Mathews is president of the Rail Passengers Association, the oldest and largest national membership organization fighting for more and better trains in America.

Anderson Testifying Feb. 15 About Safety Technology

Courtesy, Rail Passengers Association

In light of the recent accidents, Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson [will testify before a U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee panel](#) on February 15 regarding the implementation of safety technology, such as PTC. In addition to hearing Anderson, the Committee said it will also invite leaders of federal transportation agencies, private rail operators, public transit agencies and labor groups to discuss PTC implementation.

Of the recent fatal accidents, Anderson said that Amtrak is not at fault for two of them, including the South Carolina incident, where CSX was responsible for the switch that was padlocked in a position that steered the Amtrak train onto a siding where it crashed into the CSX train.

Failed “Hardware” Being Replaced on Acela Fleet

Courtesy, Rail Passengers Association

In a yet another, non-fatal passenger train accident, “Hardware failure,” caused two Acela cars to come apart this month while the train traveled towards Boston, [Amtrak officials said](#). The incident took place in Maryland after the train left Union Station in D.C., and was traveling at 124 mph. Despite the description of the incident, the train’s safety systems kicked in and immediately stopped the train, which carried 52 passengers.

Amtrak spokeswoman Christina Leeds said, “As a result of this incident, Amtrak mechanical personnel at three mechanical facilities examined the connecting hardware on each of the Acela trainsets during daily inspections yesterday and found no defects.”

Regardless of finding no defective parts, Amtrak said it will replace the hardware that failed on the two cars on its entire Acela fleet.

A Comment from IPRA’s President on Recent Passenger Rail Tragedies

The Indiana Passenger Rail Alliance (IPRA) joins many others across the nation in grieving for a combined six people killed since December in separate passenger rail accidents in Washington State, Virginia, and South Carolina. Each of these accidents has generated substantial media coverage, all which has caused even the most ardent passenger rail advocate to ask how safe is it to travel by train in America.



Virginia crash photo by Zack Wajsgasu, AP.

In our January issue of *All Aboard Indiana*, three stories on rail safety were featured. A CSX derailment in Rensselear led off the issue. Fortunately, there were no fatalities or injuries in that accident when 16 freight cars derailed. Residents from some Rensselear homes were evacuated for several hours. Two Lafayette station volunteers stepped up to make sure Amtrak passengers on Northbound and Southbound *Hoosier States* trains made their destinations. (Freight and passenger trains share train tracks in Indiana and elsewhere across the nation.)

A second story featured Operation Lifesaver, a nonprofit organization that encourages everyone to look, listen, and live when walking or driving near railroad tracks. Flashing lights and a lowered crossing gate were apparently ignored this month by a truck driver in Virginia – costing one fatality and additional injuries. (For more information on Operation Lifesaver, plug Operation Lifesaver – Indiana into your browser.)

The preliminary report on how Positive Train Control (PTC) could have prevented the Amtrak Cascades derailment last December was also written about in the January AAI. Three lives were needlessly lost in that tragedy, as that passenger train was moving at 78 mph in a 30-mph zone around a curve. In the words of Rail Passengers Association President Jim Mathews:

“The NTSB report only strengthens the need to implement PTC on all passenger rail services.”

The need for PTC was emphasized even more in the South Carolina crash. Ironically, installation of PTC contributed to the crash. (See the page one story in this issue of *All Aboard Indiana*.)

The bottom line is safety is everyone’s number one priority as IPRA continues to nudge Indiana into the 21st Century, in respect to the development of modern passenger rail systems. Let’s make sure all Hoosiers know this fact.

On behalf of the IPRA board,
Steve Coxhead,
 President

P.S. IPRA extends its gratitude to the Rail Passengers Association for allowing us to reproduce material from the February 9 Hotline #1053.

Indiana Operation Lifesaver

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What is Indiana Operation Lifesaver?

Indiana Operation Lifesaver (INOL) is a nonprofit public safety education and awareness organization dedicated to reducing collisions, fatalities and injuries at highway-rail crossings and trespassing on or near railroad tracks.

OL promotes rail safety through public awareness campaigns and education initiatives, including free safety presentations by authorized volunteers. We speak to school groups, driver education classes, community audiences, professional drivers, law enforcement officers, emergency responders, and others.

Our program is co-sponsored by state and local government agencies, highway safety organizations, America's railroads, and other entities. Together we promote the three E's - education, enforcement and engineering - to keep people safe around the tracks and railway crossings within our communities. INOL is part of a national nonprofit program known as Operation Lifesaver, Inc. (OLI).

Why is Operation Lifesaver Needed?

Sadly, every year people in Indiana are killed or injured at highway-rail crossings and at other locations along railroad tracks.

Many people are unaware that trains cannot stop quickly to avoid collisions; or, they take chances by ignoring warning signs and signals, going around lowered gates, stopping on tracks, or simply not paying attention when approaching highway-rail crossings.

People also make the potentially fatal mistake of choosing railroad tracks as shortcuts or as places to walk or run for recreation. They may not realize that walking on train tracks is illegal, or understand how quickly and quietly a train can approach. Our safety tips can save your life – or the life of someone you love.

Become an Operation Lifesaver Authorized Volunteer

We are always looking for high-energy volunteers to help us

spread our important message. Our volunteers are everywhere—schools, training programs, law enforcement events and safety fairs—with the common purpose of keeping our citizens safe. You can begin the process today by clicking: community.oli.org/community/form_volunteer_applications.

Indiana Operation Lifesaver Statistics Preliminary Indiana Rail Crossing and Trespass Statistics, 2016 vs. 2015

Source: FRA Office of Safety Analysis

2016 Crossing Collisions: 116

2016 Crossing Fatalities: 10

2016 Crossing Injuries: 36

2016 Trespasser Fatalities: 7

2016 Trespasser Injuries: 12

Vs.

2015 Crossing Collisions: 119

2015 Crossing Fatalities: 11

2015 Crossing Injuries: 42

2015 Trespasser Fatalities: 11

2015 Trespasser Injuries: 14

*Indiana is ranked 4th nationally for crossing collisions

Discounts

Crowne Plaza Union Station Indianapolis: Ask for discount 100329414 and receive 12% off the best flexible rate.

AAA and NARP members save 10% off Amtrak tickets at www.amtrak.com if booked three or more days in advance.

For More Information

All Aboard Indiana is a monthly publication of the Indiana Passenger Rail Alliance (IPRA), formerly the Indiana High Speed Rail Association (INHSRA).

To learn more about IPRA, visit www.indianahighspeedrail.org or contact us via USPS or email:

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