



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Safety Recommendation

*Log H
H-586B*

Date: MAR 13 1996

In reply refer to: H-96-6 and -7

Mr. John H. Strandquist
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About 2:35 a.m. on May 2, 1995, National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) train No. 81, the Silver Star, on its southbound run from New York, New York, to Tampa, Florida, struck an O&J Gordon Trucking Company tractor-lowbed semitrailer combination that had been lodged for 30 to 35 minutes on a rural, high-vertical-profile (hump)¹, passive² grade crossing about 1 mile north of Sycamore, South Carolina. At the time of the accident, the train was using a single main line track belonging to CSX Transportation, Inc. (CSXT). The two locomotive units and 14 cars of the 16-car consist derailed. The tractor and semitrailer were substantially damaged. No fire ensued.³

The train was carrying 279 passengers, 9 service crew members, and 5 operating crew members. Thirty-three persons sustained minor injuries. Combined property damage to the train and truck exceeded \$1 million.

The Safety Board concluded that, like many truckdrivers, the driver involved in this accident was untrained in grade crossing safety and emergency notification procedures and was therefore unprepared to react appropriately to this situation. Because time is critical when a vehicle becomes lodged on a grade crossing, it is imperative that a railroad be notified as soon as possible to allow them the greatest opportunity to notify any trains en route to the blocked crossing. In this accident, 30 to 35 minutes elapsed between the time the vehicle became lodged and the train reached the crossing. The Safety Board reconstructed the time that it likely would

¹A grade crossing where the railroad tracks are significantly elevated above the approaching roadway, creating a "hump" profile.

²A grade crossing with passive devices such as signs but lacking other visual or audible signaling devices or gates that automatically activate when a train approaches.

³For more detailed information, read Highway Accident Report--*Highway/Rail Grade Crossing Collision Near Sycamore, South Carolina, May 2, 1995* (NTSB/HAR-96/01).

have taken for a call to 911 to have reached CSXT, and for a CSXT dispatcher to reach the train crew. The reconstruction suggested the process would take no more than 4 minutes. That would have been sufficient time for the train to have stopped short of the accident crossing. Consequently, the Safety Board concluded that had the driver taken the appropriate action and notified authorities shortly after becoming lodged, this accident would probably not have occurred.

There are at least 168,000 public and 108,000 private grade crossings nationwide. Large commercial vehicles use these crossings frequently in the conduct of business. Clearly, all truckdrivers should be educated on the hazards of grade crossings in general and hump crossings in particular. They need to be advised on how to avoid these crossings, and on how to notify police and/or railroad officials when emergencies occur. One approach to doing this, which will reach all new drivers, is through the commercial driver's license (CDL) program. All commercial operators of large trucks (over 26,000 pounds gross vehicle weight) must obtain a State-issued CDL by taking an examination that tests their knowledge and skills in motor carrier operation and safety. The CDL manual does contain some information on hump crossings; however, current CDL tests administered by the States do not ask questions about grade crossing safety.

The Safety Board believes that the CDL manual should be expanded to include more specific information on the operation of lowbed vehicles over hump crossings, including avoidance techniques, and should provide information on making emergency notifications to police and railroad officials when commercial vehicles become stalled or lodged on crossings. Further, the Safety Board believes that CDL tests administered by the States should include questions that test truckdrivers on their general knowledge of grade crossing safety, their awareness of the hazards of hump crossings, and their knowledge of related emergency notification procedures.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators:

Revise the commercial driver's license manual to include specific information on hump crossings, and ensure that truckdrivers are tested on their knowledge of grade crossing safety, with special emphasis on hump crossings. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-96-6)


Revise the commercial driver's license manual to include information on grade crossing emergency notification procedures, and ensure that truckdrivers are tested on their knowledge of these procedures. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-96-7)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations H-96-1 through -4 to the Secretary of Transportation; H-96-5 to the Federal Highway Administration; R-96-1 to the American Public Transit Association; H-96-8 to the American Trucking Associations, Inc.; R-96-2 to the American Short Line Railroad Association; H-96-9 and -10 to Operation Lifesaver, Inc.; R-96-3 to Class I railroads and railroad systems; and H-96-11 and -12 to O&J Gordon Trucking Company. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 382-6208.

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 regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations H-96-6 and -7 in your reply. If you need more information, you may call (202) 382-6208.

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in these recommendations.

By:


Jim Hall
Chairman