



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

## Safety Recommendation

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**Date:** August 27, 1999

**In reply refer to:** H-99-28

Mr. Curtis Wiley  
Commissioner  
Indiana Department of Transportation  
Indiana Government Center North  
100 North Senate Avenue, Room N755  
Indianapolis, Indiana 46204-2249

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About 4:31 a.m. central daylight time on June 18, 1998, a westbound Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) two-car passenger train struck the second semitrailer of a long combination vehicle that consisted of a tractor pulling two flatbed semitrailers loaded with steel coils at a highway-rail grade crossing near Portage, Indiana. When the vehicles collided, the second semitrailer broke away from the first semitrailer and was dragged by the front of the train, while the single chain securing a steel coil to the second semitrailer broke. The released steel coil, weighing about 19 tons, entered the train through the front bulkhead of the lead car and moved into the passenger compartment. Three fatalities and five minor injuries resulted from the accident. Damages were estimated to total \$886,000.<sup>1</sup>

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the collision between NICTD train 102 and a long combination vehicle (truck) at the National Steel Corporation's Midwest Steel grade crossing was ineffective action by Federal, State, and private agencies to permanently resolve safety problems at the Midwest Steel grade crossing, which they knew to be a hazardous crossing.

The crossing area of the Midwest Steel compound grade crossing consisted of two sets of double tracks, one set owned by the Consolidated Rail Corporation (Conrail)<sup>2</sup> and one by NICTD, separated by 86 feet and 9 3/4 inches of paved asphalt (from the southernmost Conrail rail to the northernmost NICTD rail). A 58-foot space lay between the southernmost Conrail gate and the northernmost NICTD gate. Thus, the maximum storage area for the grade crossing was about 58 feet.

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information, read *Collision of Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District Train 102 with a Tractor-Trailer, Portage, Indiana, June 18, 1998*, Railroad/Highway Accident Report NTSB/RAR-99/03 (Washington, D.C.: National Transportation Safety Board, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the accident, Conrail operated the northern portion of the Midwest Steel crossing. As of June 1, 1999, the Conrail operation in this area was taken over by the Norfolk Southern Corporation.

The long combination vehicle involved in the accident was 82 feet long, 24 feet longer than the 58-foot storage distance. Nevertheless, nothing in law or practice prevented the 82-foot-long vehicle from using this crossing. Therefore, the Safety Board concluded that, as currently configured, the Midwest Steel grade-crossing storage area cannot safely accommodate all vehicles that are allowed to use it.

Since the Portage accident in late June 1998, several additional incidents and near-misses have taken place at the Midwest Steel grade crossing. The Safety Board understands that, even before this accident occurred, the National Steel Corporation, NICTD, the Indiana Department of Transportation, the Port of Indiana, and the Federal Railroad Administration had agreed that the safety issues raised by the crossing should be addressed. The Safety Board has long advocated total grade separation as the best means of ensuring grade-crossing safety.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board makes the following safety recommendation to the Indiana Department of Transportation:

Work together with the Federal Railroad Administration, the Federal Highway Administration, the National Steel Corporation, the Norfolk Southern Corporation, and the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District to make, within 2 years, permanent engineering changes to the Midwest Steel highway-rail grade crossing that will minimize or eliminate safety hazards at this crossing. (H-99-28)

Also, the Safety Board issued safety recommendations to the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Federal Railroad Administration, the Federal Highway Administration, the National Steel Corporation, the Norfolk Southern Corporation, and the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District.

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 within 90 days regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation H-99-28 in your reply. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6437.

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<sup>3</sup> National Transportation Safety Board, *Safety at Passive Grade Crossings, Volume I: Analysis*, Safety Study NTSB/SS-98/02 (Washington, D.C.: National Transportation Safety Board, 1998), p. 64.

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in this recommendation.

By: Jim Hall  
Chairman