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# Feds: Fatal DC rail crash came from lax oversight

By SARAH BRUMFIELD (AP) – 2 hours ago

WASHINGTON — A faulty electronic circuit that caused a deadly Metro crash last summer was symptomatic of an "anemic safety culture" at the D.C. area's transit agency, the National Transportation Safety Board said Tuesday.

Eight passengers and a train operator were killed in June 2009 when a Metrorail train rear-ended a second train stopped near the Fort Totten station on the city's northeastern outskirts.

As expected, the NTSB concluded that the collision occurred because Metro's automatic signal system failed to detect the stopped train. The approaching train continued to travel at 55 mph until the operator saw the train ahead of her. She pulled the emergency brake, but was still traveling at more than 40 mph at the moment of the collision.

More broadly, the NTSB said Metro ignored repeated warning signs and fostered a culture of indifference to chronic safety issues. The agency was warned about deficiencies in its safety department for 15 years before the crash, NTSB chairwoman Deborah Hersman said.

"If they don't listen this time, I'm not sure what else can be done here," she said. "There's got to be some action."

The board issued a series of recommendations, including that Metro remove or retrofit its oldest subway cars, which date to the 1970s, as soon as possible. The train that collided with the stopped train was composed entirely of the older cars, which are more susceptible to collapsing into one another in a collision. Metro has already awarded an \$886 million contract to replace the old cars but has said it cannot take them out of service immediately. The new cars won't arrive until 2013.

The NTSB urged Metro and other transit systems that use the same signaling components to remove them. Those systems include Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Cleveland.

It also said Metro should ensure that the lead car in each train has an onboard event recorder.

The NTSB has no regulatory or enforcement powers, but a failure by Metro to comply with its recommendations could cause federal and state governments to curtail the transit agency's funding. The board wields similar influence over transit agencies around the country.

Richard Sarles, the interim general manager of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, said the NTSB's recommendations were tough but necessary. However, he said: "This does not get changed overnight."

The NTSB faulted Metro's board of directors for failing to actively monitor safety issues. The track signaling system failed to recognize trains 3,000 times a week, but the issue was deemed a minor nuisance, the NTSB said.

In opening remarks, Hersman said the Fort Totten station crash was not the first time Metro's safety system was compromised. Previous accidents, some of which killed employees, foreshadowed the deadlier crash.

"You are going to hear a lot about WMATA's anemic safety culture today," Hersman said. Later, she added: "Because the necessary preventive measures were not taken, the only question was when would Metro have another accident — and of what magnitude."

Kenneth Hawkins, whose brother Dennis was killed in the crash, said he was pleased by the strength of the NTSB's recommendations, but because the board lacks regulatory power, he wasn't expecting much change.

"It's not going to change our lives," he said. "The damage has been done to us."

Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., described the NTSB's findings as "both chilling and very sad." She called on Metro to fully implement the recommendations and said Congress should authorize the U.S. Department of Transportation to establish and enforce safety standards for transit systems.

If Metro's track circuits — simple electronic devices meant to detect stopped trains on the tracks — had been working properly, the approaching train would have been slowed automatically. According to Jim Southworth, NTSB's railroad chief, the driver of the striking train applied the emergency brakes three seconds after she first could see the train ahead.

NTSB staff member Ruben Payan said Metro had been aware that the track circuits were known to fail. Five days before the accident, technicians tested the circuit that malfunctioned, but used an old test that didn't detect the failure. An up-to-date test, Payan said, likely would have caught the problem.

Metro says it now tests circuits twice a day, has stopped mixing train control components from different manufacturers and established a new test to find circuits susceptible to problems. Immediately after the crash, Metro switched to manual operation of trains instead of automatic, a change that remains in effect.



Photo 1 of 6



National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Chair Deborah Hersman presides at a meeting on the investigation findings and safety issues of the June 22, 2009 collision of two Washington Metrorail trains, Tuesday, July 27, 2010, at the NTSB in Washington. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)



Map



This was not Metro's only deadly accident in recent years. Two Metro workers were crushed to death on tracks in January when a maintenance truck backed into them. Last year, two more Metro workers were killed in separate incidents.

There was also a close call in December, when several independent safety inspectors were nearly hit.

*Associated Press writers Matthew Barakat, Lauren Sausser, Jessica Gresko and Ben Nuckols in Washington, and Brian Witte in Annapolis, Md., contributed to this report.*

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