

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: May 31, 1978

Forwarded to:

Mr. L. S. Crane
President and Chief Executive Officer
Southern Railway Company
P.O. Box 1808
Washington, D.C. 20013

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

R-78-24

About 2:53 a.m. on October 8, 1977, Southern Railway Company passenger train No. 1, The Crescent, entered a crossover from the main track into the Spencer Yard at Spencer, North Carolina, and sideswiped freight cars which were being assembled as train No. 152 on an adjacent yard track. Four locomotive units and five cars of The Crescent and seven cars of train No. 152 were derailed. Twenty-six persons received minor injuries and damage was estimated to be \$250,000. 1/

The Safety Board's investigation of the accident found that signal 330.7, which governed the signal block in which the crossover was located, displayed a clear (green) aspect for The Crescent. The track circuit controlling the signal's aspect was not shunted when the north end of the crossover was lined for the yard. The improperly lined crossover would not have caused the accident if the signal system had not failed. However, because of improper operating practices and the failure of the back-up system, which was the automatic signal system, the accident occurred.

The Southern's operating rules by which the employees were governed were not specific in delineating the action that was to be taken. Thus, the rules were subject to varying interpretations and not enforceable. It had been assumed by all operating employees that the yardmaster could assume the responsibility for a switch and that he was in attendance as required by rule. The applicable rule did not clearly authorize this action nor did it define "in attendance." The applicable rule did not specifically define both ends of a crossover as a switch. Employees did not understand that operation of a switch meant both ends of a crossover. The engine crew for train No. 152 assumed that the yardmaster had full knowledge of the crossover's position because it was his responsibility.

1/ For more detailed information on this accident read Railroad Accident Report, Side Collision of Southern Railway Company Trains Nos. 1 and 152, Spencer, N.C., October 8, 1977, (NTSB-RAR-78-3).

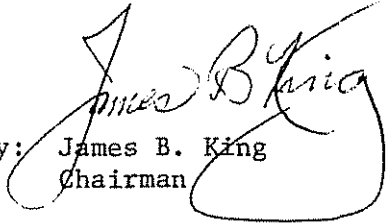
There apparently was a breakdown in communications between the yardmaster and the switch tender because the switch tender denied that he was told to reline the crossover involved in the accident. If the switch tender had stated specifically what chores he had finished or if the yardmaster had been specific in his check on what had been done, the crossover would not have been left improperly positioned.

The employees who had experienced problems with the crossover before the accident did not report the trouble properly, nor did one supervisor take a reported problem seriously and follow up on that incident. Enforceable, specific rules addressing the reporting of signal failures may have prevented the accident.

As a result of this investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Southern Railway Company:

Revise its operating rules to insure that they state as specifically as possible the action that is intended, and to enforce those rules pertaining to the operation of switches and the reporting of malfunctions of the signal system.
(Class II, Priority Action) (R-78-24).

KING, Chairman, McADAMS, HOGUE, and DRIVER, Members, concurred in the above recommendation.


By: James B. King
Chairman