

Amtrak train derails in Philadelphia, killing at least seven

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An Amtrak train traveling from Washington D.C. to New York City derailed and crashed Tuesday night in the Port Richmond neighborhood of Philadelphia. Seven people have been confirmed dead, and more than 200 were taken to area hospitals for injuries that included burns and broken bones. At least 10 are in critical condition. The train was carrying 238 passengers and five crewmembers.

The front of the train was going into a turn when it went off the tracks. After the crash, passengers struggled to escape through the windows of the toppled cars. First responders equipped with flashlights and ladders went from car to car helping passengers off the train. But with six of the seven cars overturned and some horribly damaged, firefighters had to use hydraulic tools to rescue people trapped inside.

All seven cars and the engine derailed. Three of the passenger cars remained upright, while another three were on their sides, allowing most passengers to walk away from the scene. But one car was essentially destroyed by running into a steel pole that supports the railroad's overhead catenary, which provides electric power. The terrifying wreckage of this car was the source of most of the casualties in the derailment.

Preliminary investigation has concluded that excessive speed was the primary cause of the crash. National Transportation Safety Board vice chairman Robert Sumwalt said that the train's "black box" data recorder showed that it was traveling 106 mph three seconds before the recording ended and that the train engineer then applied the emergency brake. When the recording ended, the train was going 102 mph.

The speed limit entering the curve is 70 mph and the curve itself has a speed restriction of 50 mph, according to the Federal Railroad Administration. Although the train was going too fast, the exact reason why has yet to

be announced.

Nevertheless, the 24-hour cable news networks and politicians have predictably leaped to blame the engineer. Democratic Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter told CNN, "Clearly it was reckless in terms of the driving by the engineer. There's no way in the world he should have been going that fast into the curve." Without any definitive statement by the NTSB about the cause of the overspeed, Nutter has essentially ruled out equipment, track, or signaling failures.

Sumwalt responded, "You're not going to hear the NTSB making comments like that. We want to get the facts before we start making judgments."

The area of the dangerous stretch of track is called Frankford Junction, not far from the site of the 1943 derailment of a train that killed 79 people.

The portion of the route the train was traveling on was opened in 1867, and the sharp curve where it derailed is typical of lower-budget early railroad engineering and construction. Amtrak's "high-speed" service in the region has never been built upon new alignments, like true high-speed rail in Europe and Asia, but instead has developed on the original right of way, which features more curves, speed restrictions, and ancient infrastructure than purpose-built high-speed routes.

The derailment site is on Amtrak's Northeast Corridor, which runs between Washington D.C. and Boston and is the country's busiest passenger route, with a record 11.6 million passengers in 2014. Additionally, most portions of the route also are busy with commuter agencies that share the same tracks, as well as freight traffic.

As is almost always the case in similar accidents, the ultimate problem involves the failure of a proper signaling system that would either stop or slow trains

down in the event that there is any obstruction, speed restriction or opposing traffic.

Since 1990, the NTSB has called for the installation of what is referred to as Positive Train Control (PTC). The agency has determined that since 2004, the installation of this technology could have prevented, or reduced the severity of, over 20 accidents that took 57 lives and caused millions of dollars in damages. While Congress mandated that PTC be installed by 2015, it is unfunded and still being tested by railroads, including Amtrak.

The Northeast Corridor is in dire need of billions of dollars in upgrades, both for safety and operation. Seven moveable bridges where the railroad crosses over river traffic passes are over 100 years old. The tunnels that carry the route under and through Baltimore, Maryland, date from 1873 and have sharp curves and severe speed restrictions. The tunnels under the Hudson River to New York Penn Station are at maximum train capacity, and are 100 years old.

With 20,000 employees, Amtrak serves 46 states, three Canadian provinces, over 500 destinations, and operates 21,300 miles of trackage.

For its entire existence, Amtrak has operated on a shoestring budget under yearly political attack, yet remarkably, ridership has persistently increased. In 2000, ridership was 20.9 million, rising to 30.9 million in 2014, yet for years no new trains or service have been added. In fact, Amtrak's management is on a cost-cutting campaign, implementing policies like the removal of amenities in long-distance trains for petty cost savings to appease anti-rail politicians.

The House of Representatives last month passed legislation that funded Amtrak for only \$1.4 billion a year for four years, while Tuesday, after the crash, the House Appropriations Committee rejected adding an additional \$1.5 billion of funding.

To put this figure in context, the Pentagon's 2016 budget request for the procurement of military weapons systems, \$177 billion, is 118 times larger than Amtrak's federal funding.

The entire annual funding for the Amtrak system is barely more than the \$1.3 billion being spent by the navy on five E2-D Hawkeye planes, an aircraft that most Americans have never even heard of. Replacing every single locomotive used by Amtrak would cost less than operating one aircraft carrier for one year.

To reduce the risk of traffic disasters, substantial funding is needed for both technological safety upgrades like PTC and long-term infrastructure improvements. Yet this has been declared impossible by a political system whose only aim is to funnel money into the coffers of the banks, corporations and the military.



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