

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

\* \* \* \* \*

Investigation of: \*

NORFOLK SOUTHERN TRAIN COLLISION \*

AND DERAILMENT NEAR EASTON, \*

PENNSYLVANIA ON MARCH 2, 2024 \*

Accident No.: RRD24FR009

\* \* \* \* \*

Interview of: ROBERT STACK, Engineer (268)  
Norfolk Southern

Monday,  
March 4, 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  
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JOSH QUILLEN  
Federal Railroad Administration

DON CRAINE  
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RANDY HUNT, Safety  
Norfolk Southern Transportation

CHAD BOWLING, Local Chairman  
BLET Division 74

VINCE MEANS, Regional Road Foreman (Observer)  
Norfolk Southern

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

KEVIN BANKS (Observer)  
Federal Railroad Administration

PAUL HULBURT, Road Foreman (Observer)  
Norfolk Southern

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I N T E R V I E W

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

5 We're conducting an interview today on 4 March 2024 with  
6 Robert Stack who works with Norfolk Southern. This interview is  
7 in conjunction with the NTSB's investigation of the accident that  
8 occurred on 2 March 2024. The NTSB accident reference number is  
9 RRD24FR009.

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

12 Before we begin the 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 to my left.

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

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

20 MR. BEATON: Good morning. Bob Beaton from NTSB. I'm the  
21 chief of system safety division. My last name is spelled B-e-a-t-  
22 o-n.

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

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

1 MR. CRAINE: Don Craine, C-r-a-i-n-e, Norfolk Southern  
2 Transportation.

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

4 MR. BOWLING: Chad Bowling, B-o-w-l-i-n-g, BLET, Division 74,  
5 Local Chairman.

6 MR. STACK: Robert Stack, Norfolk Southern, engineer. Last  
7 name is S-t-a-c-k.

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

10 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Observing.

11 MR. CADOGAN: Daniel Cadogan, with the BLET safety taskforce,  
12 as an observer.

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

14 MR. HULBURT: Paul Hulburt, H-u-l-b-u-r-t, Norfolk Southern,  
15 road foreman, Observer.

16 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. That's everybody. All right.  
17 Thank you. Robert, before we started -- do you go by Bob or  
18 Robert?

19 MR. STACK: Robert's fine.

20 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. Robert, you know we're recording  
21 this interview today. Do we have your permission to record it?

22 MR. STACK: Yes.

23 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. And you understand that this  
24 recording will be transcribed, and at some point will be placed in  
25 the public docket?

1 MR. STACK: Yes.

2 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Do you have any questions about anything  
3 before we begin?

4 MR. STACK: No, sir.

5 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: First off, on behalf of the NTSB, I want  
6 to thank you for coming here and helping us out with this  
7 investigation.

8 INTERVIEW OF ROBERT STACK

9 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

10 Q. I'd like to start off a little bit with just your background.  
11 Can you tell me, you know, what railroad you started with, what  
12 year and where you've been working?

13 A. Norfolk Southern. I started in 2007, worked out of  
14 Allentown, Reading, Harrisburg, Jersey.

15 Q. Okay. And you started off as a conductor and then got  
16 promoted?

17 A. Started off as conductor.

18 Q. When did you get promoted?

19 A. Got an engineer license in January of 2016.

20 Q. Okay. Is this a regular assignment that you're on right now?

21 A. It is. Jobs bounce around.

22 Q. I gotcha. Okay. So where have you been working? So how  
23 long have you been working this job?

24 A. Well, this was the first week right now. I mean I've worked  
25 it before.

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. So I mean like I said, depending what I can hold --

3 Q. No, I understand. So you've been working this job for 1  
4 week. Where were you working before the week?

5 A. 269.

6 Q. And where does that work out of?

7 A. That works pretty much the same thing. It works out of  
8 Greenville Yard to Harrisburg.

9 Q. Greenville to Harrisburg. Okay. So we'll start with ley  
10 line then. So how often you been working on the ley line?

11 A. All the jobs work the same route.

12 Q. Okay. So you've been working the ley line since when you  
13 think for the most part?

14 A. For the most part as an engineer?

15 Q. Yeah.

16 A. Since 2008 -- 2019. 2019, 2018.

17 Q. 2018-19. Okay. All right. When's the last time you took a  
18 qualifying test on the ley line?

19 A. I was just monitor back in I think it was January or  
20 February.

21 Q. January. Was that a ride or event recorder?

22 A. It was event recorder.

23 Q. Event recorder. When's the last time you had a ride?

24 A. I don't recall.

25 Q. Okay. No, that's fine.

1 A. Yeah. Last year was on the simulator.

2 Q. Okay. So last year on the simulator. When you're on the  
3 simulator, do you go the territory you operate or was it just some  
4 territory?

5 A. We pick a piece of territory.

6 Q. Okay. What territory did you get simulated on?

7 A. It was from CP Blandon to CP Burn.

8 Q. Where's that at?

9 A. That's the Reading Line.

10 Q. Reading Line.

11 A. Yeah. Basically RV0 to RV35.

12 Q. Okay. When was the last time you had your rules exams?

13 A. Last February, when I had --

14 Q. Last February.

15 A. -- when I had the simulator, yeah.

16 Q. Okay. Now with the rules exam, did you do signals test, too,  
17 at the same time?

18 A. Yes, sir.

19 Q. Okay. All right. Just to the best of your recollection, did  
20 you pass signals exam the first time?

21 A. Yes, sir.

22 Q. Rules exam the first time?

23 A. Yes, sir.

24 Q. Do you know what your score was on the rules exam?

25 A. No, I don't remember.



1 Q. No, you're fine. But you passed. You didn't have to retake  
2 it. Okay. As far as like the different locomotives, like with  
3 the locomotive that you were running the accident day, are you  
4 pretty familiar with those types of locomotives? Have you used  
5 those kind of locomotives before?

6 A. Yes, sir.

7 Q. Okay. IETMS, are you pretty familiar with IETMS.

8 A. IETMS?

9 Q. I-E --

10 A. I-E-T-M-S?

11 Q. Yeah.

12 A. I'm not sure what the --

13 Q. The PTC.

14 A. PTC.

15 Q. I'm saying it wrong.

16 A. PTC.

17 Q. Yeah, I'm saying it wrong.

18 A. Okay.

19 Q. You're good.

20 A. Yes, I'm familiar with it.

21 Q. Okay. Do you ever get tested on that?

22 A. Just basically when you run.

23 Q. Okay. So just during your rides or --

24 A. Your rides, you know. Your rides.

25 Q. Okay. Do you get any test questions on it during the rules

1 exams?

2 A. I don't remember any being on it.

3 Q. Okay. That's all I have for right now, Robert. Thank you.

4 MR. SABOL: Ron Sabol, SMART Transportation Division. No  
5 questions at this time.

6 BY MR. BEATON:

7 Q. Good morning, Robert. Bob Beaton, NTSB. I'd just like to  
8 spend a few minutes with you and hear your description of what  
9 happened? I mean could you tell me what you were experiencing  
10 when you made the transit down from -- past -- after you left  
11 Bethlehem?

12 A. After we went through Bethlehem?

13 Q. Yeah.

14 A. It was being run by the PTC. We had an approach signal at CP  
15 87. At that time, it throws it into manual control. I take  
16 control of it. We had a restricting signal at the 85, automatic  
17 signal. We had the speed down to about 15 miles an hour. Took  
18 the signal, watching out for a hind end. Came around a curve, and  
19 I saw the hind end of the other train, applied some air, the  
20 dynamic brake, and I didn't slow down as quick as I thought it  
21 would.

22 Q. Um-hum. Do you have any idea why it wasn't slowing down?

23 A. All I know is the weather conditions were rainy. I don't  
24 know if that had anything to do with or not.

25 Q. Okay. Do you have the ability to use sand to improve

1 traction?

2 A. Sometimes it -- I noticed on some of the locomotive, it's  
3 like an automatic thing almost. You know, I could push it, and  
4 it's not going to do anything, but it'll kick in automatic a lot  
5 of times.

6 Q. If you're getting wheel slip?

7 A. Right, right.

8 Q. Okay. So, when you got the restricting speed, what did that  
9 -- what does restricting speed mean?

10 A. Well, not to exceed 19 miles an hour and half the distance  
11 that you can see.

12 Q. Half the distance that you can you see. How do you judge  
13 half the distance that you can see? From your point of view.  
14 It's not a trick question.

15 A. Yeah. No. I'd say from me to that screen away would  
16 probably be near Mr. Sabol, right before Mr. Sabol here.

17 Q. Okay. Does -- are there other factors that come into play in  
18 judging half the distance to an obstacle or half the distance --  
19 stop within half the distance of the obstacle?

20 A. I'm not sure what you're asking.

21 Q. The weight of the train, territory, weather.

22 A. Well, if you're going the upper grade, it'll slow a lot  
23 sooner. A heavier train, you have to be careful because it could  
24 give you a shove.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. Visibility.

2 Q. Okay. Did any of those factors come into play after you got  
3 that restricting signal? I mean were you thinking about, oh, gee,  
4 this territory --

5 A. We were --

6 Q. -- I have to be careful?

7 A. The curves is what we have to be careful of.

8 Q. Okay. And what about those curves? What do you have to be  
9 careful about?

10 A. Well, you can't see around them. So you have to kind of  
11 judge it a little bit after that.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. Probably go a little slower than you would on the straight  
14 away.

15 Q. Okay. You've been through this territory it sounds like  
16 since -- I think you said most of the jobs went through this  
17 territory that you've had since 2016 or so.

18 A. Yeah, even as a conductor.

19 Q. Even as a conductor.

20 A. Yeah.

21 Q. So you're familiar --

22 A. I'm familiar with it, yes.

23 Q. And you're aware -- you weren't surprised that you were in an  
24 area that had some visibility limitations?

25 A. No, sir.

1 Q. What -- when you realized that you were sort of beyond the  
2 point where you could stop, and sort of leading into the impact,  
3 can you tell me exactly what you were doing to control the train  
4 or prepare for the impact?

5 A. All I remember is applying the air and dynamic brake just to  
6 hope -- hopefully safely get the train stopped.

7 Q. Hopefully you weren't hurt in the impact.

8 A. No, sir.

9 Q. You stayed in the seat?

10 A. Yes, sir.

11 Q. Okay. And then what happened? You had the impact and can  
12 you describe what the events were after that?

13 A. I was making sure the conduct was okay, made sure the train  
14 was -- released the dynamic and put the independent brake on, made  
15 sure everything was good with the train, so we could get our minds  
16 together. And at that time is when the 24X was toning the  
17 dispatcher and when the dispatcher got on, they said, hey,  
18 something's not right and that's when we let the dispatcher know,  
19 hey, we run into the back end of the train.

20 Q. You made that call or the conductor did?

21 A. I did.

22 Q. You did.

23 A. I did.

24 Q. Was that the first call about this incident that you had made  
25 to the dispatcher?

1 A. Yes, sir.

2 Q. Now, regarding the communications, leading up to the  
3 accident, what were you aware of for 24X?

4 A. I was aware they were ahead of us.

5 Q. Okay. Were you aware of anything else that they were stopped  
6 or --

7 A. No, I wasn't.

8 Q. -- no problems on --

9 A. No.

10 Q. Okay. When you came to 87 and you had the approach, I guess  
11 you're aware that 24X was ahead of you. So what does that  
12 approach signal tell you about 24X?

13 A. It tells me where it is, the block, somewhere between the 85  
14 signal and Redington.

15 Q. Okay. And then when you got to 85 and you got restricting,  
16 what did that tell you about 24X?

17 A. Same thing, they were in the block that we were coming into  
18 the -- at least their hind end was.

19 Q. Okay. Any other concerns about 24X that you recall thinking  
20 about as you went past 87 or 85?

21 A. No, I just remember telling the conductor that they're ahead  
22 and, you know, we're watching out for it.

23 Q. Okay. So, what -- let me just be clear. What was telling  
24 you to be watching out for 24X or why did you let the conductor  
25 know to watch out for 24X?

1 A. Well, the signals in the PTC.

2 Q. Okay. Okay. So it was the signal system that you were sort  
3 of getting most of your information from.

4 A. That's where I was getting all my information from.

5 Q. All your information.

6 A. Right.

7 Q. Okay. Very good. That's it for the moment. I pass it  
8 along.

9 MR. BROWN: G. W. Scott Brown with the BLET Safety Taskforce.

10 BY MR. BROWN:

11 Q. Bob, thanks for coming today. I just have a question here  
12 just to clarify the PTC training that we were discussing before.  
13 You had spoke that it wasn't any training except for the -- when  
14 you do your simulator ride. Is that what you said?

15 A. Well, I just don't remember any questions on the test about  
16 it. I know when you run your simulator, you're running with the  
17 PTC on that.

18 Q. With the PTC.

19 A. Yeah.

20 Q. Okay. And then do you know how much rest you had prior to  
21 going on duty that day?

22 A. We got to the hotel about 3:30 in the afternoon, laid down  
23 about 4:30. They called at 12:15 in the morning.

24 Q. All right. Approaching the hind end of the 24X there, do you  
25 remember the manner in which you applied the automatic brake?

1 A. I went right to second service.

2 Q. Second service.

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. And did you place the train in emergency?

5 A. No, the train did not go into emergency until after we hit  
6 them and that's probably when the derailment happened.

7 Q. Okay. That's all the questions I have right now.

8 MR. QUILLEN: Josh Quillen, FRA.

9 BY MR. QUILLEN:

10 Q. I just to kind of want to follow up on PTC as well. I used  
11 to be an engineer. So I kind of know a little what you're talking  
12 about, but to clarify something you mentioned. PTC was in control  
13 and you took control. I know PTC is an overlay. So is there  
14 something else that controls it?

15 A. There's an energy management system that's tied in with it on  
16 the same computer screen. The trip -- the engine did not have  
17 trip optimizer.

18 Q. Oh, okay.

19 A. It has energy management which is in the PTC system.

20 Q. Okay. So it runs it, throttle, stuff like that?

21 A. Yeah.

22 Q. And then you take over. Is that protocol whenever it gets --  
23 you get a restricting that you have to take over, that it cannot  
24 run it?

25 A. Once you hit an approach signal, it automatically goes to



1 manual mode it says.

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. That's all I have. Thanks.

5 MR. CRAINE: Craine. Robert, thanks for being here. I don't  
6 have any questions at this point.

7 MR. HUNT: All right. Randy Hunt, Norfolk Southern.

8 BY MR. HUNT:

9 Q. The PTC system, how does it work on a restricting signal?

10 A. It doesn't.

11 Q. Meaning?

12 A. Meaning, we have manual control.

13 Q. So I guess my question is, does PTC stop you short of  
14 anything on our --

15 A. No.

16 Q. -- restrict communication?

17 A. No.

18 Q. Control speed?

19 A. No.

20 Q. Okay. That's my only question. Thank you.

21 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Robert, you doing okay?

22 MR. STACK: Um-hum.

23 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: All right. If you don't mind, I'd like to  
24 let the team make another round.

25 MR. STACK: Okay.

1 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

2 Q. I'd like to just go back a little bit. So, they called you  
3 at 12:15 a.m.?

4 A. 12:15 a.m.

5 Q. What time did you actually sign up?

6 A. 2:15 a.m.

7 Q. 2:15. What's your crew base? Where do you sign up at?

8 A. We signed up at Gi8 in Harrisburg, the fuel pad.

9 Q. Okay. When you get the equipment, do you inspect the  
10 equipment at all or is it inspected for you?

11 A. This one wasn't. I did inspect it at the fuel pad.

12 Q. Okay. Just calendar day or was it brake test? What did you  
13 inspect?

14 A. The calendar day.

15 Q. Calendar day. Okay. Did you have brake slips? You already  
16 had brake slips or not?

17 A. For the cars?

18 Q. Yes.

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. Okay. Everything was up?

21 A. Um-hum.

22 Q. Okay. Now after -- when you first took off, did you do any  
23 kind of letting release or brake tests or anything like that on  
24 the brakes?

25 A. No.

1 Q. Okay. Now, when you get into around the Bethlehem roads,  
2 there's a lot of freight traffic going in and out of Bethlehem.

3 A. At that time of morning there could be, yeah.

4 Q. Yeah. When you're running around that area, did you hear a  
5 lot of traffic, radio traffic?

6 A. Not a, not a ton of it, no.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. It was light, yeah.

9 Q. Okay. Did you hear the dispatchers talking at all?

10 A. I heard them talking with the 18M.

11 Q. 18M.

12 A. Yeah.

13 Q. Okay. What were they talking to 18M about? Do you know?

14 A. They were going to -- they had a DP engine on the back, and  
15 they were going to send it over to the 62B.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. I assumed they needed an engine.

18 Q. Yeah, yeah. I gotcha. Were they doing a lot of conversation  
19 during that time, talking about 18M?

20 A. No, no, he just let him know what the plan was.

21 Q. Okay. Were you getting any wayside stuff over the radio, not  
22 for your train but for other trains?

23 A. No, I don't remember any.

24 Q. Okay. I'm just trying to get an idea of just how much radio  
25 traffic throughout --

1 A. Yeah.

2 Q. -- throughout the run. Okay. And then -- so when you get --  
3 when you got to the -- what was it? The 87, so up to then you  
4 were approach. How were you handling the train at that time?  
5 Were you using air? Were you using dynamic? Were you using both?

6 A. Dynamic.

7 Q. Dynamic. You were just kind of modulating it.

8 A. Yeah.

9 Q. Okay. What's the grade like there?

10 A. Regular grade.

11 Q. Okay. When you're using the dynamic, did you get any wheel  
12 slip at all?

13 A. No, I didn't.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. Like I said, it just got into it at that point some.

16 Q. Yeah. Okay. So then you get into the restricting, and are  
17 you still using dynamic or are you --

18 A. Dynamic, yes.

19 Q. Okay. And about what part do you think started grabbing  
20 there? Was it before you saw 24X or after you saw 24X?

21 A. When we saw it.

22 Q. Can you kind of walk me through it? Did you grab a lot? Did  
23 you increment it up?

24 A. Coming around the corner, I figured we were going to come to  
25 a stop anyway. So I just went to second service. It didn't dump

1 the train.

2 Q. Okay. And you said you were on the dynamic, too?

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. Okay. Did you throw it all on or --

5 A. I threw it all on, yeah.

6 Q. Okay. Did you fill out any well (ph.) slip at all?

7 A. I did not.

8 Q. Okay. Just from your perspective, when you come around that  
9 curve, did you think that was enough to get stopped in time?

10 A. I thought it was --

11 Q. Yeah.

12 A. -- the way the train was handling earlier.

13 Q. Well, that was going to be my next question. So you used the  
14 air at some point --

15 A. Yes, sir.

16 Q. -- after you took off. Did you have any issues anywhere with  
17 the air?

18 A. No.

19 Q. Okay. What's the max grade from where you signed up to the  
20 point of collision do you think you have?

21 A. I don't even know.

22 Q. Well, just --

23 A. Yeah.

24 Q. Okay. Do you have any real steep?

25 A. Coming down at Wyomissing is pretty steep, and it's a pretty

1 steady upgrade coming up the Reading Line there.

2 Q. Up the Reading Line.

3 A. And down into Bern, it's a decent slope down?

4 Q. Kind of like a bowl down the back side.

5 A. What?

6 Q. Kind of like a bowl down on the back side?

7 A. Yeah, it goes down and levels out.

8 Q. Okay. So let me ask you this. So how were you handling your  
9 train there? When you start coming down and you crest over the  
10 top, are you using dynamic, are you using air, you using both?

11 A. PTC was running.

12 Q. Oh, PTC was running. Okay. So from the time you left really  
13 until right before when you got the approach, was it --

14 A. Well, we had, we had stopped at West Laurel on the Reading  
15 Line. So I had -- at Belt (ph.), I had taken control for that one  
16 block, stopped at West Laurel.

17 Q. Okay. So just for that one block?

18 A. Right.

19 Q. Okay. Do you notice when you were running with PTC, did you  
20 notice PTC having any issues, you know, maintaining the grades or  
21 anything like that?

22 A. Just being, not a heavy, but a fairly heavy train, it had a  
23 hard time keeping it up to track speed going up the grades, but  
24 other than that, no.

25 Q. Yeah. Okay. Now, in your PTC train, does it show you the

1 blocks in front of you?

2 A. It shows probably 5 miles.

3 Q. Five miles. Can you kind of walk me, what that screen looks  
4 like? What do you see on it? What kind of information do you get  
5 on it?

6 A. It shows you the signal. It shows you what indication it's  
7 reading the signal has. It shows you the grades. That's pretty  
8 much what it shows right now.

9 Q. Okay. But do you get any fences? Do you know what I'm  
10 talking about, fences?

11 A. Yeah. If you get -- if you get a stop signal, it'll give you  
12 a red fence.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. Restricting gives you the yellow.

15 Q. Yep. So when, so when you were coming down past it, did you  
16 get a yellow fence? Is that what you had?

17 A. After 85, in the 85, yes.

18 Q. Yeah. After the 85, okay. All right. So, now, if you're  
19 okay, I'd like go back to right before the impact. So you throw  
20 on the air, and you said you went to second service? You doing  
21 all the dynamic. And then you just ride it out and hit it then.  
22 Did you hit the floor or did you just sit in the seat?

23 A. No, I sat in the seat.

24 Q. You sat in the seat. Okay. All right. And then after the  
25 impact, how far forward do you think it continued to move?

1 A. I don't think it moved any.

2 Q. Okay. Do you know about what speed?

3 A. I don't recall.

4 Q. No, that's fine. Okay. And then you said you got on the  
5 radio. So did you tone up the --

6 A. No, while we were getting our heads straight and stuff and,  
7 you know, that's when the 24X had toned the dispatcher. Then we  
8 had to sit and wait for the dispatcher to answer.

