

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: \*

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CSX EMPLOYEE FATALITY IN \*

CUMBERLAND, MARYLAND \*

Accident No.: RRD23FR016

ON AUGUST 6, 2023 \*

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Interview of: ERIC LEASE, Track Supervisor  
CSX Transportation

Cumberland, Maryland

Wednesday,  
August 9, 2023

APPEARANCES:

TODD KRAHOLIK, Investigator  
National Transportation Safety Board

ZACH ZAGATA, Branch Chief  
National Transportation Safety Board

DAVID WYATT, Investigator  
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Training

JARED CASSITY, Alternate National Legislative Director  
and Chief of Safety  
SMART Transportation Division

STEVE AMMONS, Director of Training on the Rules of  
Practices  
CSX Transportation

JOSH QUILLEN, Railroad Safety Inspector  
Federal Railroad Administration

JIM SOUTHWORTH, Mechanical Group Chairman and  
Investigator  
National Transportation Safety Board

ROBERT EDWARDS, Director of Safety and Observer  
CSX Transportation

JORDAN GIBSON, Observer  
Federal Railroad Administration

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I N T E R V I E W

1  
2 MR. KRAHOLIK: My name is Todd Kraholik and I am with the  
3 NTSB. We are here today on August 9th in Cumberland, Maryland, to  
4 conduct an interview with Eric Lease, who works for CSX  
5 Transportation. This interview is in conjunction with NTSB's  
6 investigation near Cumberland, Maryland as a result of the  
7 accident. A conductor trainee was fatally injured. The NTSB  
8 accident reference number is RRD23FR016. The purpose of this  
9 investigation is to increase safety, not assign fault, blame, or  
10 liability.

11 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around  
12 the table and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name,  
13 who you are representing, and your title. I'd like to remind  
14 everybody to speak clearly so we can get an accurate recording.  
15 I'll start off and then pass to my right. Again, my name is Todd  
16 Kraholik, the spelling of my last name is K R A H O L I K, and I  
17 am an NTSB investigator.

18 MR. ZAGATA: Zach Zagata, Z A G A T A, NTSB branch chief.

19 MR. LEASE: Eric Lease, L E A S E, track supervisor,  
20 Cumberland, Maryland.

21 MR. WYATT: David Wyatt, last name spelled W Y A T T,  
22 Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen investigator.

23 MR. CASSITY: Jared Cassity, C A S S I T Y, I'm the alternate  
24 national legislative director and chief of safety for SMART  
25 Transportation Division.

1 MR. AMMONS: Steve Ammons, A M M O N S, CSX Transportation,  
2 director of training on the rules and practices.

3 MR. SOUTHWORTH: Jim Southworth, S O U T H W O R T H, I'm a  
4 railroad accident investigator and mechanical group chairman here  
5 and I'm an observer in this interview.

6 MR. QUILLEN: Josh Quillen, Q U I L L E N, FRA.

7 MR. GIBSON: Jordan Gibson, G I B S O N, FRA observer.

8 MR. KRAHOLIK: All right, Eric, do we have your permission to  
9 record the discussion today?

10 MR. LEASE: Yes.

11 MR. KRAHOLIK: Do you understand the transcripts will be part  
12 of a public docket and as such, we cannot guarantee any  
13 confidentiality?

14 MR. LEASE: Yes.

15 INTERVIEW OF ERIC LEASE

16 BY MR. KRAHOLIK:

17 Q. All right, so can you give us a history of your railroad  
18 career?

19 A. I've been with CSX for 17-and-a-half years. I started out on  
20 the FPGs (ph.), that's where I hired out at, worked some service  
21 lane jobs, worked my way up. Just to make a long story short, I  
22 went into management -- from a foreman job, I went into management  
23 in 2017 in July. So, I've been in management about six years.

24 Q. And how long have you been in Cumberland as the manager?

25 A. Four years.

1 Q. And have you ever been a track inspector before?

2 A. A very short time before I went into management.

3 Q. Okay, and the night of the incident, did you come at all to  
4 the accident or anything like that?

5 A. I got here at about 3:30 a.m., approximately. Everything was  
6 already dealt with and cleaned up. So, I mean, I went down to the  
7 engines and was looking around. But yes, I was here about 3:30  
8 a.m., I think.

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. Maybe closer to 4:00.

11 Q. All right, I'm going to move to -- do you know if CSX has any  
12 close clearance process, or what defines a close clearance, or  
13 anything like that?

14 A. I feel like they probably have stuff for, like, close  
15 clearance objects. I don't know what the footage is right off  
16 hand. They do have MWIs and stuff for that. As far as close  
17 clearance for tracks that I know of, I don't know that I've ever  
18 of a minimum.

19 Q. Okay, so has anybody ever -- let me go change it, have you  
20 ever identified a close clearance for tracks -- between two  
21 tracks?

22 A. No.

23 Q. Do you know what you would do if you were to find a close  
24 clearance in -- for tracks?

25 A. Honestly, no. I mean, I'd have to find out. No, I don't.

1 Q. Okay, have you heard anybody mention or talk about that end  
2 of the yard being tight, or close, or anything like that?

3 A. Not that I recall. I mean, that day, there was other people  
4 talking about it. I may have heard it. I honestly can't say that  
5 I've ever had anyone say that it was a tight area to me.

6 Q. I got you. In your -- as a manager, you perform track  
7 inspections?

8 A. Yes.

9 Q. And then as part of your track inspections, is that something  
10 you check for, close clearances?

11 A. No.

12 Q. Okay, so this yard periodically has clean sweeps, or safety  
13 sweeps, or whatever you want to call them?

14 A. Uh huh.

15 Q. Have you ever participated in them?

16 A. Yes.

17 Q. Did -- as part of the clean sweeps, do you have any knowledge  
18 of them cleaning up the sunshades over there, or the mirrors, or  
19 anything?

20 A. No.

21 Q. Have you ever seen the sunshades and mirrors in the track  
22 over there before?

23 A. I don't know if I've ever noticed it in that location, no.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. And I shouldn't say I've never noticed, but if I have, I've

1 never -- they were piled up, maybe I didn't take notice to them.  
2 But yeah, I've never taken notice to them.

3 MR. KRAHOLIK: I got you. All right, I think that's all I  
4 have. We're going to go around.

5 MR. ZAGATA: Zach Zagata, NTSB, no additional questions

6 MR. WYATT: David Wyatt, BLET, no additional questions.

7 MR. CASSITY: Jared Cassity, SMART TD, no questions.

8 MR. AMMONS: Ammons, just give me a minute. I'm thinking  
9 here.

10 BY MR. AMMONS:

11 Q. Can you just tell us a little bit about the transition in  
12 that area from the track center? You know, the distance between  
13 the track centers from maybe the entry of that move into the area  
14 where the collision happened and then maybe on the other end as  
15 well? The variance there and how it changes?

16 A. Yeah, so as far as the track centers?

17 Q. Yes.

18 A. So, starting at the -- I guess it would be the west end  
19 coming east, once you come by the signal, I believe it was over 12  
20 feet. The closer you get, it starts -- once it starts curving  
21 with the curvature of the other track, it starts getting a little  
22 closer, a little closer, and just gradually down to 11, three-and-  
23 a-half, I think, was the tightest. Then it stayed there for a  
24 short time and then once you get to the other curve, it starts  
25 going back our to eventually it goes into the 11th, 11-and-a-half,



1 11, ten, then on over 12 feet.

2 Q. Have you ever experienced that before in any other locations?  
3 I mean, where there's that much change in that short of a  
4 distance?

5 A. Yeah, down there it just kind of -- during the investigation,  
6 looking at it, it almost looks like it was probably meant to be  
7 like that. Maybe it wasn't ever -- you know, years ago, maybe it  
8 wasn't that close, I don't know. But just standing back, looking  
9 at the track's structure, the way the two curves are really sharp,  
10 I believe that little curve right there is almost as far away from  
11 that track as you can get it without readjusting the whole track.  
12 With that being said, I was a surfacing foreman and I just  
13 remember locations, you'll see spots. Like in curves, same thing,  
14 it's usually, like, around the curve or I don't know why, but just  
15 the track centers will get a little close at the curve and then  
16 they'll just kind of spread back out. So, yeah, I think I've seen  
17 it before.

18 Q. In that particular location, there are four tracks, correct?

19 A. Uh huh.

20 Q. Did you measure the track centers between the other three  
21 tracks and how they can (indiscernible)?

22 A. Yes, so between the freight and I think -- I want to say -- I  
23 don't want to say exactly, but in about the same location between  
24 the freight and two main, there was a section that 11, seven-and-  
25 a-half, I believe. So, yeah, it was a little tight there too, so

1 it's -- I believe that whole area there is a little -- just a  
2 little tight.

3 Q. Is there any plans as of yet -- based off, you know, this  
4 incident, is there any plans to do anything with those -- that  
5 area there, those tracks -- any of those tracks?

6 A. Not that I've been told, no. No, I haven't been told of  
7 anything that we're going to try to do yet other than, I think,  
8 Mr. Johnson was saying about trying to move the track when he was  
9 here that night.

10 MR. AMMONS: Okay, that's all I've got.

11 MR. QUILLEN: Josh Quillen, FRA, no questions.

12 BY MR. KRAHOLIK:

13 Q. Todd Kraholik with the NTSB. I just want to talk about if  
14 CSX decided to widen those tracks, can you talk about what that  
15 would entail? Is it a simple run the tamper through and spread  
16 them out -- can you kind of discuss --

17 A. I don't think it would be. With my experience, like I said,  
18 you've got two sharp curves on each end, it drops down, it's a  
19 compound curve. It goes from -- I don't want to say the degree  
20 because I'm not sure what it was, but a sharp -- it goes to a  
21 really small curve -- sharp. The short part that is tight, is --  
22 it's just really short. So, basically, you would have to cut out  
23 rail, move that whole entire track down. From my knowledge, you  
24 would have to move the entire thing, and then do the same with the  
25 freight if you wanted to fix that too.

1 Q. So, you'd have to move all four of them, basically?

2 A. Well, at least two of the tracks. (Clears throat) Excuse  
3 me. We didn't measure between two and one main, but it looked  
4 like it was a little wider there. But yeah, at least the freight  
5 and the city would have to be moved to adjust to whatever they  
6 would want.

7 Q. Okay, and when we were talking about surfacing, can you kind  
8 of discuss what surfacing is and what that entails?

9 A. So, surfacing is just basically, in that situation, you would  
10 be lining the track. You'd pick the track up, you would move it  
11 one way or the other, whichever way you would need it.

12 Q. Okay, and when you're surfacing, if you were to surface that  
13 area not for moving the track, would you take measurements before  
14 of your distances? Or would you --

15 A. Generally, yeah. I mean, generally, as a foreman on a  
16 surfacing unit, especially, like, an area like that, you would --  
17 with all the tracks like that, generally, you're going to check  
18 track centers as you're walking, so -- yeah.

19 Q. All right. Okay, since you've been here for four years, have  
20 you done any surfacing in there?

21 A. Not that I can recall, no.

22 MR. KRAHOLIK: Okay, that's all I have. We can go around one  
23 more time.

24 MR. WYATT: Nothing further.

25 BY MR. CASSITY:

1 Q. Jared Cassity with SMART TD. So, I've been a conductor and  
2 locomotive engineer and when it comes to the track world, I  
3 honestly don't know much at all other than we need to keep the  
4 railroad equipment on the rails. So, I'm curious, is there a  
5 standard or an ideal measurement when it comes to track separation  
6 or track centers that CSX or anyone in the industry recommends?

