

Three dead in Montana Amtrak derailment

Kevin Reed**26 September 2021**

Three people were killed and five others were hospitalized when an Amtrak train derailed on Saturday afternoon near Joplin, Montana. Crew members were reported to be among those injured.

The train, known as the Empire Builder, was traveling westbound on its route from Chicago to the Pacific Northwest when it derailed at approximately 4 p.m. about 30 miles south of the Canadian border and 100 miles north of Great Falls, the nearest city in Montana.

A statement from Amtrak said that its Incident Response Team had been engaged and “we are sending emergency personnel and Amtrak leadership to the scene to help support our passengers, our employees and their families with their needs.”

The statement also said that the train was “operating on BNSF tracks near Joplin,” there were 141 passengers and 16 crew members onboard and the train consisted of “two locomotives and 10 cars, with eight of those cars derailing.” BNSF Railway is the largest of the nine Class I freight rail networks in North America with 32,500 miles of track in 28 states.

Those injured were transported to a hospital in Great Falls while others were treated locally and released. Montana Governor Greg Gianforte reported at a press conference that the five people hospitalized were in stable condition.

CBS News reported about 60 passengers spent Saturday night at nearby Chester High School in Chester, Montana, and that Governor Gianforte said anyone who did not need medical attention was transported out of Chester on Sunday.

CNN interviewed one of the passengers in a sleeper car, Megan Vanderves, who said, “I would describe the experience as kind of extreme turbulence on an airplane but louder, and there was kind of a lot of smoke smell. The first thought I really had when I woke up was, ‘Oh my God we’re derailing.’”

The Associated Press (AP) interviewed local resident Trevor Fossen who was first at the scene of the accident and helped get the passengers out of the derailed train.

Fossen was on a dirt road in the area on Saturday when he saw “a wall of dust” about 300 feet high. “I started looking at that, wondering what it was and then I saw the train had tipped over and derailed,” said Fossen. He then called his brother to bring ladders for people who could not get down from the sides of the tipped over cars.

Photos from the scene showed several rail cars tipped over while others were clearly off the tracks. In one photo people are seen using ladders to climb down after exiting the train through the windows. Other pictures showed passengers standing alongside the toppled train cars holding their luggage.

The Empire Builder’s route goes from Chicago through St. Paul/Minneapolis, Spokane and on to Portland and Seattle. The Amtrak website says of the trip, “Experience the rugged splendor of the American West. Traveling between Chicago and the Pacific Northwest along major portions of the Lewis and Clark Trail, the mighty Empire Builder takes you on an exciting adventure through majestic wilderness, following the footsteps of early pioneers.”

The National Transportation Safety Board sent its “Go Team”—a group of technical experts who investigate transportation accidents—to the scene on Sunday. The 14-member team includes specialists in railroad signals who will look for the cause of the derailment on the BNSF main track that involved no other trains or equipment, according to NTSB spokesman Eric Weiss.

Railroad safety expert David Clarke, director of the Center for Transportation Research at the University of Tennessee, told the AP that accident scene photos show the derailment “occurred at or near a switch, which is where the railway goes from a single track to a double track.”

The AP reported that Clarke said “the two locomotives and two cars at the front of the train reached the split and continued on the main track, but the remaining eight cars derailed. He said it was unclear if some of the last cars moved onto the second track.”

Clark went on, “Did the switch play some role? It might

have been that the front of the train hit the switch and it started fish-tailing and that flipped the back part of the train.” Another possibility, Clarke said, was “a defect in the rail” pointing out that “regular testing doesn’t always catch such problems.” He ruled out speed as a factor because “trains on that line have systems that prevent excessive speeds and collisions.”

A spokesperson from BNSF claimed that the track where the derailment occurred was just inspected last Thursday. Amtrak said on Sunday that service to and from the Pacific Northwest on the Empire Builder is suspended and the westbound train will terminate in Minneapolis, and the eastbound train will originate in Minneapolis.

The fatal accident on an Amtrak train is part of a pattern of derailments in recent years as US transportation infrastructure crumbles and the safety of travelers and railroad employees alike is subordinated to corporate profits. On December 18, 2017, an Amtrak train derailed near DuPont, Washington, killing three people. On April 3, 2016, an Amtrak train on its way from Philadelphia to Savannah, Georgia, struck a backhoe and derailed in Chester, Pennsylvania, and killed two track workers. On May 12, 2015, the Amtrak Northeast Regional train from Washington D.C. to New York City derailed in Philadelphia and killed 8 people and injured 200.

The bipartisan infrastructure bill—originally proposed by President Joe Biden in April and expected to be voted on in Congress in the coming week—contains a thoroughly inadequate \$66 billion in funding for Amtrak. A federally appointed panel published a report on September 9 that said nearly double this sum is needed just to upgrade the heavily traveled Northeast Corridor. The \$117 billion proposal calls for more than 150 projects to modernize the antiquated, crumbling and dangerous passenger rail arteries connecting Washington D.C., Philadelphia, New York and Boston.



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