9 Q. Okay. So from how long until 24 called, did dispatch  
10 respond? Just to the best of your recollection.

11 A. I have no idea.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. Everything was happening so fast.

14 Q. No, I gotcha. I gotcha. And then you got on and started  
15 talking when they started?

16 A. Yeah, they said something -- something's not right. And  
17 that's when I told them. I called Harrisburg East said that 268,  
18 we just ran into the back end of 24X.

19 Q. Okay. Now, did you know what other trains were in the area?  
20 Was dispatch talking to any other trains or --

21 A. Like I said, the only one I heard talking, too, was the 18M.

22 Q. Okay. Did you hear any radio communications from 24X before  
23 the impact?

24 A. No.

25 Q. What about the westbound training, did you hear them talking



1 at all before the event?

2 A. Not that I recall. I didn't, I didn't remember hearing  
3 anything.

4 Q. Okay. Now did you see the head end of 19G go by after you  
5 after you guys stopped?

6 A. I saw him go by but I, I think they went by before we hit it.

7 Q. Okay. All right. Now, after the impact, did you think  
8 everything was still on the rails at that time?

9 A. I did at first, and then when -- like I said, I didn't put  
10 the train in emergency but after the impact, the train went into  
11 emergency. And, then it clicked on me, something -- we came apart  
12 somewhere probably.

13 Q. Yeah. Took a couple of minutes to collect yourself.

14 A. Yeah.

15 Q. And then you started formulating.

16 A. Yeah, started figuring out, okay, what happened here. What,  
17 you know --

18 Q. Yeah. What did your conductor do? Did he stay in his seat,  
19 too? Or did he --

20 A. No, he did go to the floor.

21 Q. He went to the floor.

22 A. Yeah.

23 Q. Okay. So then after you guys collected yourself, is that  
24 when you started talking to dispatch?

25 A. Right. The 24X had toned.

1 Q. Right.

2 A. And then when they came on, after the tone.

3 Q. So had 19G already passed.

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. So 19G had already passed --

6 A. Yes, sir.

7 Q. -- by the time you were talking to the dispatcher.

8 A. Yes, sir.

9 Q. Okay. And then at some point, 19G stopped. Did you know why  
10 they stopped at that time?

11 A. No.

12 Q. Okay. When did you find out?

13 A. Not until after I mentioned -- I talked to the dispatcher.  
14 The 19G got on the radio and said that there were some derailed  
15 cars, and they hit them.

16 Q. Okay. All right. Did you conductor get out and walk the  
17 train at all or --

18 A. No.

19 Q. Okay. Did you get any instructions from management at all  
20 over a radio?

21 A. No.

22 Q. Okay. What about dispatch? Did they give you any  
23 instructions after impact?

24 A. No.

25 Q. Okay. So did you guys just stay in the cab after the impact?

1 A. We stayed in the cab. I'm not even going to guess how long  
2 it took for -- a member of management had shown up, and he said  
3 just stay there. Don't move.

4 Q. Okay. Where they up on the road above you?

5 A. Yeah, yeah.

6 Q. Okay. Did they call you on the radio or did he just yell at  
7 you?

8 A. Yelled. I opened the window.

9 Q. Gotcha. And then did emergency services show up?

10 A. They did.

11 Q. About how long afterwards?

12 A. I don't recall.

13 Q. Best of your knowledge.

14 A. They were there first.

15 Q. Okay. Do you feel it was pretty quick or just took a while?

16 A. It was fairly quick. We started seeing some folks show up.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. But the whole process was lengthy.

19 Q. No, I gotcha. I gotcha. Okay. So to the best of your  
20 recollection, from the time of impact, how long were you sitting  
21 on the head end until you finally were able to leave? Just best --

22 A. Maybe an hour and a half, maybe.

23 Q. Okay. Hour and a half. Okay. Was it management that pulled  
24 you out of there or was it --

25 A. No, the emergency services.

1 Q. Emergency services.

2 A. Yeah, they had to get a plan together.

3 Q. Okay. How did you guys get out of there?

4 A. The road sat about 30 feet high. So they sent ropes down,  
5 put harnesses and helmets on, hooked up to the ropes, and then  
6 they -- we had to wait. They had to go get a ladder, go up the  
7 ladder.

8 Q. Okay. Ladder. And then once they pulled you off the rails  
9 up on that top road, did they take you anywhere or did they treat  
10 you there?

11 A. We loaded into the fire truck eventually and then went to the  
12 firehouse.

13 Q. Okay. Did you see medical attention there? Did anybody look  
14 at you?

15 A. No.

16 Q. Okay. Did you ask for any medical attention?

17 A. No, I didn't.

18 Q. Okay. What about your conductor?

19 A. No.

20 Q. Okay. Robert, thank you. That's all I have.

21 BY MR. SABOL:

22 Q. Hi, Robert. Again, Ron Sabol, SMART Transportation Division.  
23 Robert, can I take you back in time to when you checked into the  
24 hotel.

25 A. Okay.

1 Q. All right. So you're off duty. You went over to the hotel.  
2 You checked in, went up to your room. And, you say you laid down,  
3 took your rest. That was during the day. Was your rest  
4 interrupted in any way? Like being in the hotel during the day?

