

National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D. C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

LOG R-1009E

Date: October 24, 1988

In reply refer to: R-88-69

Ms. Pamela Plum
President
National League of Cities
389 Congress Street
Portland, Maine 04101

On September 8, 1987, a New Orleans Terminal (NOT) crew moved six tank cars of butadiene from the NOT's Oliver Yard in New Orleans, Louisiana, and at 7:35 p.m. placed them on track 3 of the CSX Transportation's (CSXT) Terminal Junction Interchange Yard (interchange yard) for delivery to the CSXT. About 1:50 a.m. on September 9, 1987, butadiene leaking from one of the tank cars was ignited and the resulting flames rising about 100 feet into the air engulfed both bridge spans of Interstate 10. The fire receded to the leaking tank car where it burned beneath the tank car until 1:55 p.m. on September 10, 1987. During the emergency, more than 200 city blocks were evacuated affecting 800 to 1,000 residents.¹

Preparedness for handling hazardous materials transportation emergencies must begin with effective planning. The city, through the New Orleans Fire Department (NOFD) superintendent, recognized in the early 1970s that it was a major transportation center through which hazardous materials are transported by rail, highway, and marine vehicles. However, it was not until 1982 that the city began to assess the hazards posed to its citizens by such transportation and how it would develop a coordinated, effective response for minimizing the threats presented by the transportation of hazardous materials. This initial effort was supported by a Federal grant of \$53,000 from the Department of Transportation (DOT) as one of seven demonstration projects it funded for hazardous materials contingency planning.² The city's Hazardous Materials Advisory Council was appointed to support this effort and the city's Hazardous Materials Incident Response (HMIR) Plan was a product of this effort.

¹For more detailed information, read Hazardous Materials/Railroad Accident Report--Butadiene Release and Fire from GATX 55996 at the CSX Terminal Junction Interchange, New Orleans, Louisiana, September 8, 1987 (NTSB/HZM-88/01)

²Lessons Learned: A Report of the Lessons Learned From State and Local Experiences in Accident Prevention and Response Planning for Hazardous Materials Transportation, DOT and EPA, December 1985.

The NOFD's HMIR Plan and related plans developed by other city agencies were a result of the initial planning actions. However, city management never analyzed or tested through drills if the plans were adequate for providing an efficient, coordinated response to hazardous materials emergencies. Additionally, the planning efforts of the city and the use of its Hazardous Materials Advisory Council have been ineffective for identifying special needs for specialized equipment and specific training of personnel who respond to hazardous materials emergencies or who perform overall command management of such emergencies. Furthermore, since the city was not aware of the CSXT and the NOT emergency response plans for handling emergencies in railyards and were not aware of the response capabilities of each, it is obvious that the city has not performed an effective assessment of available technical resources that could be used to assist the city during responses to hazardous materials emergencies.

New Orleans recognized that it needed to prepare for handling hazardous materials emergencies including those that occur in railyards. The city should initiate communication with the railroads to solicit cooperation in handling emergencies that involve hazardous materials. New Orleans, like most large cities, has several railyards operated by different companies in its boundaries that may endanger the lives and health of adjacent populations should an accident occur. Each railyard generally has different operating procedures for carrying out the interchange and movement of rail cars, each has a different physical plant and configuration, and each has different capabilities and planning for handling hazardous materials emergencies. For cities that have multiple railyards in their boundaries, individual coordination by railyards with city emergency response officials likely would be a less effective and efficient means of preparing for handling an emergency in a railyard. Individual coordination with each railyard also would be ineffective for identifying areas where railyards could provide mutual assistance during hazardous materials emergencies and for maintaining emergency preparedness current with changes that occur in the individual railyards. The Safety Board continues to believe that operators of railyards have a primary responsibility for mitigating the harmful effects to lives and property that may occur should hazardous materials be released from rail cars; however, where multiple railyards are present within a city, the most effective preparedness level could be achieved by bringing together into a common planning effort representatives of all railyards and of all affected city response agencies. The Safety Board believes that this can best be accomplished by the cities rather than by the individual railyards.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the National League of Cities:

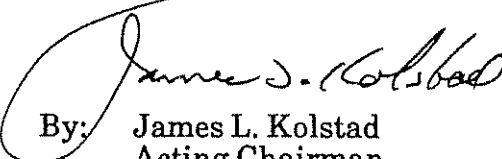
Advise its membership of the hazardous materials/railroad accident in New Orleans, Louisiana, on September 8, 1987, and urge its members in coordination with railyard management to develop and implement emergency response procedures for handling releases of hazardous materials from railroad vehicles. (Class II, Priority Action) (R-88-69)

Also as a result of its investigation, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations I-88-3 and -4 and R-88-55 to the city of New Orleans, R-88-56 and -57 to the Norfolk Southern, I-88-5 to the New Orleans Public Service, Inc., R-88-58 through -64 to the Federal Railroad Administration, R-88-65 to the General American Transportation Corporation, R-88-66 and -67 to the Mitsui & Company (USA) Inc., R-88-68 to the GATX Terminals Corporation, I-88-6 to the Research and

Special Programs Administration, and R-88-70 to the National Governors' 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-88-69 in your reply.

KOLSTAD, Acting Chairman, and BURNETT, NALL, and DICKINSON, Members, concurred in this recommendation. LAUBER, Member, did not participate.


By: James L. Kolstad
Acting Chairman