

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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DERAILMENT OF UNION PACIFIC TRAIN *

NUMBER UEGKOT 09 NEAR GRAETTINGER, * Accident No.: DCA17MR007

IOWA ON MARCH 10, 2017 *

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Interview of: ROD PRESSLER

AmericInn
Spencer, Iowa

Saturday,
March 11, 2017

APPEARANCES:

DAVID BUCHER, Rail Accident Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

JOSH SHAFFER, Director of Road Operations
Twin Cities Service Unit
Union Pacific Railroad, St. Paul, Minnesota

MIKE CORUM, Operating Practices Specialist
Federal Railroad Administration, Kansas City

MARK SANDLER, Operating Practices Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration

STEVE FACKLAN, Primary Investigator, Safety Taskforce
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET)

LAWRENCE MOZENA, National Safety Team
SMART Transportation Division

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I N T E R V I E W

1
2 MR. BUCHER: This is Dave Bucher, rail accident investigator
3 for the National Transportation Safety Board. And this is the
4 interview of Mr. Rod Pressler, conductor of the accident train
5 involved in the accident at Graettinger, Iowa, on March 10, 2017.
6 NTSB accident number DCA17MR007.

7 And we'll go around the table and introduce ourselves for the
8 record. To my left?

9 MR. SHAFFER: My name is Josh Shaffer. I'm the director of
10 road operations, for the Twin Cities Service Unit headquartered
11 out of St. Paul, Minnesota, Union Pacific Railroad.

12 MR. CORUM: Mike Corum, C-o-r-u-m, operating practices
13 specialist, FRA, Kansas City.

14 MR. FACKLAN: Steve Facklan, F-a-c-k-l-a-n, primary
15 investigator, BLET, Safety Taskforce.

16 MR. MOZENA: Lawrence Mozena, M-o-z-e-n-a, SMART TD, National
17 Safety Team member.

18 MR. SANDLER: Mark Sandler, S-a-n-d-l-e-r, FRA, operating
19 practices inspector.

20 MR. BUCHER: Okay. Rod, the purpose of this interview is to
21 increase safety, not assign fault, blame or liability. However,
22 NTSB cannot offer complete confidentiality because your name is
23 going to go into the docket. The transcript will go into the
24 docket. You can have one person with you if you choose to do so.

25 MR. PRESSMAN: No, I'm fine.

1 MR. BUCHER: Okay. Great. And the interview is being
2 recorded. We will send you a copy to review it.

3 INTERVIEW OF ROD PRESSLER

4 BY MR. BUCHER:

5 Q. As I said out in the lobby, if you could just go back from
6 your call time, go through your day, how it was through the
7 accident?

8 A. Okay. We got called to work, showed up at work at 1630. Run
9 the paperwork for our train. The power was supposed to be at
10 Superior, is where I thought, but the power ended up being at
11 Estherville. So we cabbled up to Estherville, got on the power,
12 took that to Superior. Pulled the ethanol train out of Superior
13 and headed south with it back towards Eagle Grove.

14 Q. Okay. You didn't notice anything unusual when you put the
15 train together or any --

16 A. There was one bad order in there that was on our paperwork
17 that we left up there, that we -- I called the corridor before we
18 left Eagle Grove. And sometimes they're just overdue airbrake
19 tests and you can take them with you to destination, but this had
20 something to do with something else. So he had called the car
21 people and they told him that it needed to be left up there. So
22 we set it out up there, and so we only had 100 cars in our train
23 out of there.

24 Q. Okay, 100 cars, and you made the required airbrake tests and
25 everything?

1 A. Yes. I walked it, hand numbered the list from 1 to 100, and
2 I do not have that list now. Somebody took it from me last night,
3 a UP person.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. I don't know, or I give it to somebody in the UP. I don't
6 know who took it, who it was right offhand, but that's where my
7 hand-numbered list went.

8 Q. Okay. And you walked the airbrake test and you got on the --
9 in the cab of the locomotive and you departed?

10 A. Superior, yes.

11 Q. Okay. After you left Superior, as you approached the
12 accident site, any, anything unusual with train handling you
13 noticed when you --

14 A. No, nothing. Nothing unusual, felt nothing until there was
15 just a little like -- you could feel something let go and the
16 engine surged just a little bit, which must have been when we
17 busted apart is my thought. And then all the bells and whistles
18 go off and the engineer says we go into emergency. Turned around
19 to look, natural reaction to see what's going on behind us, and
20 there's just a big ball of fire already in the sky. So that's
21 what happened.

