



Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives

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May 29, 2015

SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER

TO: Members, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
FROM: Staff, Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials
RE: Full Committee Hearing on “Oversight of the Amtrak Accident in Philadelphia”

PURPOSE

The Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure will meet on Tuesday, June 2, 2015, at 10:00 a.m. in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building to receive testimony on the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) Northeast Regional Train 188 accident in Philadelphia from representatives of the National Transportation Safety Board, Federal Railroad Administration, Amtrak, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen.

BACKGROUND

On Tuesday, May 12, 2015, at approximately 9:30 p.m., Amtrak Northeast Regional Train 188, traveling from Washington to New York, derailed in north Philadelphia, near Frankford Junction. There were approximately 238 passengers and five crew members on board. Tragically, there were eight fatalities and approximately 200 injuries. Local emergency responders were on the scene soon after the accident. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) sent a team of on-scene investigators to the site of the accident that night. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) also sent a team of investigators to aid in the investigation. Amtrak and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET) are also parties to the NTSB investigation.

Preliminary Facts

Preliminary reports from the NTSB’s investigation are that the train consisted of one locomotive and seven passenger cars. After leaving Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station, the train approached a left-hand turn traveling at a speed of 106 m.p.h. through a curve with a speed restriction of 50 m.p.h. The entire train derailed. NTSB reports that, moments before the derailment, the engineer applied the emergency brakes, and speed only decreased to 102 m.p.h. when it derailed.

There are no indications as to why the train was traveling at such a high speed. The track itself, according to NTSB, had been inspected the previous day by a geometric inspection car, and as of the date of this memo, no defects have been reported. Furthermore, the locomotive engine was a new, state-of-the-art locomotive. The investigative team is looking into the track, signals, mechanical condition of the train, human factors, and other possible factors that could inform the determination of probable cause. NTSB will review data from the event recorder in the cab of the locomotive, video from an outward facing camera, the locomotive, cars, and track, and will also interview those involved in the accident, including passengers.

NTSB

The NTSB is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident the United States and significant accidents in other modes of transportation – railroad, highway, marine, and pipeline. The NTSB determines the probable cause of the accidents and issues safety recommendations aimed at preventing future accidents. In addition, the NTSB carries out special studies concerning transportation safety and coordinates government resources to provide assistance to victims and their family members impacted by major transportation disasters.

FRA

Generally, FRA is the federal agency charged with ensuring the safe movement of people and goods by rail. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, D.C., FRA maintains eight regional offices throughout the country. The agency has jurisdiction over all freight, commuter, and passenger rail transportation, but not over the safety of urban mass transit rail systems. FRA promulgates regulations, notices safety advisories, and issues emergency orders to ensure, among other things, that railroads and equipment are operated and maintained in a safe manner. FRA closely monitors data and trends to identify, reduce, and eliminate risks.

Amtrak

The Rail Passenger Service Act of 1970 (P.L. 91-518) created the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) and charged it with the responsibility for providing intercity passenger rail transportation. Amtrak's route system includes short-to-medium distance corridors and a long-distance route network. In addition, Amtrak operates passenger rail services on the Northeast Corridor (NEC). Running between Washington and Boston, the NEC is the backbone of the Nation's intercity passenger rail system, carrying more passengers than any other line. The NEC is host to intercity passenger rail, commuter rail, and freight rail operations. Of the 437 total miles of the NEC, Amtrak owns and controls 363 miles, with states controlling portions of the route north of New York City. Amtrak operates 153 daily trains on the corridor, including the Northeast Regional and Acela services, and Amtrak has captured over 75 percent of the Washington to New York air-rail market.

BLET

The BLET is a Division of the Rail Conference of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) and is North America's oldest rail labor union. It represents locomotive engineers, conductors, brakemen, firemen, switchmen, hostlers, and other train service employees on Amtrak and other railroads in the United States. The BLET's total membership is more than 55,000. Since Jan. 1, 1992, federal regulations have required locomotive engineers to be trained and tested to be federally certified and licensed to operate trains.

WITNESS LIST

The Honorable Christopher Hart
Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

The Honorable Joseph H. Boardman
President and Chief Executive Officer
Amtrak

Ms. Sarah Feinberg
Acting Administrator
Federal Railroad Administration

Mr. Dennis R. Pierce
National President
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen