

R-364B

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: June 29, 1981

Forwarded to:

Mr. William H. Dempsey
President and Chief Executive Officer
Association of American Railroads
American Railroads Building
1920 L Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

R-81-79 and -80

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/

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.

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).

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.

Not only the ICG Railroad but all railroads should have and enforce similar Operating Rules or Special Instructions. The Association of American Railroads should disseminate the details of this accident to their members and urge that the necessary action be taken to avoid the lengthy blockage of railroad/highway grade crossings.

During the fire, the fire chief was unsuccessful in his attempts to contact the conductor and did not know the contents of the railroad cars stopped in the fire area. 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 the information to anyone.

The conductor was not wearing an identifiable uniform or insignia and the fire department personnel seeking him apparently did not recognize him. ICG Special Instructions #1210 require the conductor to make himself "available" at an emergency scene.

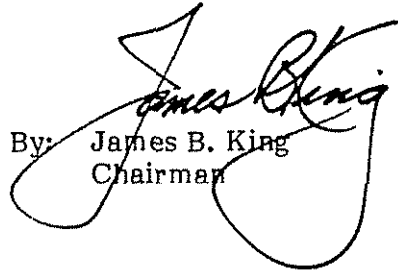
The conductor literally complied with his railroad special instructions. However, if he had taken the initiative to contact the command post at the scene through emergency service personnel, he could have provided information concerning the train car contents and might have been helpful in providing 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 very specific as to the actions that traincrews should take in an emergency. Such accidents are not limited to the City of Kenner or to the ICG Railroad. The Association of American Railroads should disseminate the circumstances of this accident and the recommendations included in this report to their membership, so that all railroads will benefit from the lessons learned.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the American Association of Railroads:

Inform the Association membership of the circumstances of this accident and urge that all railroad operating rules require that, in the event of an emergency involving a train, the conductor be required to actively seek out the onscene individual in charge of the emergency service operation, identify himself, and provide the information contained in the waybills and train consist. (Class II, Priority Action) (R-81-79)

Inform the Association membership of the circumstances of this accident with special emphasis on the blocking of railroad/highway grade crossings in violation of local ordinances which fosters a disregard by motorists for traffic control devices at grade crossings and urge the member companies to include in their operating rules and special instructions a prohibition against such practices and the requirement for their personnel to comply with such operating rules and local ordinances at grade crossings. (Class II, Priority Action) (R-81-80)

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