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NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: February 20, 1985

Forwarded to:

Honorable Richard M. Anderson
New Courthouse
Third Floor
Marshall, Texas 75670

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

R-85-6 and -7

About 10:09 a.m. on November 12, 1983, Amtrak train No. 21 (The Eagle), with 162 persons aboard, derailed near Woodlawn, Texas, while traveling at 72 mph on the Missouri Pacific Railroad (MP). The train was traveling westbound on the single main track when it passed over a section of rail that a repair crew had just installed to replace a broken rail. The break had occurred at a field weld in a length of new, continuous-welded, 136-lb RE section, chrome-vanadium alloy, high-strength, vacuum-treated rail, which had been installed in the track about 1 month earlier. The temporary repair consisted of removing a length of the outer rail in a curve and replacing it with a 19-foot 6-inch length of rail bolted in place. The repair insert was a section of used, 136-lb RE section, standard-carbon rail. The repair crew used an oxyacetylene torch to cut both the new alloy rail and the used standard-carbon rail during the repair. The accident resulted in 4 passenger fatalities and 72 injuries. Damage was estimated to be more than \$2,180,000. 1/

The first rescue units, from the Marshall, Texas Fire Department, arrived at the accident scene about 10:25 a.m. and requested assistance from three additional jurisdictions. Many other jurisdictions responded without having been requested to do so after learning of the accident through emergency services radio frequencies and commercial radio stations. Emergency personnel from at least 21 jurisdictions responded to the accident scene. Rescue personnel assisted persons in the overturned cars, initially by hoisting them by hand up to a window, and then by using ladders to facilitate access to the car interiors. All of the passengers and crewmembers were evacuated from the accident site within 1 hour after the emergency response personnel arrived.

Several emergency response personnel, law enforcement officers, and the county civil defense director stated to Safety Board investigators that the lack of a disaster plan and a central dispatching system hampered rescue efforts. Specific problems cited included the lack of a designated on-scene commander, a command post, and a chain of

1/ For more detailed information, read Railroad Accident Report--"Derailment of Amtrak Train No. 21 (The Eagle) on the Missouri Pacific Railroad, Woodlawn, Texas, November 12, 1983" (NTSB/RAR-85/01).

command; lack of a mutual-aid radio frequency for communication among most responding units; and poor crowd control which resulted in the access road to the accident site being clogged with vehicles, including emergency vehicles, and hampering rescue efforts. By about 11 a.m., the main highway and the access road to the railroad had become obstructed with vehicles, severely impeding the flow of traffic. Additional responding emergency personnel continued to head for the accident site even though their services had not been requested; they could not be headed off due to lack of information on their identity. There was no mutual aid agreement among the responding jurisdictions.

Had there been an effective disaster contingency plan in place with a county-wide emergency services dispatching system, a commander would have been designated for the emergency response effort who would have been able to tailor the response to the needs of the accident and better coordinate those efforts. Moreover, a centralized dispatching system probably would have reduced the on-scene congestion, much of it involving emergency vehicles, which hampered the rescue efforts of the emergency personnel.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that Harrison County, Texas:

Establish a centralized emergency services dispatching system. (Class II, Priority Action) (R-85-6)

In coordination with neighboring jurisdictions, develop and implement a mutual-aid agreement for responding to emergencies which provides for the orderly dispatch of emergency service units in participating jurisdictions on an "as needed" basis. (Class II, Priority Action) (R-85-7)

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 actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter.

BURNETT, Chairman, GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, and BURSLEY, Member, concurred in these recommendations.


By: Jim Burnett
Chairman