5 A. No.

6 Q. You sleep pretty sound while you were there?

7 A. Slept pretty good.

8 Q. When the crew called you or the automated system or whatever  
9 it is for you to take call for your train, you felt comfortable  
10 taking a call for the train? You were rested enough and --

11 A. Yes, sir.

12 Q. Okay. And as you went on duty and working your train, did  
13 you feel fatigued in any way through the night or you were in just  
14 pretty good shape?

15 A. Pretty good.

16 Q. Pretty good. It's normal routine for you on this regular  
17 job, right?

18 A. Right, right. Different hours.

19 Q. Yeah. Back and forth.

20 A. Sleeping one night and day the next.

21 Q. Okay.

22 MR. SABOL: no further questions.

23 MR. BEATON: Bob Beaton, NTSB.

24 BY MR. BEATON:

25 Q. I just want to follow up on a few items here. Can you tell

1 me, since you've been qualified as an engineer, what sort of  
2 training you've had on stopping half the distance to an obstacle?

3 A. At least once a year, they do a banner check.

4 Q. And can you describe what that is?

5 A. They pick a block, and they'll put an obstruction banner out  
6 there. You've got to come at a restricted speed, and stop before  
7 -- within half the distance.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. And they started doing these switch banners, too, for the  
10 switches. We've got to come in and stop half the distance on  
11 those also.

12 Q. And the switch banner just a flag at a switch?

13 A. Yes, sir.

14 Q. Okay. Any other training? Any written tests or computer  
15 tests or --

16 A. They'll throw some computer modules here and there on  
17 different things.

18 Q. Specially with regard to restricted speed or stopping?

19 A. I don't remember on -- specifically on restricted speed at  
20 this moment. I know we do some DP and stuff like that, but.

21 Q. Okay. Once there was the impact, once you ran into the hind  
22 end with the train ahead, is there any procedure for calling out  
23 emergency, emergency, emergency?

24 A. There is.

25 Q. Can you tell me what that is and if you, if you complied with

1 that?

2 A. When you go into emergency, you should announce it on the  
3 radio, emergency, emergency, emergency. I didn't comply. I  
4 didn't think about it at the moment with everything going on.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. And I don't believe the conductor did either.

7 Q. Would you have considered yourself in an emergency situation,  
8 making a call out should have been done?

9 A. Yes.

10 Q. Okay. But things were just so hectic and surprising to you?

11 A. Yeah, I had a lot. I was trying to get, you know.

12 Q. Sure.

13 A. And that -- I didn't comply with that.

14 Q. All right. Was there, was there any need for you to make any  
15 other communications to advise other trains in your area of your  
16 situation, or is that handled by the dispatcher?

17 A. First thing we do is notify the dispatcher.

18 Q. Okay.

19 A. And he would disseminate information as needed from there.

20 Q. Was any information sent out from the dispatcher one the  
21 dispatcher was advised that you run into 24X?

22 A. There was -- at that point, because when I got done talking,  
23 is when the 19G got on the radio and said that they had derailed  
24 cars and their engine was in the water.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. So I don't know if there was -- recall if there was any. I  
2 mean we were just trying to figure out, okay, what's going on? Is  
3 everyone okay? And, what was the situation I guess.

4 Q. So if I was to try to construct a timeline between when 24X  
5 advised that they felt a bump and then you advised that you had  
6 hit their hind end and 19G had hit some derailed cars, what would  
7 that timeline look like? I mean could you give me some times  
8 between those various calls?

9 A. I wasn't watching the watch but everything seemed to happen  
10 quick.

11 Q. Quick. I mean we're not talking on the order of minutes  
12 here. We're talking seconds or --

13 A. Well, like I said, I didn't pay attention to the time, but I  
14 know when they had toned the dispatcher, it was a little pause  
15 before the dispatcher answered.

16 Q. Okay. And then as soon as the dispatcher answered, is when  
17 you broke in and said --

18 A. 24X said that something's not right. I jumped in and said  
19 this is the 268. We just ran into the back of them. And then the  
20 19G got right on.

21 Q. Gotcha. Okay. Thank you for that. Just one last area, I  
22 just want to make sure I understood. You know, we talked before  
23 that you had been through this area on many jobs many times. Can  
24 you give me a feeling for how many times you've been through this  
25 specific area of 87, 85?



1 A. I figure at least twice a week, probably twice a week for  
2 years.

3 Q. Okay. Since 2016?

4 A. Yeah, as a conductor, I've been going through since 2012.

5 Q. 2012.

6 A. Yeah, because -- as an engineer.

7 Q. Just like your backyard.

8 A. I've been running these runs a long time.

9 Q. Yeah. Okay. Thank you for that, Robert. I appreciate it.

10 MR. BEATON: All right. That's it for me.

11 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Do you mind if we take a break, a  
12 quick break.

13 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Sure. All right. The time is now 11:24

14 (Off the record at 11:24 a.m.)

15 (On the record at 11:36 a.m.)

16 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. The time is now 11:36, and we're  
17 resuming the interview.

18 MR. BROWN: G. W. Scott Brown with the BLET Safety Taskforce.

19 BY MR. BROWN:

20 Q. Bob, I just have a few questions for you here. You had  
21 mentioned before about approaching West Laurel and then you had to  
22 come to a stop there.

23 A. Yes.

24 Q. Was there any other time during your trip that you had to  
25 take over and you were being held?

1 A. Not that I recall, no. We didn't stop anywhere else.

2 Q. Do you think the auto train run -- complacent on running the  
3 train if auto train is running most of the time?

4 A. It takes away from what we're -- we're supposed to get a feel  
5 for the train, on how it's running and we don't get that when the  
6 auto control is running the train. I can't sit there and watch  
7 the whole time road crossings and everything else. So I don't  
8 know what -- I mean I don't get the feel for it, just the little  
9 bit that I do run it.

