

NTSB releases preliminary findings on North Dakota train crash

By: **Helmut Schmidt**, Forum News Service

FARGO, N.D. – Tracks closed by a train crash Monday west of Casselton, N.D., were expected to be back in use early Thursday morning, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad and National Transportation Safety Board said Wednesday.

In addition, NTSB board member Robert Sumwalt released some preliminary results of the agency's investigations.

Among those findings: The signals around the crash site were in good working order; the derailment point has been determined; and a broken axle has been found and will be studied to determine if it played a role in the derailment and crash.

About 2:10 p.m. Monday, an eastbound Burlington Northern Santa Fe train hauling crude oil struck a westbound train's derailed car filled with soybeans.

The crash, about a half mile west of Casselton, set off massive explosions and prompted evacuations of the town and some of the surrounding area due to concerns about toxic clouds of smoke billowing from burning oil.

Among the NTSB findings released Wednesday:

- The track on which the westbound grain train was traveling was inspected by a "high rail" vehicle and by inspectors on foot.

Sumwalt said inspectors found physical evidence of the point of the derailment at a mechanical switch in the rail.

- Investigators looked at data logs for signal equipment on both sides of the tracks three to five miles from the site of the collision. No problems were found with the signals.

- Data recorders in the grain train's locomotives indicate it was going 28 mph when its cars began to derail. At that time, emergency braking went into effect, Sumwalt said.

The eastbound train carrying oil had two event recorders in the two lead locomotives, but Sumwalt said investigators have not been able to get into the locomotives and are not optimistic that any data will be recoverable.

However, he said investigators have been able to pull data from a third locomotive on the end of the oil train. That event recorder estimated the train's speed at 42 mph.

- There may have been less than a minute between the derailment of the grain train's cars and the collision of the oil tanker train with one of those cars. That crash led to at least 18 cars from the oil train derailing, setting several tanker cars ablaze and causing huge explosions.

- The oil train's cargo was supposed to be UN1267 petroleum crude oil. It is a Class 3 flammable liquid. And it was supposed to be packing group 1, which is supposed to have the lowest flash point.

Investigators will check the shipping records to be sure the oil was properly classified, Sumwalt said.

- All of the tanker cars have been moved and placed at a point near the tracks where they can be more thoroughly examined by inspectors.

That will also allow the transfer of the remaining oil in the tank cars into trucks waiting at the site.

"We're making good progress," Sumwalt said.

Sumwalt said NTSB investigative teams will be at the site through the weekend.

At the Pizza Ranch restaurant in Casselton, co-owner Jaci Sullivan said Monday was hopping as her restaurant was tapped to help feed crews responding to the train crash and tanker fires.

But New Year's Eve was slow, she said.

"Just thank God it did happen outside of town and no one was hurt," she said.

Lance Johnson, who lives on the west side of town near the railroad tracks, said he had "front-row seats" to the aftermath of the crash and the tanker explosions.

"One time, I could feel it in my chest," Johnson said.

Linda and Dan Wendel and their three children stayed in their home on the east side of Casselton through the evacuation.

"It livened things up, that's for sure," Linda Wendel said.

Linda Wendel, who runs a day care in her home, said she turned off the air exchanger, and they didn't notice any fuel smells at their home.

Dan Wendel said he only saw a few sprinkles of soot in the snow.

"I think it's been played up a bit," he said, though "the fireballs were amazing."

Kim Langer, the bartender at the Red Baron Lounge, said New Year's Eve was slow, and New Year's Day looked quiet early on, too.

"I'm glad it was a half-mile that way (west) and not in town," Langer said. "I probably would have been a goner."

At the site of the derailment, more than a dozen flatbed trucks were pulled to the side. Some of them had brought in backhoes and front-end loaders, while others waited to haul off damaged rail stock.

One tanker car sat on the tracks, and a group of inspectors walked around it Wednesday afternoon.

Perhaps a hundred yards to the east, two grain hopper cars also stood on the tracks.

The wreckage had stopped burning and only one car, away from the rest, appeared to still be smoking.

Sheriff's deputies maintained a watch on the road to discourage through traffic.

BNSF spokeswoman Amy McBeth said the tracks were expected to reopen about midnight Thursday.