

New Mexico railway crash kills three train operators

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On Saturday, November 30, a freight train derailed and plunged into a ravine in southwestern New Mexico, resulting in the deaths of all three train operators aboard. This accident is the latest in a ballooning number of railway crashes that is pushing the Association of American Railroads (AAR) to consider modifying and replacing both new and old tank cars.

The Southwestern Railroad train that derailed 70 miles northwest of Las Cruces, New Mexico, was carrying magnetite, a type of iron ore that is not hazardous, according to operations manager Chris Grimes. State Police Sgt. Oscar Sosa told reporters that three men were inside the locomotive, which careened into the 40- to 50-foot ravine, leaving eight cars behind. None of the freight spilled, and no determination as to the cause of the accident has been released publicly.

The Southwestern derailment came just one day prior to the Metro-North crash that killed four and injured 63 people in New York City on December 1. The train purportedly entered a 30 mph curve travelling at a speed of 80 mph, possibly due to the decreasing number of operators aboard trains in recent years. Federal transportation officials have since responded by issuing an emergency order to Metro-North to place extra operators on lines that have major speed changes.

The Metro-North and Southwestern crashes are just two of many railway accidents that have occurred over the past several months. In fact, according to a Wikipedia listing of rail accidents, at least six other similar incidents have occurred within the last three months alone.

On September 16, a freight train derailed near Seville, Illinois when a bridge spanning the Spoon River collapsed beneath it. The collapse sent six of about 20 freight cars carrying corn syrup into the river.

On September 19, a CSX train derailed while slowing

into the Ashland Chemical Plant in Southampton County, Virginia, injuring two engineers and sparking a diesel fuel fire.

On September 30, an out-of-service Chicago Transit Authority train crashed directly into a stopped train in Forest Park, Illinois, ejecting passengers from their seats and hospitalizing 33 people.

On October 24, the derailment of four freight cars loaded with gravel to be used on the SunRail construction project crushed a man to death in Sanford, Florida. The man's body was found partially pinned under an overturned rail car.

On November 8, 25 cars of a 90-car freight train bringing crude oil from North Dakota to Florida derailed and exploded in Pickens County, Alabama, resulting in flames 300 feet high that could be seen from over 10 miles away. An unknown amount of crude oil spilled into an adjacent marshland.

On December 5, a Canadian National ore train rear-ended another ore train in Minnesota, resulting in the hospitalization of two crew members.

A proposal filed by the AAR with the US Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration in November stated that most old tank cars must be phased out and that even new cars will require modifications if safety standards are to be improved. According to the Bangor Daily News, this proposal could cost the producers of tank cars more than \$3 billion and drastically affect the growth of crude-by-rail.

AAR President Edward Hamberger has made clear that "It's time for a thorough review of the US tank car fleet that moves flammable liquids, particularly considering the recent increase in crude oil traffic."

Crude-by-rail shipments have skyrocketed over the last three years, resulting from the state of pipeline

infrastructure in both the US and Canada. In the third quarter of 2013, US shipments rose 44 percent to 93,312 carloads, which is equivalent to almost one tenth of the amount of crude oil the US produced. This increase has been beneficial to US railroads, which have seen a general decrease in profitability due to power plants moving from coal to natural gas in recent years.

The AAR proposal includes changes that would help prevent explosions like the one that occurred in Alabama on November 8. New cars would be fitted with steel jackets, thermal protection, and pressure relief valves. *The author also recommends:* New York: Basic safety system absent in Metro-North crash [6 December 2013]



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