

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 9, 1981

Forwarded to:

Mr. Ronald Dansby
President
Rio Towing Company
2102 Broadway
Houston, Texas 77012

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-8 through -10

Shortly after 0811 c.d.t., on August 7, 1980, the Bermudan bulk carrier FORT CALGARY and the U. S. towboat BRAZOS and its tow collided near beacons 75 and 76 in the Houston Ship Channel. As a result of the collision, butadiene gas escaped from one of the barges in the BRAZOS' tow. This gas ignited and set fire to the BRAZOS which resulted in its being declared a constructive total loss. All five crewmen of the BRAZOS received burn injuries. All residents within a 1-mile radius of the burning barge were evacuated from their homes. The FORT CALGARY sustained relatively minor damage to its hull. The total damage, including cargo loss, resulting from this accident has been estimated at \$860,000. 1/

Although not related to the cause of this accident, the Safety Board believes that certain aspects of the BRAZOS' operation deserve comment. Neither the operator nor the relief operator knew the particulars of the cargoes carried in the barges that made up their tow. The Safety Board believes that such knowledge can be of prime importance to the safety of navigation. The person in charge of the navigation of a vessel should know what cargoes his vessel is moving, their inherent dangerous properties, and any precautions that may be taken to protect the vessel's crew, the marine environment, and the general populace inhabiting areas near navigable waterways. In this particular accident, the Safety Board believes that even if the operator and relief operator had known what cargoes were carried in the barges there was nothing that they could have done after the collision to have prevented the release and ignition of the butadiene or to have materially changed the outcome of the collision. Nevertheless, the Safety Board believes that the failure to learn the contents of the barges that made up their tow was a poor operational practice.

1/ For more detailed information, read "Marine Accident Report—Collision of U.S. Towboat BRAZOS with Bermudan Bulk Carrier FORT CALGARY, Houston Ship Channel, August 7, 1980" (NTSB-MAR-81-1).

The operator of the BRAZOS ignored the initial calls made by the pilot of the FORT CALGARY while broadcasting a routine position report to his company. The Safety Board believes that bridge-to-bridge radio communications between vessels that are being navigated in close quarters to each other should take precedence over all routine communications. The failure to establish bridge-to-bridge radio contact cannot fail to produce some feelings of uncertainty on the part of the person attempting such contact and may, in some cases, result in precipitous action which could endanger both vessels. Even though the operator of the BRAZOS completed his transmission to his company office and still established a meeting agreement with the FORT CALGARY, the Safety Board believes that the operator of the BRAZOS should not have persisted in his routine position report until after he had established and executed a meeting agreement with the FORT CALGARY.

No one on board the BRAZOS had the required tankerman certification for the handling of butadiene. The Safety Board does not believe that, had there been a tankerman certified to handle butadiene on board, the outcome of this accident would have been materially different. Under other conditions, however, it may have been crucial to have had someone knowledgeable and experienced in the handling of this product aboard, not just for the security of the tow and the safety of the crew, but also for the protection of the persons residing near the Houston Ship Channel.

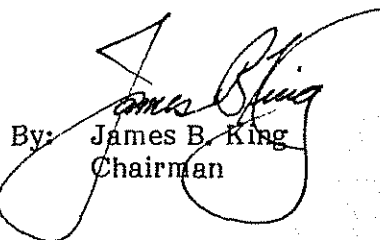
Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Rio Towing Company:

Establish a company policy whereby, in the interest of safe navigation, routine position reports of underway towboats are not to interfere with bridge-to-bridge radio communications. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-8)

Require company towboat operators and relief operators to inform themselves concerning the identity of cargoes in the barges in their tows. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-9)

Review company management policies and procedures to insure compliance with Coast Guard vessel operating regulations regarding the certification of company tankermen (46 CFR 31). (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-10)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, and McADAMS, GOLDMAN, and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations.


By: James B. King
Chairman