

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

NORFOLK SOUTHERN TRAIN COLLISION *

AND DERAILMENT NEAR EASTON, *

PENNSYLVANIA ON MARCH 2, 2024 *

Accident No.: RRD24FR009

* * * * *

Interview of: JOHN MCHALE, Engineer (19G)
Norfolk Southern

Tuesday,
March 5, 2024

APPEARANCES:

RICHARD SKOLNEOVICH, Operations Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

RON SABOL, National Safety Team
SMART Transportation Division

BOB BEATON, Chief, Systems Safety Division
Division of Railroad, Pipeline and Hazardous Materials
National Transportation Safety Board

G. W. SCOTT BROWN, Safety Taskforce
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

JOSH QUILLEN
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RANDY HUNT, Safety
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ROBERT KREIS, Local Chairman 498
SMART representing John McHale

BRIAN McLAIN, Safety Department
Norfolk Southern

VINCE MEANS, Regional Road Foreman (Observer)
Norfolk Southern

DANIEL CADOGAN, Safety Taskforce (Observer)
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

JORDAN GIBSON (Observer)
Federal Railroad Administration

KEVIN BANKS (Observer)
Federal Railroad Administration

PAUL HULBURT, Road Foreman (Observer)
Norfolk Southern, Keystone Division

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I N T E R V I E W

1
2 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: All right. Good morning. My name is
3 Richard Skolnekovich, and I'm the NTSB operations group chairman
4 for this accident.

5 We're conducting an interview today on 5 March 2024 with John
6 McHale who works for Norfolk Southern. This interview is in
7 conjunction with the NTSB investigation of the accident that
8 occurred at Easton, Pennsylvania, 2 March 2024. The accident
9 reference number is RRD24FR009.

10 The purpose of this investigation is to increase safety, not
11 to assign fault, blame or liability.

12 Before we begin our interview and questions, we'll go around
13 and introduce ourselves. Please spell out your last name and
14 title. I'll start off, and then I'll pass it again to my left.

15 Again, my name is Richard Skolnekovich, S-k-o-l-n-e-k-o-v-i-
16 c-h, NTSB investigator.

17 MR. SABOL: Ron Sabol, S-a-b-o-l, Sheet, Metal, Air, Rail and
18 Transportation Workers, Transportation Division, national safety
19 team.

20 MR. BEATON: Bob Beaton, B-e-a-t-o-n, chief of the system
21 safety division with NTSB.

22 MR. BROWN: G. W. Scott Brown, BLET safety taskforce, B-r-o-
23 w-n.

24 MR. QUILLEN: Josh Quillen, Q-u-i-l-l-e-n, FRA.

25 MR. CRAINE: Don Craine, C-r-a-i-n-e, NS Transportation.

1 MR. HUNT: Randy Hunt, H-u-n-t, Norfolk Southern Safety.

2 MR. KREIS: Robert Kreis, SMART local chairman for the 498
3 representing John and his support, K-r-e-i-s.

4 MR. McHALE: And John McHale, engineer, M-c-H-a-l-e.

5 MR. McLAIN: Brian McLain, M-c-L-a-i-n, Norfolk Southern
6 Safety Department.

7 MR. MEANS: Vince Means, M-e-a-n-s, Norfolk Southern,
8 regional road foreman.

9 MR. CADOGAN: Good afternoon [sic]. Dan Cadogan, C-a-d-o-g-
10 a-n. I'm with the safety taskforce of BLET.

11 MR. GIBSON: Jordan Gibson, G-i-b-s-o-n, FRA, observer.

12 MR. BANKS: Kevin Banks, B-a-n-k-s, FRA, observer.

13 MR. HULBURT: Paul Hulburt, H-u-l-b-u-r-t, Norfolk Southern,
14 Keystone Division, road foreman, observer.

15 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. And that's everybody. John, thank
16 you so much for coming in today. We appreciate you coming in. I
17 know we talked a little bit before the interview, but you
18 understand that this interview is being recorded.

19 MR. McHALE: Yes.

20 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: And you know it will be transcribed at
21 some point --

22 MR. McHALE: Yeah.

23 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: -- and will be part of our public docket.

24 MR. McHALE: Yes.

25 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. And we have your permission to --

1 MR. McHALE: Yes.

2 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: -- record it. Okay. Great.

3 INTERVIEW OF JOHN MCHALE

4 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

5 Q. John, if you don't mind, I'd like to start just a little bit
6 about your railroad history, when you started and when you got
7 promoted and so forth.