10 MR. BROWN: That's all the questions I have right now.

11 MR. QUILLEN: John Quillen, FRA.

12 BY MR. QUILLEN:

13 Q. I asked the conductor this but you also have been around a  
14 little longer than him, but have you ever had a rule on sterile  
15 cab or do you now? Red zone, something like that.

16 A. I don't know about a -- no, official rule. It's recommended.  
17 It's highly, you know, I've worked with road foremen before where  
18 they even told the dispatcher, said listen, we're having an  
19 approach. We're in a sterile cab. We'll talk to you after you  
20 come to a stop.

21 Q. But there is no rule right now with that or was in the past?

22 A. Not to my knowledge, no.

23 Q. Going back, when you said -- when the train went in emergency  
24 itself, that's probably when you realized the train separated.

25 Can you elaborate? Did you think it was a separation or did you

1 think, oh, man, we derailed or --

2 A. I didn't know what to think. I -- the first thing was  
3 somewhere it came apart. I didn't expect a derail but I didn't  
4 put the train in emergency after the impact. Bells were going  
5 off, check and make sure the conductor's okay. Okay. Why are  
6 these bells going off? Oh, the train's in emergency. Oh, why is  
7 this train in emergency? I didn't have an answer. I mean I could  
8 guess but --

9 Q. Okay. That's all I have. Thank you.

10 MR. CRAINE: Craine with NS.

11 BY MR. CRAINE:

12 Q. Bob, taking you back to going by 87, 85, do you recall any  
13 conversation you were having with the conductor at that time?

14 A. I know I mentioned that we have to watch out for the 24Z  
15 [sic]. I don't recall any.

16 Q. Okay. How about -- you indicated, 87 approach, 85  
17 restricting. Is that correct?

18 A. Approach 87, yeah, 85 restricting.

19 Q. Do you recall if they call those on the radio?

20 A. I believe Devin did, yes. That's the conductor.

21 Q. Okay. And when you first saw the hind end of 24X, do you  
22 have a recollection of the sight distance or how far you thought  
23 they were from your first sight?

24 A. Maybe 8 cars.

25 Q. Okay. All right. And, Mr. Brown took care of that question.

1 So that's all I have. Thank you.

2 MR. HUNT: Randy Hunt, NS. No questions.

3 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

4 Q. Okay. Robert, we're almost done. You're doing great.  
5 There's a couple of follow-up questions I forgot to ask you  
6 before. So I'd like to ask you now. Going back to your rest  
7 beforehand, how much time were you off previously before you  
8 signed up on the accident day?

9 A. I can't remember from one day --

10 Q. I know, I know.

11 A. Let's see. We worked -- my Tuesday, Wednesday. Okay. So we  
12 got back Wednesday. I don't even know what time it was, but we  
13 had all day Thursday, and then report to work 5 o'clock Friday  
14 morning.

15 Q. 5 a.m. Friday. Okay. What your job regularly work? Is it  
16 -- I know it's a regular job, but is it -- are you getting called  
17 in by a train or are you getting -- do you actually have set times  
18 that you normally sign up and days off?

19 A. Most of our set times 269, when I worked that, that's a call  
20 job, but it's pretty much steady. We work 2 days, off 1 day.

21 Q. Okay. Do you have set relief days or is that just how it  
22 lines up?

23 A. However it lines up.

24 Q. Okay.

25 A. Whenever you get the bid. You know, sometimes you might work

1 4 days in a row.

2 Q. Yep.

3 A. It depends on how the bid lines up. You know, we getting  
4 then, bid and stuff.

5 Q. Gotcha. Okay. And then I forgot to ask you before, but you  
6 said you had some -- 24X got in front of you because you had some  
7 setoff work to do or you had some work to do somewhere?

8 A. Yeah, I didn't mention that, but we -- when we leave the fuel  
9 pad, we went into Rutherford Yard --

10 Q. Rutherford Yard.

11 A. -- set some cars off, picked some cars up. At that time,  
12 they were on the LERG (ph.) and they were coming up. They went  
13 by.

14 Q. Okay. I gotcha. They went by when you were in Rutherford.

15 A. Yeah.

16 Q. Okay. Okay. And that is all the questions I have.

17 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: We'll make one more round.

18 MR. SABOL: Yeah, Ron Sabol, SMART Transportation Division.

19 BY MR. SABOL:

20 Q. So when you were in Harrisburg, you put your train together.  
21 You put your power against your train?

22 A. No. It comes from out west.

23 Q. It comes from out west.

24 A. We relay it to fuel pad.

25 Q. Okay. So you relay it to fuel pad. When you boarded that

1 train, did you do a on and off brake test?

2 A. No, I didn't.

3 Q. You didn't. When you boarded the train, I assume the brake  
4 was fully applied?

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. Okay. And then you released it?

7 A. Yes.

8 Q. Okay. During the course of your trip, did you rear end  
9 telemetry or marker, were you able to maintain your air pressure  
10 and communication with that marker throughout your trip --

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. -- do you know?

13 A. Yes.

14 Q. It wasn't fading in and out within --

15 A. No.

16 Q. -- no comm or nothing like that?

17 A. No.

18 Q. Okay. Do you remember after impact, you come to and  
19 everything else, and you saw and figured out that your train, your  
20 power was in emergency, did you ever reset everything?

21 A. I reset the emergency brake -- or the airbrake, you know. It  
22 went to emergency.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. Waited a lot of time and then went to release to see if it  
25 would recover.