22 Q. Okay. So you actually saw the fireball?

23 A. Yeah. We saw the fireball, yes. That's -- it was already in
24 the sky when we turned around, so --

25 MR. BUCHER: Okay. All right. I've got a couple of more

1 questions but I'm going to go around the room a little bit.

2 MR. PRESSLER: Yes.

3 BY MR. SHAFFER:

4 Q. Josh Shaffer speaking. Have you ever traveled over a broken
5 rail before?

6 A. Not that I knowingly know of, other than getting walked
7 across one, you know, 5 mile an hour of the maintenance people
8 there, they walk you over it. But --

9 Q. So you have gone over one at a slow speed like walking speed
10 or 5 miles an hour?

11 A. Yes. Yes.

12 Q. So do you know -- do you recognize that there's a distinct
13 difference between that or a jointed rail?

14 A. I actually don't, no. No, I don't. Because some of the
15 jointed rail is pretty bumpy, too. So --

16 Q. Sure.

17 A. Every time you hit the joint, so --

18 Q. Do you normally feel jointed rail through that territory?

19 A. I don't really notice it on that chunk of the track up there
20 but -- yeah, I don't notice it, I guess, up there.

21 Q. Did anything look different as you approached the bridge?

22 A. No, nothing looked different. Nothing felt different.

23 Q. Do you recall if you were looking out the front window as you
24 approached that location?

25 A. I believe I was. It's not else to see in the middle of the

1 night, so --

2 Q. When you did your airbrake test --

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. -- did you do that before or after you set out the bad order?

5 A. We did it before we set out the bad order.

6 Q. Okay. Do you remember the location of the bad order in your
7 train?

8 A. It was 12th from the rear end.

9 Q. I see. And the derailment happened how far from the head
10 end? How many cars did you have with you when you pulled away?

11 A. We had 100 and it happened at 20 -- we had 20 cars with us
12 that made it over the derailment.

13 Q. Okay. So it wasn't anywhere near what you were --

14 A. No, no.

15 Q. Okay. When you were doing your air test, at any point did
16 you pull your train past you or did you walk every time?

17 A. Well, let's see. We pulled in. They didn't know where our
18 cars were, which track. So we noticed -- we figured out where our
19 cars were when we pulled in on the power. And we found our track.
20 There was no buffer on the head -- or which would have been the
21 rear end; there was no buffer. So both buffers are on the head
22 end.

23 So we pull in and set one engine over and then switched ends,
24 which one engine's going to be our DPU eventually. Switched ends,
25 got on the head end, pulled out, grabbed a buffer off the track,

1 set it over on top of our DPU and put our two engines on the head
2 end of our train. Got on the DPU engine, which wasn't set up for
3 DPU yet, and run that into the rear end of our train. Then we
4 cabbed back to the head end. Well, it wasn't very far. It's like
5 15 cars or something to the other end. But we cabbed back to the
6 head end, and he set it all up and DPU'ed it and did the train
7 control, the cab signals, alerter test, all that crap. And then
8 when he got it set up and pumped up and all linked and everything,
9 and then I went and started my air test.

10 Q. How's it only a 15 car -- oh, is it because it's a balloon
11 track?

12 A. It's a bit balloon track, yeah.

13 Q. Got you. Okay.

14 A. Yeah, and 100 cars goes basically from one end almost to the
15 other --

16 Q. I see.

17 A. -- back around the circle. Because when we set that bad
18 order out -- it's a big hill coming out of there. So instead of
19 pulling up the hill and screwing around with the last car, we
20 actually shoved back and set the rear 12 cars over and then put
21 our bad order over on another track, and then hooked back up and
22 then pulled back out so we could have all three engines going up
23 the hill.

24 Q. So you never even had to pull the train past you to set that
25 bad order out?

1 A. No, no.

2 Q. I see.

3 A. We didn't do that to set the bad -- I pulled it -- he pulled
4 it past me up at the derail where I watched to release, which is
5 right at the top of the hill. They got the derail going by the
6 end of the plant there.

