

Freight trains collide in Texas, burst into flames

Alan Whyte
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Two freight trains collided head-on Tuesday morning, exploding into a ball of fire in Texas, killing three of the four rail workers involved. The fourth employee managed to jump moments before the derailment and was taken to a hospital with non-life threatening injuries. The fireball of the two smashed trains burned well into the night, making it impossible for emergency workers to search for the other three.

It wasn't until Wednesday—amid the wreckage of twisted metal and smoldering hot spots of the smashed locomotives, rail cars and shipping containers that was strewn about 400 yards from the collision site—that the remains of two of the workers were found Wednesday. A third worker has not been found, but is presumed dead. Each train had a crew of two members, a conductor and a train engineer.

The crash took place at approximately 8:30 a.m. in the northern part of the state, about five miles from the tiny town of Panhandle. Residents were temporarily forced to evacuate amid thick plumes of black smoke billowing from the wreckage that could be seen for miles. When they were allowed to return, they were told to limit water use because the water supply was being depleted by firefighters struggling to put out the flames.

The diesel-fueled trains were carrying primarily consumer goods, such as paper products, clothing, television sets and computers. Shortly before the crash, one of the trains stopped in a yard about 30 miles away to refuel, which tragically only added to the degree of destruction.

On Wednesday, investigators for the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) were on the scene and one of them, Richard Hipkind, speaking for the agency, said, “The team will be examining mechanical, the equipment, track, signals, operations, human

performance, data recorders, maintenance records, and witness reports. We will not be determining the probable cause of the accident while we are here on the scene, nor will we speculate about what may have caused this accident.” Both trains are equipped with cameras and event recorders, which are similar to black boxes in commercial airlines.

He also said, “Our mission is to understand not just what happened, but why it happened, and to make recommendations or changes to prevent it from happening again.”

Both trains belong to BNSF, one of the largest freight railroads in the United States.

A company spokesman, Joe Faust, said that it was unclear how fast the trains were traveling, but stated that it was less than the speed limit of 70 miles per hour. He also said, “Our preliminary investigation and review of the accident clearly demonstrates this is the type of incident that PTC is intended to prevent.”

Positive Train Control (PTC) is designed to use GPS, wireless radio and computers to automatically slow or stop trains that are on the wrong track, or if they are going faster than the designated speed limit for safe operation.

The lack of PTC technology was identified by the NTSB as the most fundamental cause of the derailment near Philadelphia last year, when an Amtrak train was traveling around a curve at more than twice the allowable speed, killing eight and injuring 159 people. Agency investigators concluded that if PTC had been installed and functioning properly on that part of the track, it would have slowed the train in enough time to prevent the accident. (See “Lack of safety technology contributed to 2015 Amtrak crash in Philadelphia”)

In a released statement, BNSF stated: “While sections of the track operated by the eastbound train involved in

this accident have PTC installed and are being tested, the section of track where the incident occurred will be installed later this year.” In other words, the company’s delay in installing PTC is responsible for this disaster.

While BNSF Railway, one of the largest freight railroad companies in North America with about 32,500 miles of track and a reported operating revenue of more than \$21 billion in 2015, claims that it will install PTC by a 2018 federal deadline, at least three freight railway companies have said that they will need an extension until 2020.

The NTSB has been arguing for Positive Train Control technology since 1969 and has estimated that since that time the technology could have prevented 145 rail accidents that killed 288 people and injured 6,574.

Congress voted in 2008 for PTC to be implemented after a commuter train and a freight train collided in California, killing 25 people and injuring more than 100. The deadline for its installation was December 31, 2015. The rail companies maintained that they could not meet the deadline, and even threatened to shut down if Congress did not give them a delay in its implementation. Congress, supporting the criminal role of the companies in postponing implementation of this safety technology, gave them a three year extension.

It is clear that the very slow pace of PTC installation by this company and others, and the continuing request for postponements granted by Congress, are allowing tragedies such as this one to continue, needlessly killing both employees and passengers. It is yet another example of how, under capitalism, there is always enough money for bank bailouts and war, but there is never enough to protect the lives of those who actually do the work and ride the rail systems.



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