1 Q. Okay. Was it recovering?

2 A. No.

3 Q. You didn't get no recovery at all?

4 A. It stayed -- our flow stayed high and the rear stayed in  
5 zero.

6 Q. Okay. All right. Thank you.

7 MR. SABOL: No further questions.

8 MR. BEATON: Bob Beaton, NTSB.

9 BY MR. BEATON:

10 Q. Just one follow up. You were talking a moment ago about the  
11 auto train. Is that the same as energy management?

12 A. It is energy management.

13 Q. It is energy management.

14 A. There's two systems. You've got trip optimize on the GE  
15 models and you've got the energy maintenance on the EMD models.

16 Q. Okay. And you made the comment that you don't get the feel  
17 for the train when energy management is in control. Can you give  
18 me a rough estimate of time -- in terms of your operating time,  
19 how much is spent in energy management versus in manual control?

20 A. We're required to be above 90 percent.

21 Q. Above 90 percent. Okay. And you were in energy management  
22 all the way down to 87 or 85?

23 A. Except for the stop, we had to go in slower on.

24 Q. Okay. Can you say a little bit more about -- you don't -- I  
25 get it when the train is being controlled for you, you don't have

1 a feel for the train, but can you say a little bit more about what  
2 impact energy management has had on your skills as an engineer or  
3 any impact on your as an engineer?

4 A. It decreases probably -- if anything, it decreases our skills  
5 due to the fact that we're just sitting there letting a computer  
6 run it. You don't get the, you know, okay. I mean you know where  
7 your grades are and stuff like that.

8 Q. Yeah.

9 A. It's like your car. If you've got it on auto control, you  
10 don't know how much it's accelerating or decelerating, going up  
11 and down the hills on the highway. Same thing with energy  
12 management.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. And then you get thrown into a manual mode. Now, you've got  
15 to sit and figure, okay, how much do I need to apply, how much do  
16 I need to accelerate, you know.

17 Q. Yeah. Is that process of taking over manual control from  
18 energy management -- it's been described in other industries like  
19 in these smart cars, that the drivers have to be in a certain  
20 period to recover, and figure out what the state of the car is in  
21 that case. Is that something similar that when you take over from  
22 energy management the train, can you talk about that process that  
23 you go through to recover control?

24 A. It is. When it -- normally just on the approach or randomly  
25 sometimes, it'll -- if it feels like it's losing control of the



1 train, it'll say manual control required.

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. Now, you've got to figure out. Okay. What notch is it in?  
4 Is it in power? Is it in dynamic? And then you've got to match  
5 it up, and then that's just so you don't get the jerk of the  
6 train. And then you've got to figure out, okay, what are we doing  
7 from here? Are we coming out of braking? Was it going into  
8 braking?

9 Q. Okay. So, you got handed back manual control when you went  
10 into restricting at 85.

11 A. 87.

12 Q. Or 87. Excuse me. Do you remember having a sense of how  
13 much time it took to re-understand control of your train or  
14 establish control of your train?

15 A. I don't recall. I know that at that point, we were already  
16 doing 30 miles an hour and the approach required a 30 miles an  
17 hour. So we weren't -- it's not like we were going too fast and I  
18 had to get it down.

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. It's just a matter of, okay, where we're at here, is it going  
21 to pick up here? Is it going to slow down?

22 Q. Right. Okay. Would you characterize that sort of  
23 reestablishing control in this case easy or difficult or non-  
24 descript?

25 A. It's not that it's difficult. It's just -- it takes a moment

1 or 2 to --

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. -- you know, it's like someone else doing something and you  
4 jump in and take over. Okay. Where were they at? Where, you  
5 know.

6 Q. Right. Okay. You were able to do that with any problem?

7 A. Right, yeah. It had it at the speed that you need to be at.  
8 So it's just a matter of --

9 Q. I understand what you're saying. Thank you.

10 MR. BEATON: Okay. That's it for me.

11 MR. BROWN: G. W. Scott Brown with the BLET Safety Taskforce.  
12 I have no questions right now.

13 MR. QUILLEN: No questions.

14 MR. CRAINE: Craine, NS. Just one clarifying.

15 BY MR. CRAINE:

16 Q. You mentioned talking to Mr. Sabol about recovering the air.  
17 This was from the train line emergency because you had stated  
18 earlier that you went to second service, not --

19 A. I went to second service. After the impact is when the bells  
20 started going off. Why are bells -- oh, it's showing train in  
21 emergency.

22 Q. Okay. Just clarifying, you did not.

23 A. No, I did not set the train in emergency.

24 Q. You did not put the train in emergency.

25 A. No.

1 Q. You sat there. Okay. Thank you. That's all I've got.  
2 Thanks.

3 MR. HUNT: No, questions. Randy Hunt.

4 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Michael Skolnekovich, NTSB.

5 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

6 Q. Robert, I want to thank you for taking the time to come in  
7 here and talk to us today. I really appreciate your answers  
8 especially in trying to help us to figure out what we can do to  
9 prevent this in the future. If we have any additional questions,  
10 do you mind if we contact you?

11 A. That's fine.

12 Q. Okay. Do you have anything that you want to add or -- that  
13 might prevent accidents like this from happening in the future?

14 A. Not that I can think of off the top of my head right now.

15 Q. All right.

16 A. Yeah, I don't.

17 Q. Okay. Well, Robert, on behalf of the NTSB, I thank you.

18 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: At this time, the time is now -- we're  
19 going to conclude the interview.

20 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

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 Robert Stack

ACCIDENT NO.:               RRD24FR009

DATE:                         March 4, 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