8 A. My hire date on NS was 11/08. Promoted to conductor 11/09,
9 and certified as an engineer I believe it was March 2015.

10 Q. Okay. And where did you hire on and work at?

11 A. Allentown.

12 Q. Allentown. And where did you get qualified at?

13 A. As far as the territory or --

14 Q. Yeah.

15 A. All territories to North Jersey, out to Altoona, Hagerstown,
16 Camden, Harrisburg.

17 Q. What division is that? Harrisburg, is that Keystone?

18 A. Keystone Division now.

19 Q. Okay. Keystone. And then did you work extra board or --

20 A. I started out on an extra board. This was an assigned train
21 of mine.

22 Q. Okay. Is it a regular job?

23 A. Yes.

24 Q. How long have you been working the regular?

25 A. We have a bid system. So it could vary, but I was on it for

1 2 weeks this time and --

2 Q. Yeah. So how long do you think you've been working it
3 regular?

4 A. I worked it as a conductor regular when I was -- for 4 or 5
5 years, and I worked it as an engineer previously before the PWS
6 came in, probably for 2 years straight.

7 Q. Okay. So you're pretty comfortable and familiar with the
8 territory?

9 A. Yes.

10 Q. Okay. So overall since '08 to now you've pretty much been
11 working the same territory?

12 A. Yes.

13 Q. Okay. And how often do you go over the ley line? Pretty
14 frequently --

15 A. Yes.

16 Q. -- during that time? Okay. So you're pretty comfortable
17 with it?

18 A. Yes.

19 Q. Okay. All right. Just real quick. Where do you sign up at?

20 A. Allentown.

21 Q. Allentown.

22 A. And away terminals are Croxton where we were coming from, you
23 know, coming back down town away from home terminal.

24 Q. Okay. So your home terminal is Croxton?

25 A. Our home terminal in Allentown.

1 Q. Allentown. But you were going to overnight at Croxton?

2 A. Yeah, we went down the night before.

3 Q. Oh, okay.

4 A. And came back -- we were coming back the following day.

5 Q. Gotcha. Okay. What time did you sign up?

6 A. 9 p.m.

7 Q. 9 p.m. What time did you get off the day before?

8 A. We were stuck on the train. We got off at 2 a.m.

9 Q. 2 a.m. Okay. Do you have any relief days?

10 A. I'm sorry.

11 Q. Relief days, days off?

12 A. It's usually out, back, day off.

13 Q. Okay. So when was the last time you were off?

14 A. It would have been -- when did we go out? Thursday.

15 Wednesday.

16 Q. So Wednesday. Okay. Okay. Just a couple of quick questions
17 about just your background. So when was the last time conduct or
18 were part of a rules exam?

19 A. Just recently about 3 weeks ago.

20 Q. Three weeks. Okay. That's actually good. So I've got some
21 more questions. No, I'm just kidding. The rules exam that you
22 took, did it cover signal exams as well?

23 A. Yes.

24 Q. Okay. Did you have any problems with the signal exams?

25 A. No.

1 Q. Okay. Was there any territory qualification questions on the
2 exam?

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. Can you kind of give me just a general idea what kind of
5 questions they asked?

6 A. Speeds, you know -- I'm trying to think. Just general
7 questions about the territory, you know, what's the speeds, grade,
8 you know, not really much, I mean I really don't know.

9 Q. No, no, that's fine. Just as best you can remember. So was
10 it like track speeds or --

11 A. Yeah.

12 Q. -- restricted speeds?

13 A. Like track speeds and --

14 Q. Okay. Any like, you know, milepost locations of things?

15 A. Not that I can recall.

16 Q. Okay. Were there any PTC questions?

17 A. No, but I did my simulator run on the exact run going east.

18 Q. Well, that was going to be my next question. So, you did a
19 simulator run?

20 A. Yeah, from LE85 to Port Reading Junction.

21 Q. Okay. When was that?

22 A. The same time.

23 Q. Same time.

24 A. Same time as the rules class.

25 Q. Okay. And when you did simulator, did you get any like

1 emergency type stuff?

2 A. They put up signals like approach slows to restricting, you
3 know, they put various signals up.

4 Q. Yep. Okay. And who were you -- with a road foreman or --

5 A. Yeah, road foreman Atlanta.

6 Q. Okay. Did you go to Atlanta to do this or was this --

7 A. No, he was on a box.

8 Q. Okay. Where's the simulator at?

9 A. In Allentown.

10 Q. Okay. All right. Was it good or did he have any
11 improvements for you?

12 A. No, it's -- everything was fine.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. Can I stand up for a second?

15 Q. Absolutely. Do you need to take a break?

16 A. I just need to stand up and stretch.

17 Q. Yeah, absolutely.

18 A. I'm getting a little --

19 Q. I've gotcha. If we need to take a break, we can take a
20 break.

21 A. No, I'm just starting to tighten up at little bit.

22 Q. I've gotcha. Is it okay if I continue to ask questions?

23 A. Yeah, that's fine.

24 Q. Okay. All right. So with the simulator training, you said
25 you did some approach to restricting training?

1 A. Yeah.

2 Q. Okay. Did you get any dark signal training or --

3 A. No, there was no dark signal.

4 Q. Okay. So just the normal --

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. -- single progression type training and --

7 A. Went from clear to an approach to maybe an approach slow to a
8 restricting.

9 Q. With the simulator training, was there any -- what kind of
10 consist did you have?

11 A. That I do remember because it was a strange consist. It was
12 an 87 auto -- 87 car auto rack train that weighed 10,000 ton.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. Which is kind of impossible.

15 Q. I was about to say. They're really going to make sure you
16 knew what you were doing.

17 A. It was like 10,000 feet and 10,000 ton.

18 Q. 10,000 feet.

19 A. So I was like 10,000 ton, that's kind of --

20 Q. Yeah. Have you spent much time working auto racks?

21 A. Not a lot but, you know, I've done my share.

22 Q. Yeah.

23 A. I just know they're not 10,000 tons for 87 cars.

24 Q. Yep. I gotcha. Okay. Did you have multiple DP units or
25 anything like that?

1 A. Not DP. It was just -- I believe it was, if I'm correct,
2 only one unit.

3 Q. One unit.

4 A. I'm not sure. I don't remember.

5 Q. Okay. And was there any PTC training involved with it?

6 A. As far as?

7 Q. During the simulator training?

8 A. No.

9 Q. Like PTC failure or --

10 A. No, there was no PTC failure at all.

11 Q. Okay. Okay. You doing okay?

12 A. Yeah.

13 Q. All right. All right, John. That's all I have for now.
14 Thank you so much.

15 A. Okay.

16 MR. SABOL: Ron Sabol, SMART Transportation Division.

17 BY MR. SABOL:

18 Q. John, thank you for coming in today. I have a couple
19 questions. Was PTC functionable on your train?

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. Okay. At any time did you have the automated system engaged
22 on --

23 A. It was running trip optimizer at the time.

24 Q. Trip optimizer. Okay. At any point leading up to your
25 incident, did you have to take it out of trip optimizer?

1 A. Yes, coming down the mountain at milepost 71 or so.

2 Q. Did you have a chance to re-engage it or were you still in
3 manual?

4 A. Yes, I re-engaged it. We were coming down the mountain and
5 was going through a 40, and it got it up 41 with the accelerometer
6 climbing. So I, you know, instead of getting a penalty, I took it
7 out of trip optimizer and went manual down the mountain.

8 Q. Okay. And then you -- when you flattened out and everything
9 to back under control --

10 A. I put it back into trip optimizer.

11 Q. -- you put it back into trip optimizer.

12 A. Yes.

13 Q. Okay. Was trip optimizer engaged at the time of the
14 incident?

15 A. I was engaged. It automatically knocks you out if you take
16 air or --

17 Q. Right.

18 A. -- you know, so I'd say when I took air, it knocked it out of
19 it but --

20 Q. Okay. Okay. Thank you.

21 MR. SABOL: No further questions.

22 BY MR. BEATON:

23 Q. John, good morning. Bob Beaton from the NTSB. I'd like to
24 ask you a couple of questions about the accident but before we get
25 to that, can you give me a general overview of your trip that day

1 leading into the accident? When you started out, I think you said
2 you started from Croxton.

3 A. Croxton, yeah.

4 Q. Can you just kind of walk me through the trip?

5 A. We leave Croxton with, you know, they have cars in their yard
6 and we go over to another yard, as shared assets yard at Oak
7 Island and we do a pickup there. We leave, a cut of cars from
8 Croxton out on the main and go in and pick up, and we picked up
9 approximately 9400 feet from Oak Island. And then you come back
10 out, and you double back against what's left of your consist. And
11 we had DP set up, had to set up DP out there and came in with a DP
12 and then positions the DP according to where you have to, where it
13 has to be in -- according to the rules.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. And the trip was fine, you know. Didn't encounter anything
16 out of the ordinary until --

17 Q. Until you did.

18 A. -- until we did.

19 Q. Yeah, yeah. All right. Well, let's talk a little bit, as
20 you get closer to CP Redington, can you tell me what your
21 experience was as you encountered 24X and passed her?

