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NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: August 17, 1982

Forwarded to:

Honorable John Spellman
Governor of Washington
Olympia, Washington 98504

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

H-82-30

During 1981, the National Transportation Safety Board investigated seven accidents involving collisions at railroad/highway grade crossings in the State of Washington, the most recent being a grade crossing accident which occurred on September 12, 1981, in Spokane, Washington, when a Volkswagen drove in front of a Burlington Northern freight train. The driver of the automobile and his 21-month-old son were killed in the crash.

Accident statistics indicate that in the 4-year period from 1978 to 1981 there were 751 accident/incidents at railroad/highway grade crossings in the State of Washington. These accident/incidents resulted in 59 fatalities and 164 injuries. Although the number of fatalities resulting from grade crossing accidents has declined nationally in recent years, it has remained constant in the State of Washington over the last 2 years.

To reduce the number of accidents involving collisions of trains and highway vehicles at grade crossings which result in fatalities and injuries, a uniform, coordinated effort is needed. The education, enforcement, engineering, and legislative effort that is required involves interaction among agencies that may ordinarily not become involved in each other's activities. Trucking associations, State and local departments of transportation, labor groups, enforcement agencies, legislatures, railroads, highway carriers, and shippers should participate in this effort.

In 32 States, many of these agencies are currently working together in "Operation Lifesaver" programs which are being coordinated by the National Safety Council. In locations where this program has been implemented, the results have been impressive and encouraging in terms of reduced accidents, fatalities, and injuries at grade crossings. ^{1/} From 1978 to 1981, fatalities in those States with "Operation Lifesaver" programs have dropped 31.9 percent (from 941 to 641), injuries 25.9 percent, and accidents 30.8 percent. A Safety Board review of the railroad accident data of all the States that do not have an "Operation Lifesaver" program in effect indicates that six States, of which Washington is one, could benefit from joining in the "Operation Lifesaver" program.

^{1/} Railroad/Highway Accident Report--"Collision of Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad Company Freight Train with an Automobile, Des Moines, Iowa, July 1, 1976" (NTSB-RHR-77-2); and "Operation Lifesaver-A Program to Reduce Accidents and Deaths at Railroad-Highway Crossings," Traffic Safety, Vol. 79, No. 8, August 1979.

The Safety Board is aware that officials of your State are knowledgeable of the "Operation Lifesaver" concept and that some preliminary discussion has been held concerning an "Operation Lifesaver" program in Washington. However, it is our understanding that no definite plans have been made to proceed with the program. The Safety Board believes that Washington's participation in the voluntary "Operation Lifesaver" program would improve safety for highway and railroad users throughout the State.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the State of Washington:

Adopt an "Operation Lifesaver" program as a foundation for a Statewide effort to reduce accidents at railroad/highway grade crossings in Washington. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-82-30)

BURNETT, Chairman, GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, and McADAMS and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in this recommendation.


By: Jim Burnett
Chairman