

# Washington, D.C., track worker killed in accident

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In the latest in a series of accidents involving Washington, D.C.'s Metro public transportation system, a track repairman was killed Sunday August 9 while doing repair work. Michael Nash, 63, had been working for Metro since 1990. He was working with a team of about 10 to 15 others replacing crossties when a small truck called a gravel spreader struck him at 9:50 p.m.

Nash was involved in removing gravel and was halfway through a 10-hour shift when the accident occurred. The gravel spreader was moving on the rails at only 5 to 10 mph, according to a Metropolitan transit spokesman. There has been no official explanation for the cause of the accident.

Whatever its immediate cause, the killing of Nash is the most recent evidence of safety breakdown in the US capital's mass transportation system.

On June 22, a moving train crashed into a stationary train, killing 9 people including one train-operator, and injuring about 80 people. (See "Washington DC: Nine killed, scores injured in subway accident")

This followed a close call in March when two Metro trains nearly collided. This potential crash was averted when a train-operator stopped his train by engaging its emergency braking system.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has been investigating the June crash and suspects that the cause was a defective signal system. It appears that Metro's control system failed to detect the train that was stationary, and the approaching train never received a command to stop. Agency officials have determined that the track circuit in the area of the crash had been intermittently failing for the last 18 months. The train cars themselves were in need of repair.

While the Metro general manager, John B. Cote Jr., has said that he will implement NTSB recommendations, he has been dismissive of any potential risks to workers or commuters. "I use the system," Cote said. "It is safe."

In fact, the entire Metro system, created in 1976, is suffering from aging tracks and infrastructure. With a repair backlog, maintenance is often done while trains are operational instead of when the system shuts down during the midnight hours, a much safer time to make repairs. As a result, between October 2005 and November 2006, four Metro employees were killed when they were struck by trains.

Struggling with budget deficits, the transit system is underfunded and therefore not properly maintained. The second largest subway system after New York, Washington Metro officials have themselves admitted that they need \$7 billion for projects for the next 10 years in order to create a safe system.

The New York subway system has been engaged in capital improvements since its system almost collapsed in the mid-1970s. However, these improvement programs have been largely financed by bonds, and it has been estimated that the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) in the New York region has accumulated about \$27 billion in debt. This debt, coupled with the economic downturn, has led the MTA to repeatedly raise fares.



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