22 A. We were going by 63V who was stopped on main 2 at Redington
23 and, you know, my PTC showed -- was showing at 30 miles an hour at
24 milepost 85. So it was -- we were doing 30 miles an hour. We
25 passed 63V, passed 24X's head end and nothing out of the ordinary.

1 And, you know, we came around the first curve and we saw an engine
2 and thought it was 24X's DP. We didn't know, you know, we saw an
3 engine sitting right at the hind end there or middle, and next
4 thing you know, we came around the curve and I said, what the hell
5 is this? And I took full service and the next thing I know, I'm
6 in the river.

7 Q. Okay. Thank you for that description. I don't need to
8 belabor these questions, but when you passed the head end of 24X,
9 and subsequently, was there any radio communications that you were
10 aware of?

11 A. Not that I heard at the time. I don't remember when I heard.
12 I just heard 268 at one point, and I'm pretty sure right after we
13 passed that engine, saying we just hit -- we just ran into the
14 back of 24X.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. And that was right as I was going around the curve --

17 Q. Seconds before.

18 A. Yeah.

19 Q. Yeah. Okay. No communications from dispatcher?

20 A. No. The first dispatcher I heard was 19G, are you on the
21 move? And I think I told them something like we -- there was a
22 car in our track. We're in the river.

23 Q. Okay. Just backing up, just before heard 268, do you recall
24 any other communications?

25 A. No, I didn't.

1 Q. Okay. Did you hear any other noises or --

2 A. Not to my recollection. I, you know, I can't really thing.
3 I'm not really sure.

4 Q. Okay. I was just curious. Maybe you heard the impact of
5 engine 268.

6 A. No, I didn't. I was focused on, you know --

7 Q. Yeah. Okay. That's fine. That's fine. Okay. That's all I
8 have for right now. Thanks, John.

9 A. Okay.

10 MR. BROWN: Brown, I have no questions at this time.

11 BY MR. QUILLEN:

12 Q. John Quillen, FRA. I'm glad you're okay. You said you
13 grabbed full service when you saw the derailed cars.

14 A. When I saw the cars in our track.

15 Q. Right. Did you place it in emergency at any point?

16 A. I may have. I don't know. I know my conductor trainee said
17 he pulled the handle.

18 Q. Okay. Yeah, he did say that. Okay. That's all the
19 questions I have.

20 A. But we're taught to put it in full service, not dump it.

21 Q. Okay.

22 A. So.

23 Q. Thank you. That's all I have.

24 A. All right.

25 MR. CRAINE: Craine, I have nothing.

1 MR. HUNT: Randy Hunt. No questions.

2 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

3 Q. Rich Skolnekovich. I just want to follow on. So being
4 taught not to dump, is that a rule or is that just part of the
5 training that you're told? I don't ask anybody.

6 A. No, I mean we were told, you know, part of the rule, not -- I
7 don't know if it's a rule or not but they -- it's safer not to put
8 it in emergency as far as derailing your consist behind you, you
9 know, is the way it's been implied to me.

10 Q. I understand. So maybe through your OJT training when you
11 were getting qualified as an engineer --

12 A. Right.

13 Q. -- you're thinking you heard it there?

14 A. Possibly.

15 Q. Okay. And you said the conductor, the conductor trainee
16 pulled the --

17 A. Yeah, he told me he pulled his lever on his side.

18 Q. Okay. All right. John, thank you. That's all I have.

19 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: We'll go around the table one more time.

20 MR. BEATON: Yeah, I have some follow up.

21 BY MR. BEATON:

22 Q. John, you've been on this line since you qualified as a --
23 you've been on a ley line since you qualified as an engineer in
24 2015. Is that correct?

25 A. Yes, many times.

1 Q. So can you give me a rough number of how many times you've
2 gone east or west through --

3 A. It's got to be hundreds of trips at least.

4 Q. Hundreds.

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. Yeah. Okay. I know you were going west, but I'd like to ask
7 you about going east --

8 A. Okay.

9 Q. -- through that area. If you had a train like 268 on a wet,
10 early spring morning, with rain, and you had restricted signals,
11 how fast would you go through the --

12 A. The curves.

13 Q. -- curves?

14 A. On the one, I would ask not to take the restricting signal
15 until -- I would wait for a better signal.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. But if I had to going around those curves, I wouldn't do more
18 than 2, 3 miles an hour.

