



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

## Safety Recommendation

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**Date:**

**In reply refer to:** R-98-62

Sheriff Tom Sheahan  
Mohave County Sheriff's Department  
301 West Beale Street  
Post Office Box 1191  
Kingman, Arizona 86402

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About 5:56 a.m., on August 9, 1997, National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) train 4, the Southwest Chief, derailed on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) tracks about 5 miles northeast of Kingman, Arizona. Amtrak train 4 was en route from Los Angeles, California, to Chicago, Illinois, and had just left the Kingman station. The train was traveling about 89 mph on the eastbound track when both the engineer and assistant engineer saw a "hump" in the track as they approached bridge 504.1S. They applied the train's emergency brakes. The train derailed as it crossed the bridge. Subsequent investigation revealed that the ground under the bridge's supporting structure had been washed away by a flash flood. Of the 294 passengers and 18 Amtrak employees on the train, 173 passengers and 10 Amtrak employees were injured. No fatalities resulted from the accident. The damages were estimated to total approximately \$7.2 million.<sup>1</sup>

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of this accident was displacement of the track due to the erosion and scouring of the inadequately protected shallow foundations supporting bridge 504.1S during a severe flash flood because the BNSF management had not provided adequate protection, either by inspection or altering train speeds to fit conditions. Contributing to the accident was the failure of the BNSF management to adequately address the erosion problems at bridge 504.1S.

The Safety Board is concerned that unverified notification information was issued during the emergency response to this accident. During the initial communication of on-site information by local agencies, some confusion resulted in the erroneous reporting of 8 to 13 fatalities, when no fatalities had actually occurred. A BNSF special agent called the Mohave County Sheriff's Department to inquire about the accident and was told that two persons in the upper level of train

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<sup>1</sup>For more detailed information, read Railroad Accident Report—*Derailed Amtrak Train 4, Southwest Chief, on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway, near Kingman, Arizona, August 9, 1997* (NTSB/RAR-98/03).

4's dormitory car were seriously injured and that those injured would probably be "DOA." The BNSF relayed this information to other BNSF employees and, in some cases, stated that two DOAs were reported. In subsequent conversations with the Mohave dispatcher and a sergeant, the BNSF special agent overheard the dispatcher talking to someone on scene over the radio referring to "six downstairs." The special agent asked if she had heard that there were two DOAs upstairs and six DOAs downstairs in the dormitory car; the sergeant replied, "Yes." The initial speculation by the Mohave dispatcher that those persons with serious injuries would become DOAs apparently caused others to use that same terminology. This incorrect information was subsequently relayed to various, including Federal, organizations.

The Safety Board recognizes that conflicting reports of the circumstances of an accident often are communicated initially, and that in the early stages of the response, emergency responders must speculate and evaluate the situation to ensure that adequate resources are available for the worst-case scenario; but speculation is not fact. The information that is relayed to responding agencies must be as accurate as possible, and information that is relayed to other parties must either be confirmed as factual or clearly characterized as unverified. The Safety Board concluded that the inaccurate reporting of fatalities that took place during the accident notification process was a result of unconfirmed information being relayed to Federal agencies by local organizations.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board makes the following safety recommendation to the Mohave County Sheriff's Department:

Review the circumstances of the derailment accident that occurred at Kingman, Arizona, on August 9, 1997, with your dispatchers and emphasize the importance of relaying verified factual information when communicating with other agencies.  
(R-98-62)

Also, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations R-98-48 through -53 to the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corporation, R-98-54 through -57 to the Federal Railroad Administration, H-98-41 to the Federal Highway Administration, H-98-42 to the Arizona Department of Transportation, R-98-58 through -61 to the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak), R-98-63 to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, R-98-64 to the National Sheriffs' Association, R-98-65 to the Association of American Railroads, and R-98-66 to the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association.

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 recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation R-98-62 in your reply. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6430.

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

By: Jim Hall  
Chairman