

Wreck Report Cites Disregard For Rules

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The collision of two Alaska Railroad trains last July, which fatally injured two persons, could have been avoided easily if crewmen on either train had followed standard operating rules, the National Transportation Safety Board has found.

The freight train which plowed into the rear of a halted passenger train last July 5 was traveling illegally fast, the freight's engineer was improperly preoccupied with copying a message and the engineer misapplied the emergency brakes when he finally tried to halt the speeding freight train, the safety board said.

Sixty-two persons were injured when the empty freight train smashed into the rear of the passenger train which had halted about 150 miles north of Anchorage to

allow passengers to view Mt. McKinley. The passenger train was carrying 226 riders, many of them holiday tourists returning to Anchorage after a Fourth of July excursion to Mt. McKinley National Park.

It was the state's worst train wreck.

In a strongly worded report released today, the safety board said, "This accident appears to be the culmination of a series of rule violations and poor practices. There is no doubt that the engineer and front brakeman of Extra 1502 South (the freight train) saw No. 5 (the passenger train) in sufficient time to have stopped their train by regular means, despite its improper speed.

"But the preoccupation of the engineer with copying the train order permitted the train to move to a point where an emergency application was required to stop the train short of the collision. The emergency application still should have stopped the train short of the collision but the improper release of the locomotive emergency brake negated this possibility."

Crewmen in the passenger train also violated railroad rules when they failed to put flares and a flagman behind the halted train to warn approaching trains, the safety board noted.

If any one of four rules had been followed, the fatal crash would not have happened, the safety board said. The
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gligence

... then moved the independent brake handle full forward. In doing so, he accidentally released the locomotive emergency brakes and the freight train was still traveling at nearly 25 m.p.h. when it slammed into the passenger train.

Tests conducted by the safety board after the wreck showed the train could have been stopped in 1,215 feet if it had been traveling at 42 m.p.h. At slower speeds, the stopping distance would have been even less, falling to 929 feet at 36 m.p.h. Without using emergency brakes, a train moving at the maximum legal speed of 35 m.p.h. could have stopped in 1,362 feet, the tests showed.

The engineer of the freight train, Murdock was fired by the railroad and several other crewmen were suspended.

Murdock had been promoted to his position as engineer on March 31, 1974, about 1½ years before the accident.

During the days immediately preceding the crash, Murdock had worked two days as a fireman on passenger trains, two days as a fireman on freight trains, three days as an engineer on freight trains, four days as an engineer on a switching crew. For three days he was not on duty.

Wreck Report Cites Negligence

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The freight train to stop while its crew copied a message from the Hurricane dispatcher.

Trains to keep 10 minutes between each other.

The display of a lighted flare on the track if a train slowed down or stopped.

A maximum speed of 35 miles per hour.

None of the regulations was followed at the time of the crash, the safety board said.

In addition, the air brake system on the locomotive of the freight train allowed the engineer to release the locomotive's emergency brake inadvertently.

The board made three recommendations as a result of the crash:

That the Federal Railroad Administration establish

Alaska Railroad procedures insuring "consistent compliance" with its operating rules.

That the railroad administration revise the rules so they "explicitly state the actions required to provide safe operation."

That the railroad administration require all railroads to modify the type of brake valve involved in the accident "to eliminate future unwanted release of locomotive brakes."

The freight train had been scheduled to run ahead of the passenger train from Healy to Curry but the freight train was delayed and the passenger train passed it at Colorado, 61 miles south of Healy.

The freight train's crew was informed by train radio it would be sent a message — "a train order" — at Hurricane.

The freight train passed through Hurricane without stopping, although it was required by regulation to stop to copy the message. Instead, the engineer, John Murdock of Anchorage, attempted to copy the message as the train continued southward at 40 mph. According to trainmen, it is not uncommon for crewmen to take messages without stopping.

The freight crew members first spotted the halted passenger train as they rounded a curve about 3,000 feet north of the parked train. Murdock told the safety board investigators he applied the brake lightly because he thought he had enough distance in which to stop the train.

After seeing the halted passenger train, the freight's brakeman, Clinton Gray, asked Murdock to let him copy the broadcast train order. The engineer declined. The brakeman then blew the train whistle as the freight train approached a road crossing, since Murdock still appeared to be busy.

Gray became concerned when the freight locomotive was about 1,500 feet north of the passenger train and he reached for the emergency brake. But Murdock applied the emergency brake first and

then moved the independent brake handle full forward. In doing so, he accidentally released the locomotive emergency brakes and the freight train was still traveling at nearly 25 m.p.h. when it slammed into the passenger train.

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