7 Q. So you did eventually roll by the train then?

8 A. Yes, I did.

9 Q. I see.

10 A. Yep.

11 Q. Did you notice any flat spots or anything out of the
12 ordinary?

13 A. There was nothing. There was no air leaking when I walked
14 the air test. There was no flat spots when it went by me. There
15 was nothing. So --

16 Q. Okay. Can you describe in more detail how the train felt
17 when you derailed?

18 A. All I felt was just a lurch, like we lurched forward just a
19 little bit and, like I said, I figure that's when it busted in
20 two, and we just lurched forward. And then I kind of looked at
21 the engineer, but then all -- everything started going off, the
22 bells and whistles, and he just goes, we just went into emergency.
23 And that's, that's all I felt was just a lurch. We lurched
24 forward and that was it.

25 Q. Any rough track leading up to the bridge?

1 A. Nothing, nope.

2 Q. How did you guys pull the train ahead after the derailment?

3 A. Well, initially I was going to go out and cut the power off
4 and then we were going to get out of there, you know. But being's
5 nothing was exploding or anything, I walked back to the end --
6 well, hurried back to the end, and closed the angle cock and then
7 he drug me up -- or he drug the engine up to the next crossing,
8 which is about a mile and a half away, so --

9 Q. How far away were you from that fire?

10 A. For the fire, on that end, about 15 cars maybe or so, is
11 about how far we traveled before we got stopped.

12 Q. Do you remember about how big the fireball was?

13 A. Oh, it was a huge fireball, the first one. And then when I
14 was walking back to close the angle cock, there was kind of
15 another fireball -- no explosion, but kind of another big shot of
16 flames in the air. But that's all I seen actually other than
17 regular just burning after, you know, it had been going for a
18 while, so -- but that was that end of the train.

19 Then we went around and talked to the fire guys while they
20 were -- the sheriff had got down there to where we were finally,
21 and our cab had trouble finding us. But I did have him stop at
22 Emmetsburg to wait for us as we were working our way back. So he
23 got out on the gravel roads, and they're all screwed up out there,
24 but he finally got to us. And the deputy pulled up and said they
25 needed us back down at the other end, too, you know.

1 So we went down there and talked to the fire chief, and on
2 the way down there, the corridor or somebody had called and said
3 don't do anything. And by the time we got down there, the fire
4 chief said there -- well, he could see the other engine, the DPU.
5 He says you need to get on that and we need to pull some cars out
6 of there. So he says go down there -- well, my engineer had
7 gotten the cab driver's phone and had called whoever at the
8 corridor, I believe, and told him what we were supposed to do.
9 And then they -- the fire chief overrode that guy, and the guy
10 says, well, do what he wants you to do then, you know.

11 And he told me to go in there as far as I felt safe and close
12 the -- you know, pull the train out. So I left nine cars on the
13 rail and I run in there and shut the angle cock and knuckle it
14 together. So I pulled the pin while I was in there, and then ran
15 back over and got in the fire guy's truck and we backed that clear
16 out in the field again, so -- and waited for him to pump the air
17 up and pull them out of there, so -- and that's pretty much the
18 extent of it. Other than that, we sat in the cab and watched it
19 burn.

20 MR. SHAFFER: Okay. I don't have any further questions.

21 MR. CORUM: No questions.

22 BY MR. FACKLAN:

23 Q. Steve Facklan, BLET, Safety Taskforce. A couple of quick
24 things for my paperwork. When did you hire out? What year?

25 A. September 2003.

1 Q. And had you worked over this territory?

2 A. Yes, many times, yes.

3 Q. Okay. And were you assigned to the pool or extra board?

4 A. I'm a pool conductor, yes.

5 Q. Okay. Here's one I haven't gotten yet. Do you remember the
6 exact train symbol?

7 A. Yes, UEGKOT of the 9th -- 0-9.

8 Q. Okay. And you said you were on duty approximately 1630?

9 A. 1630 on duty, yes.

10 Q. Okay. Do you remember what the weather was like? Maybe just
11 rough guess on temperature, and cloudy or sunny?

12 A. Yeah. It was like 19 degrees. The wind was blowing pretty
13 strong because it was pretty cold out when I walked the train, I
14 remember, up there, because it's kind of in the open down there.
15 And let's see. It was clear, though. It was nice and clear out.
16 I only remember that because on the other report I had to -- we
17 had to do the weather, too. But, yeah, it was nice and clear out
18 and about 19 degrees and windy.

