



# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

## Safety Recommendation

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**Date:** June 25, 1998

**In Reply Refer To:** R-98-31

Mr. Charles R. Matthews  
Chairman  
Texas Railroad Commission  
Post Office Box 12967  
Austin, Texas 78711

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At 10:52 p.m. on June 22, 1997, Union Pacific Railroad (UP) freight trains 5981 North and 9186 South collided head-on in Devine, Texas. The trains were operating on a single main track with passing sidings in dark (nonsignalized) territory in which train movement was governed by conditional track warrant control authority through a dispatcher. The conductor from 5981 North, the engineer from 9186 South, and two unidentified individuals who may have been riding on 5981 North were killed in the derailment and subsequent fire. The engineer from 5981 North received minor injuries, and the conductor from 9186 South was seriously burned. Estimated damages exceeded \$6 million.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly before 11 p.m. on June 22, a Devine Police Department (DPD) officer, on routine motor patrol near the UP track south of the railroad bridge at milepost 290.4, reported that he observed a passing northbound train, heard a loud explosion sound, and noted that the passing train was rapidly decelerating. Seeing flames and black smoke at the railroad overpass in his rear view mirror, he radioed the DPD dispatch desk, which received the transmission at 10:52 p.m. and notified the Devine Volunteer Fire Department (DVFD) and the DPD with an "all-hands" respond request. Numerous 911 phone calls were also received from concerned residents reporting a loud explosion sound.

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<sup>1</sup>For more detailed information, read Railroad Accident Report--*Collision and Derailment of Union Pacific Railroad Freight Trains 5981 North and 9186 South in Devine, Texas, on June 22, 1997* (NTSB/RAR-98/02).

While driving to the accident scene, the officer who had witnessed the event encountered the engineer of 5981 North, who had been injured after jumping from the northbound train; the engineer indicated that the other train possibly contained hazardous materials. Because the 5981 North engineer had indicated that hazardous materials may have been on board a train, the community disaster plan was implemented, and the Devine Emergency Management Coordinator was dispatched. The Chemical Transportation Emergency Center<sup>2</sup> was contacted about 11:06 p.m. by the DPD, which also contacted the railroad to request hazardous materials consist information. The UP responded by phone and fax that no hazardous materials products were on board either train.

The firefighting suppression effort continued to focus on the blaze, which reportedly flared several hundred feet high and was seen up to 30 miles away. About 1 a.m. on June 23, the fire had been substantially suppressed, and the DVFD chief directed that all water lines be shut down. About 1:37 a.m., the fire was declared under control.

The 29-member DVFD provides exclusive firefighting support to Devine, a rural community of about 4,000 people. Supplementary firefighting support is available through mutual aid requests to neighboring communities. At the time of the accident, the DVFD fire suppression equipment consisted of two conventional pump trucks (750 gpm and 1000 gpm) and three small support trucks. The DVFD's support apparatus included ladders, nozzles and hoses, lights, self-contained breathing equipment, and a small stock of fire suppression foam.

Within minutes of the collision, a DPD officer, as well as the first fire, rescue, and emergency medical services personnel, had arrived on scene. The chief of the DVFD activated the Incident Command System and assumed control as incident commander. He acted effectively and managed the incident successfully to completion without serious injury to responders, local residents, or officials at the accident site. However, the DVFD did not have access to an adequate amount of fire suppression foam equipment that would have further aided its efforts to mitigate the massive fire that ensued after the collision. Such equipment is not readily available for rural fire departments, although hazardous materials are routinely transported through their jurisdictions. The increase in rail traffic on the San Antonio to Laredo railroad corridor indicates a need for such readily available firefighting equipment to mitigate a fire event such as the one that occurred in the Devine accident. The National Transportation Safety Board concluded that although the local emergency response was timely and adequate, the lack of readily available fire suppression foam equipment showed a need for additional firefighting equipment to mitigate significant fire events. Consequently, the Safety Board believes that the Texas Railroad Commission should develop a system that would make fire suppression foam equipment readily available to emergency management agencies and local rural fire departments for the fighting of hazardous materials fires.

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<sup>2</sup>The center, operated by the Chemical Manufacturers Association, was established to provide initial and immediate information about handling hazardous materials and other chemicals.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Texas Railroad Commission:

Develop a system that would make fire suppression foam equipment readily available to emergency management agencies and local rural fire departments for the fighting of hazardous materials fires. (R-98-31)

In addition, the Safety Board issued Safety Recommendations R-98-18 through -25 to the UP and R-98-26 through -30 to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). The Safety Board also reiterated Safety Recommendation R-87-16 to the FRA.

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-98-31 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