19 Q. Okay. Is that -- what's driving that decision for speed? Is
20 it the territory or the weather, train --

21 A. My speed, what I would be doing?

22 Q. Well, yeah. You just said 2 miles an hour.

23 A. The territory, because if you can't see, you know, I'd have
24 to sight a distance to be able to stop.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. If I'm coming around a curve, I can't see around the curve.
2 So I'm not going to be doing, you know, exceeding, you know, an
3 exceptional speed.

4 Q. Okay. And that would -- you'd make that decision no matter
5 sort of --

6 A. Whether it's wet, dry, light, dark.

7 Q. Yeah, leaves --

8 A. If I'm not coming around a curve -- if I'm coming around a
9 curve, I'm not going fast at all.

10 Q. Okay. And is it fair to say that you routinely go that speed
11 through that area when you're going east?

12 A. Usually if I see a restricting at 85, I stop and ask the
13 dispatcher if I can hold and wait for a better signal.

14 Q. Okay. Okay. And when you stop and hold, is there any
15 announcement that you're holding for -- at that location?

16 A. Usually dispatch will say, you know, 19G or 18G at 85,
17 they're at 7500 feet or whatever to another train.

18 Q. Yeah.

19 A. Yeah, they'll give them a distance for someone who may be
20 coming up behind you.

21 Q. Right. Okay. All right. John, I really do appreciate you
22 coming in and sharing your experience and comments here with us
23 today. I believe that that's all I have. Thank you.

24 A. Thank you.

25 MR. BROWN: Nothing else.

1 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

2 Q. All right. John, I appreciate you. I know you're hurting.
3 I really do appreciate you coming in here to talk to us. You've
4 been extremely helpful. So we really appreciate it. At this
5 point, I'm going to ask you, is there anything you'd like to add
6 to the interview or --

7 A. No, I don't think so.

8 Q. From what you know of the accident, is there anything you can
9 think of that might help prevent it in the future?

10 A. Communication.

11 Q. With crews? With dispatchers? Or what?

12 A. Everything.

13 BY MR. BEATON:

14 Q. Can you add a few more words? Communications.

15 A. Basically if something happens, someone should be saying
16 something, you know, right away or dispatchers should at least --
17 like I said, I didn't hear a dispatcher say anything or they may
18 have, they may not have, you know, saying, hey, 24X is up there,
19 5200 feet or whatever they were, you know, and this guy should
20 have acknowledged or something. I don't know, you know, to be
21 honest with you.

22 Q. But from your point of view, if you had that information,
23 would it help you operate better?

24 A. It would -- I don't think it would have stopped, if they had,
25 even by the time they said something to me. I don't know if there

1 would have been enough time to even do anything.

2 Q. Yeah.

3 A. You know, it was -- it all happened so fast.

4 Q. In this instance.

5 A. Yeah.

6 Q. But better communications may help in different instances.

7 A. Maybe, yeah.

8 Q. Is that what you're saying?

9 A. Yeah, I think so.

10 Q. Okay. Thank you.

11 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

12 Q. Richard Skolnekovich. Would you tell them that so the
13 conditions prior to the accident or are you talking about during
14 or both?

15 A. Just if there's communication. I don't know if someone would
16 have talked, maybe there could have been something if I would have
17 been able to apply the brakes sooner or -- but they wouldn't have
18 know if their cars were on the track either. So I, you know, I
19 don't know.

20 Q. Well, I guess the reason why I was asking was because you
21 kind of alluded to it before about letting the train know that
22 there's another train in front in him with the dispatcher.

23 A. Right. They usually do.

24 Q. Yeah, but not always.

25 A. I would say 98 percent of the time at least.

1 Q. All right. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

2 A. No, I don't think.

3 Q. Okay. John, on behalf of the NTSB, I thank you. And, if in
4 the future, if we have any questions, do you mind if we call you?

5 A. No, not at all.

6 Q. Okay. All right. Then that concludes the interview. Thank
7 you, John.

8 A. All right. Thank you.

9 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

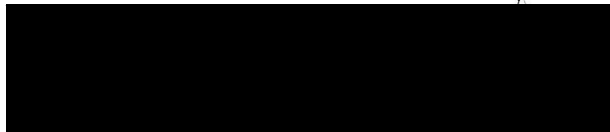
This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF: NORFOLK SOUTHERN TRAIN COLLISION
 AND DERAILMENT NEAR EASTON,
 ON MARCH 2, 2024
 Interview of John McHale

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD24FR009

DATE: March 5, 2024

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