

US: third major Amtrak accident in three months

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One woman died and 96 other people were injured when Amtrak's California Zephyr train, traveling from Chicago to Emeryville in northern California (near Oakland), derailed in rural Iowa Saturday night. Aboard the train were 196 passengers and 15 Amtrak employees.

Stella Riehl, 69, of Colorado Springs, Colorado, was the single fatality and died at the scene of the accident. At least 16 of the injured were hospitalized and another 80 people, including 11 crew members, had been released from hospitals by late Sunday. Another crew member is still in the hospital.

The derailment involved all 15 cars and the two locomotives making up the train. A 3,000-foot section of track was ripped off the gravel bed where 11 of the coaches jumped the track, leaving wreckage for a quarter of a mile. Two cars were twisted sideways across the track, some skidded down a 25-foot embankment and another dangled over the embankment's edge as passengers pushed open an emergency window in order to escape from the train. Another car was completely overturned.

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) were focusing on possible defects in the rails because the accident took place on a flat straight-away, an unusual location for derailment. In addition, the train was traveling at a speed well below the area's limit. "We've isolated the problem to the interface between the train and the rails," explained Ted Turpin, investigator in charge for the NTSB.

The track is owned by Burlington Northern & Santa Fe Railway, which is required by law to visually inspect the tracks three times a week and subject the tracks to ultrasound equipment once a month in order to detect internal fissures. A spokesman for the company could not comment on whether other accidents had

occurred on the same stretch of track.

Rescue work was hampered because the accident took place nearly two miles from the nearest road. Farmers who rushed to the scene ferried the victims from the fields in pickup trucks to emergency vehicles on the public roads. Charlie Romstad of Colorado Springs, the deceased passenger's son, told reporters that his mother had gone to Des Moines because her brother had died. She was taking his ashes back to Colorado Springs when she was killed in the derailment.

The derailment marked the third major Amtrak accident in three months. The rail company's most recent crash occurred February 5 in Syracuse, New York, when 60 people were injured. Ten people were hurt in December when a train derailed in Northern California. In March 1999, 11 people were killed when an Amtrak train collided with a truck near Bourbonnais, Illinois.

Statistics recently released by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) reveal a 12 percent increase in the number of rail accidents in 2000 compared with 1998. Train accidents per million train miles rose by 6 percent over the same period. There were 2,891 train accidents in 2000, causing 12,069 casualties, including 928 fatalities (down slightly from 1999). Most of those involved individuals walking on train tracks and highway-rail crossing accidents.

Passenger rail transportation in the US is in a generally deplorable state. Amtrak was formed by the federal government in 1971 to prevent the collapse of rail passenger service. It was essentially a government bailout of the railway companies for whom operating passenger trains had become unprofitable. The rail share of intercity commercial passenger traffic fell from 64 percent to 17 percent between 1940 and 1965; by 1987 railroads provided only 3 percent of passenger

service.

The number of rail accidents and deaths is one indication of the overall decay of the infrastructure in the US. Hundreds of people die at railway crossings each year, for example, in part because 80 percent of the 164,000 public crossings have no lights or gates. Forty-seven people died when an Amtrak train plunged off a bridge near Mobile, Alabama in September 1993; the FRA had considered installing sensors on the country's 85,000 railroad bridges, which would indicate tracks out of alignment, and rejected the idea because of the cost.



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