



Log H-586D

National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: MAR 13 1996

In reply refer to: H-96-9 and -10

Ms. Gerri L. Hall
Executive Director
Operation Lifesaver, Inc.
1420 King Street, Suite 401
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

About 2:35 a.m. on May 2, 1995, National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) train No. 81, the Silver Star, on its southbound run from New York, New York, to Tampa, Florida, struck an O&J Gordon Trucking Company (O&J) tractor-lowbed semitrailer combination that had been lodged for 30 to 35 minutes on a rural, high-vertical-profile (hump), passive grade crossing about 1 mile north of Sycamore, South Carolina. At the time of the accident, the train was using a single main line track belonging to CSX Transportation, Inc. (CSXT). The two locomotive units and 14 cars of the 16-car consist derailed. The tractor and semitrailer were substantially damaged. No fire ensued.¹

The train was carrying 279 passengers, 9 service crew members, and 5 operating crew members. Thirty-three persons sustained minor injuries. Combined property damage to the train and truck exceeded \$1 million.

The Safety Board determined that the truckdriver failed to understand that the substandard profile of the grade crossing was incompatible with the truck he was operating, and he did not know what actions he should take to notify authorities once his vehicle became lodged. The Safety Board concluded that, like many truckdrivers, this driver was untrained in grade crossing safety and emergency notification procedures and was therefore unprepared to react appropriately to this situation.

The Safety Board has had a longstanding objective of improving safety at highway/rail grade crossings. Since 1976, the Safety Board has investigated more than 300 grade crossing accidents and has focused on the many safety issues involved at intersections where the paths of motor vehicles and trains meet. The Board has issued some 190 safety recommendations to

¹For more detailed information, read Highway Accident Report--*Highway/Rail Grade Crossing Collision Near Sycamore, South Carolina, May 2, 1995* (NTSB/HAR-96/01).

Federal and State agencies, railroads, and safety organizations in an effort to have deficiencies corrected. Although the number of accidents and deaths at grade crossings has been reduced dramatically, grade crossing accidents continue to be the largest single source of fatalities and injuries involving railroad operations.

There are at least 168,000 public and 108,000 private grade crossings nationwide. Large commercial vehicles use these crossings frequently in the conduct of business. Since 1983, the Board has investigated at least 16 accidents in which lowbed vehicles lodged on grade crossings and were struck by trains. Two of those 16 accidents occurred during the investigation and report preparation process for this accident. The 16 accidents, all of them non-fatal, resulted in 296 injuries and more than \$19 million in property damage.

The Safety Board looked at several potential countermeasures that would improve driver awareness of hump crossings and possibly reduce the likelihood of collisions between trains and lowbed trucks. One of those countermeasures involved educating lowbed vehicle operators and other motorists on the dangers of traveling over hump crossings, and advising them of what to do when vehicles become lodged/stalled. Clearly, all truckdrivers should be educated on the hazards of grade crossings in general and hump crossings in particular. They need to be advised on how to avoid these crossings, and on how to notify police and/or railroad officials when emergencies occur.

Safety Board staff held a meeting on October 10, 1995, with industry representatives from the American Trucking Associations, Inc., (ATA), the Specialized Carriers and Rigging Association, the National Automobile Transporters Association, the Truck Trailer Manufacturer's Association (TTMA), and Operation Lifesaver, Inc. (OL). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss potential ways of informing truckdrivers of the hazards of hump crossings. One observation resulting from that meeting was that OL can, and will, be more proactive in addressing the hazards of hump crossings and low-ground-clearance vehicles in its truckdriver grade crossing safety education efforts for trucking groups.

Several industry training manuals and advisory programs address hump crossings. Specifically, the ATA and the TTMA in their training manual and technical bulletins have published information that provides some guidance on hump crossings. Although this material may be widely distributed amongst larger motor carriers who actively participate in the national industry groups, it is unlikely that the information receives wide distribution among the smaller, local carriers like O&J that are engaged in interstate and intrastate operations but are not members of these groups. Thus, many truckdrivers employed in smaller operations may not be aware of the consequences of driving low-ground-clearance vehicles over hump crossings.

The OL program has been successful in educating the general public about grade crossing safety. Recently OL officials have directed significant attention to trucking groups. Representatives of OL stated that they will include awareness of hump crossings in their truck program. The Safety Board commends the efforts of OL, and believes that it should not only expand its educational program to include hump-crossing awareness, but should also target the expanded program to groups that are not exposed to industry programs. The Safety Board further

believes that OL should expand the North and South Carolina initiative that provides emergency personnel with railroad industry telephone numbers to use when vehicles become lodged or stalled on crossings.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that Operation Lifesaver, Inc.:

In conjunction with appropriate trucking industry groups, expand your existing programs to educate truckdrivers who are not exposed to industry programs on the hazards of hump grade crossings. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-96-9)

In cooperation with the Class I railroads, railroad systems, the American Short Line Railroad Association, and the American Public Transit Association, expand your existing programs to inform the general public and law enforcement and emergency response agencies of grade crossing emergency notification programs within their respective States. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-96-10)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations H-96-1 through -4 to the Secretary of Transportation; H-96-5 to the Federal Highway Administration; R-96-1 to the American Public Transit Association; H-96-6 and -7 to the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators; H-96-8 to the American Trucking Associations, Inc.; R-96-2 to the American Short Line Railroad Association; R-96-3 to Class I railroads and railroad systems; and H-96-11 and -12 to O&J Gordon Trucking Company. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 382-6208.

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety board is vitally interested in any action taken as a result of its safety recommendations. Therefore, it would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations H-96-9 and -10 in your reply. If you need more information, you may call (202) 382-6208.

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in these recommendations.

By: 
Jim Hall
Chairman