7 A. I don't think so. I mean, I was a surfacing foreman and I  
8 don't ever really remember getting an exact number like you don't  
9 want to be less than this that I can recall. I've never heard of  
10 a measurement, no.

11 Q. Okay, so -- and I think you may have just said it, on the  
12 flip side, is there a number that when you encounter, you said  
13 woah, this is too close, we can't do this? Is there that number  
14 or is too close determined?

15 A. No, I mean, I've -- like, I feel like in my head maybe 12  
16 feet would be, like, what you would want. I don't even know if  
17 that's even right. But less than that, I remember being on the  
18 main a couple spots again, as a surfacing foreman, and being in  
19 the 11s -- like mid 11s and then I was just a new foreman, a guy  
20 was training me and, you know, he said that's fine. So, even  
21 then, I -- he said it was fine and that was ten years -- or eight  
22 years ago.

23 MR. CASSITY: Okay, that's helpful, thank you. I have  
24 nothing else.

25 BY MR. AMMONS:

1 Q. Ammons, just one follow up there with that. In the  
2 engineering department world, when you guys are thinking about,  
3 you know, clearances and that's fine, are you typically thinking  
4 about equipment hitting equipment in clearing or does it come into  
5 thought of men or women riding it?

6 A. They honestly -- I was talking about this the other day,  
7 like, for me, I don't really think about the aspect of trains, so,  
8 like, to me, I'm not thinking about someone riding the train. So,  
9 no, I'll say I do not think about that.

10 Q. You would be more concerned with clearing of other equipment?

11 A. Yeah, that's right.

12 Q. Yeah, so if you were out there -- you know, obviously,  
13 hindsight is what it is, we know, obviously, unfortunately, what  
14 happened, but prior to that day -- prior to the 6th, if you were  
15 out there and for whatever reason measuring those track center  
16 clearances there for distances, and you come up at 11 and three  
17 inches and three-quarters -- is that what it was?

18 A. Yeah, 11 and three-and-a-half I think is what it was.

19 Q. If you come up with that, it doesn't concern you at that  
20 point?

21 A. A spot like that that hasn't been touched, no, I wouldn't --  
22 I mean, I would think in my head yeah, that's tight, but it's --  
23 to me, as long as I've been here, it's been like that, we've made  
24 that move a lot. No, I just -- no, it wouldn't.

25 MR. AMMONS: That's all for now.

1 BY MR. QUILLEN:

2 Q. Josh Quillen, FRA, if you was to identify a close clearance,  
3 what would happen next in -- you know, to add it to the timetable  
4 and stuff?

5 A. I would talk to -- I probably would just go to my director  
6 and say hey, we've got a close clearance issue here. I think, you  
7 know, it's whatever -- what's our next step is basically what I  
8 would do.

9 MR. QUILLEN: Okay, no further questions.

10 BY MR. KRAHOLIK:

11 Q. Todd Kraholik with the NTSB. Do you have anything you would  
12 like to add or any recommendations to prevent this in the future?

13 A. I don't know. There's a million things. I don't know, I  
14 mean, we're going to learn a lot from this, obviously, with track  
15 centers and maybe what we should allow. I mean, looking now, if  
16 the track was moved over, obviously, this would've never happened.  
17 But I really don't know, no.

18 Q. Okay, thank you. If we have any follow-up questions, do you  
19 mind if we contact you?

20 A. Nope.

21 MR. KRAHOLIK: All right, on behalf of the NTSB, I would like  
22 to thank you for your time and cooperation. We're going to go off  
23 the record.

24 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

25

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

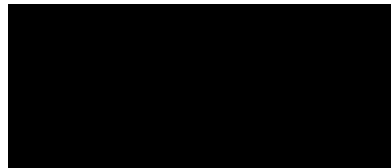
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Interview of Eric Lease

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD23FR016

PLACE: Cumberland, Maryland

DATE: August 9, 2023

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.



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Carolyn Hanna  
Transcriber