19 Q. Prior days, was the wind -- weather much warmer?

20 A. No. It had been chilly the last few days before that, too, I
21 believe.

22 Q. Okay. Let's see. Do you recall roughly what the -- within
23 best guess, what your speed was when you were going through the
24 area in question?

25 A. Well, the speed limit's 30 and James always goes slow. So it

1 was less than 30.

2 Q. Okay. Having worked in that area before, do you recall any
3 or see signs of any kind of maintenance work in that area?

4 A. Oh. Yeah, we had commented on where they had replaced ties
5 when we were getting to that area or somewhere in -- before that,
6 we had commented about or I had said something about it looked
7 like they been changing ties up here, because you could kind of
8 tell where they had pulled them out and put new ones in, you know,
9 so --

10 Q. How close was that to the derailment area?

11 A. I don't even remember how close it was.

12 Q. Are we talking like a mile or within -- over a distance?

13 A. Within 5 miles or so.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. Yeah, it was somewhere. I don't even remember where we -- I
16 said that at, but --

17 Q. Okay. You said you -- after the derailment, you cut away
18 with approximately 20 cars on the head end?

19 A. There was 20 cars -- yeah. We didn't make that cut. I just
20 went back and shut the angle cock. That's where we --

21 Q. It came apart.

22 A. -- where we came apart, yeah.

23 Q. Okay. And do you remember roughly how many was pulled off
24 the rear of the train?

25 A. We took 52, I believe, off the rear. The 53 through 80 were

1 still up there in the mix, so --

2 Q. All right.

3 A. Which makes 28 cars up in the mix there.

4 Q. Your buffer cars, you had to do some switching around to get
5 buffer cars on the head end and rear end. They were all on the
6 head end --

7 A. They were both on the head end originally, yes.

8 Q. Okay. Do you recall -- can you recall what the UP rules are
9 for buffer cars for a train like this?

10 A. Yeah, we need one on each end if it's a DPU, yeah.

11 Q. Okay. Let's see. In the past, have you ever requested for
12 extra buffer cars?

13 A. No. Nope.

14 Q. I guess I'll just go into these questions real quick. Just
15 going over some training, yearly or biyearly training. I
16 understand -- do you know when the last time was you had hazmat,
17 emergency response training?

18 A. I just got tested 2 years in a row. It was a year ago April
19 and a year ago before that in April.

20 Q. Okay.

21 A. Or maybe not April. I think it was February. How did that
22 work? I don't know. Last time was, I believe, April though of
23 last year.

24 Q. What's the hazmat -- the Emergency Response Guide training
25 consist of in the program?

1 A. Well, you read the deal and all the precautions they want you
2 to do and how you're supposed to put your train together when it's
3 dangerous, you know, order of the cars and stuff and basically
4 that.

5 Q. They didn't give you any kind of training on how to respond
6 maybe in a derail incident like this?

7 A. Yes, yes, yes. That's in there also.

8 Q. Okay. Just curious, did you have any prior military or
9 volunteer fire --

10 A. No. No military, no.

11 Q. Because you guys did a very good job as far as your response.

12 MR. FACKLAN: I think that's all I have right now.

13 MR. MOZENA: No questions.

14 BY MR. SANDLER:

15 Q. The only question I have for you is how old are you?

16 A. [REDACTED].

17 Q. Happy Birthday.

18 A. [REDACTED].

19 MR. SANDLER: That's all I have.

20 BY MR. BUCHER:

21 Q. Dave Bucher again. I have a couple.

22 A. Yes.

23 Q. How long would you estimate between departing Superior and
24 the time of the accident? Just a ballpark.

25 A. What time did we depart? I got it written down if you want

1 me to -- can I look?

2 Q. Yeah. Um-hum.

3 A. I forget what I give her for a departure time, but there's 10
4 mile an hour track right there leaving, so it took us a while to
5 get down there. Let's see. 2025, and 185 minutes we were in
6 there. We got there at 2025 -- it's in my other book, actual time
7 here.

