

R-364A

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: June 29, 1981

Forwarded to:

Mr. William J. Taylor
President and Chief Executive Officer
Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Company
233 North Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60601

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

R-81-77 and -78

At approximately 6:58 p.m., c.s.t., on November 25, 1980, a southbound tractor/cargo-tank semitrailer loaded with 8,600 gallons of gasoline approached a railroad/highway grade crossing on Williams Boulevard in Kenner, Louisiana. The vehicle was driven around the automatic grade crossing warning gates which were down and was struck by an eastbound Illinois Central Gulf Railroad freight train. The freight train's lights were illuminated, its whistle was sounding, and its bell was ringing. The overturning semitrailer struck a northbound automobile stopped at the crossing. Gasoline flowing from the ruptured cargo tank ignited. The burning gasoline destroyed the automobile, a building, the semitrailer, and damaged 19 other automobiles. The train locomotive was derailed and was damaged by fire. Seven persons were killed and six others were injured in the accident. 1/

The firechief did not know the contents of the train cars in the vicinity of the fire during the emergency. A search for the train conductor was initiated by the firechief on the south side of the crossing. The conductor said that he had come forward from the caboose to the fire area with all the papers necessary and spent his time on the north side of the fire helping to keep spectators away from the train. He was aware that he was supposed to provide information about contents of the train and pertinent information concerning hazardous materials to the fire authorities, but he said no one asked him for any information and he did not volunteer any information.

The conductor literally complied with the railroad's special instructions. However, if he had taken the initiative to contact the command post at the scene through other emergency service personnel, he could have provided information concerning the train car contents and might have been helpful in providing communication with the proper railroad personnel that could have expedited the train movements the firefighters felt were necessary. The ICG railroad should modify its instructions to make them specific concerning the actions that traincrews should take in an emergency.

1/ For more detailed information, read Railroad/Highway Accident Report--"Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Freight Train/Mobil Oil Company Tractor Cargo-Tank Semitrailer Collision and Fire, Kenner, Louisiana, November 25, 1981" (NTSB-RHR-81-1).

Though Kenner City Ordinance No. 13 1/2-3 prohibits a railroad train from blocking a crossing longer than 10 minutes, some citizens complained that switching in the area results in the Williams Boulevard crossing being blocked at times from 15 to 45 minutes. Some city officials agreed that the railroad crossings along the ICG track were often blocked much longer than the 10-minute limit and this was a concern because it restricted their police and fire protection coverage on both sides of the tracks.

The ICG Operating Rules, section 103d states:

Public grade crossings must not be blocked longer than five minutes when it can be avoided. When parting trains or cuts of cars at such locations, the cars should be left not less than fifty feet from each side of crossing, when practical. Before movement is made to recouple, the crossing must be protected by a trainman.

In their interpretation of the above rule, they further state:

Unnecessary operation of automatic grade crossing warning devices due to engines or cars standing on circuit, especially at certain locations where it is done frequently, tends to cause motorists to disregard those warning devices, and must be avoided.

The ICG Railroad should require compliance with these operating rules by the crew members responsible for the operation of their trains. This would assure compliance with the City of Kenner's ordinance and avoid contributing to the cause of motorists' disregard of traffic control devices and automatic crossing gates at railroad/highway grade crossings.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Illinois Central Gulf Railroad Company:

Revise Special Instruction No. 1210, subitems 6 and 7, of the Mississippi Division Timetable No. 1 to require that, in the event of an emergency involving a train, the conductor must actively seek out the onscene individual in charge of the emergency service operation, identify himself, and provide the materials and information described in the instructions. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-81-77)

Enforce the company operating rules that require all train crews to comply with ICG rules, local ordinances, and/or State statutes relating to the prohibition against blocking railroad/highway grade crossings beyond established time limits. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-81-78)

KING, Chairman, and GOLDMAN and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations. DRIVER, Vice Chairman, and McADAMS, Member, did not participate.


By: James B. King
Chairman