8 Arrived -- departed 2330, is when we departed, and the
9 derailment happened at about midnight 50.

10 Q. Departed at 2330 and --

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. Okay. And you estimate what time the accident occurred?

13 A. Midnight 50 approximately.

14 Q. 1250 a.m.

15 A. Because we went past mile pole 60 at midnight 45 at 28 miles
16 an hour.

17 Q. Okay. Very good. Very good. Thank you.

18 A. Yep.

19 Q. Change gears a little bit. Just -- when you called the
20 dispatcher, 9-1-1, how long do you estimate before the first
21 emergency responder arrived?

22 A. Oh, man, I don't know. Let's see. I run back there -- or I
23 didn't run back, I walked back quickly. Shut that angle cock. He
24 tried to pump them up and pull on them the first time, and it went
25 into emergency again because the DPU had something to do with it

1 he said. So he got it reset and pumped it up again, and then he
2 started pulling on them. And then I could see cars coming out
3 there, fire trucks or maybe patrolmen or sheriffs or somebody, you
4 know, lights, flashing lights and stuff. So it was maybe about 10
5 minutes, if even that. Maybe not even that.

6 Q. Okay. Okay. Great. Appreciate that.

7 A. Yeah, it might have been sooner than that even.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. Because they ended up getting -- I don't think our 9-1-1 call
10 to the dispatcher got the people aroused. Someone else called in
11 a 9-1-1 call, the farmer or something out there.

12 Q. And I just want to make -- be clear. When you looked back at
13 the time of the accident, and then walked back, the train had
14 actually separated, and how far apart do you think it separated
15 between --

16 A. I was about 15 cars from the fire.

17 Q. Okay. So there was a gap of about 15 cars?

18 A. Yeah, we had gone about 15 cars before the train had stopped.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. And everything else stopped back wherever that happened
21 there.

22 Q. Right. Okay. Thanks. I appreciate that.

23 A. Yeah.

24 MR. BUCHER: Okay. That's all I have. We'll go around
25 again.

1 BY MR. FACKLAN:

2 Q. I just have one quick, more for your opinion.

3 A. Sure.

4 Q. Having gone through all this emergency response, do you have
5 any recommendations or comments on something that could help
6 prevent this or improve something as far as a situation like this?

7 A. Not necessarily, you know. Having gone through it for the
8 first time, it -- I don't know. It's just -- it seemed like
9 everything went smoothly with everything, you know. It took us a
10 long time to get back there because the gravel roads are all
11 screwed up out there, you know. But other than that, it seemed
12 like everything went smoothly.

13 Q. Thank you.

14 A. Yeah. Well, they weren't going to fight the fire anyway, you
15 know. They were just going to sit there. That's basically what
16 he said, they're just going to let it burn when we got there,
17 so -- yeah, so I don't know. Everything seemed to go smoothly, I
18 believe.

19 MR. MOZENA: No questions.

20 MR. SANDLER: I don't have any further questions.

21 BY MR. BUCHER:

22 Q. Dave Bucher again. And just one. You did the air test and
23 you didn't notice anything with the locomotives while you were
24 going down the road. Everything seemed normal with them. I know
25 you're not the engineer, but --

1 A. Yeah, everything seemed normal when I was in there, so -- I
2 didn't notice anything unusual about anything.

3 Q. Okay. I did ask the engineer and he said the same thing --

4 A. Yeah.

5 Q. -- but I like to verify it.

6 A. I wouldn't know what to look for anyway. I actually can't
7 even run an engine. I mean, a lot of conductors can, but I have
8 never been behind there, so --

9 MR. BUCHER: Okay. All right. I appreciate it, and thank
10 you, and this concludes the interview.

11 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: DERAILMENT OF UNION PACIFIC TRAIN
 NUMBER UEGKOT 09 NEAR GRAETTINGER,
 IOWA ON MARCH 10, 2017
 Interview of Rod Pressler

ACCIDENT NO.: DCA17MR007

PLACE: Spencer, Iowa

DATE: March 11, 2017

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.

Kathryn A. Mirfin
Transcriber