

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

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COAL TRAIN DERAILMENT & BRIDGE *

COLLAPSE NEAR PUEBLO, COLORADO * Accident No.: RRD24FR001

ON OCTOBER 15, 2023 *

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Interview of: SCOTT KURTZ, Conductor
BNSF Railway, Denver, Colorado

Telephonic

Tuesday,
October 17, 2023

APPEARANCES:

RICHARD SKOLNEKOVICH, Operations Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

J. D. ARCHIE, Operating Practices Inspector
Federal Railroad Administration

JOHN REMINGTON, Director of Operating Rules
BNSF Railway

STEVE FACKLAM, Assistant National Coordinator
BLET Safety Task Force

BRAD WARREN, National Safety Team Investigator
SMART Transportation Division

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I N T E R V I E W

1
2 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. Good afternoon. My name is Richard
3 Skolnekovich, and I'm NTSB operations group chairman for this
4 accident. We're conducting an interview on 17 October 2023 with
5 Scott Kurtz who works for BNSF Railroad.

6 This interview is in connection with NTSB's investigation of
7 the accident that occurred at Bragdon, Colorado, on 15 October
8 2023. The NTSB Accident Reference Number is RRD24FR001.

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

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

15 Once again, my name is Richard Skolnekovich, S-k-o-l-n-e-k-o-
16 v-i-c-h, NTSB, operations group chairman.

17 MR. ARCHIE: My name is J. D. Archie, FRA, operation
18 practices safety inspector, Colorado, A-r-c-h-i-e.

19 MR. REMINGTON: John Remington, J-o-h-n, R-e-m-i-n-g-t-o-n,
20 BNSF Railway, director of operating rules.

21 MR. FACKLAM: Steve Facklam, F-a-c-k-l-a-m, assistant
22 national coordinator, BLET, safety task force.

23 MR. WARREN: Brad Warren, W-a-r-r-e-n, national safety team
24 investigator for SMART Transportation Division.

25 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay.

1 MR. KURTZ: Scott Kurtz, K-u-r-t-z, BNSF, conductor at
2 Denver, Colorado.

3 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. Thank you, Scott. First and
4 foremost, I want to thank you for participating in the interview
5 and helping us gather information for this accident.

6 INTERVIEW OF SCOTT KURTZ

7 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

8 Q. What I'd like to do is start off with you telling us a little
9 bit about your railroad career, where you started, how long you've
10 been working and what your craft is.

11 A. Okay. Scott Kurtz. I hired out with BNSF in 2006, roughly
12 in March. So I've been with BNSF since then. I also have about 3
13 years experience with the Union Pacific Railroad out of Omaha,
14 Council Bluffs, Iowa. So I've been working. I worked in the
15 yard. I spent a couple of years in the yard, worked as a brakeman
16 and currently working as a conductor. I've been in this position
17 for several years now in the super pool. It's a couple years old.
18 So I've been working as a conductor now for most of my career out
19 of Denver.

20 Q. Okay. Are you based at Denver now?

21 A. Yeah.

22 Q. Okay. Are you on a regular job or you on just a pool?

23 A. It's a pool. It's called the super pool, and I would run out
24 of Denver three different directions in that pool.

25 Q. Okay. What other places do you work?

1 A. We run Denver to Sterling, Colorado, Denver to Cheyenne,
2 Wyoming, and then this route was Denver south, Denver, La Junta
3 Trinidad.

4 Q. Okay. Now, how often do you work this route?

5 A. It varies. I would say 25 percent of my work is probably
6 going south.

7 Q. Okay. How often do you get called out? Are you getting
8 called out daily?

9 A. Yes.

10 Q. Okay. All right. With this route here, when was the last
11 time you ran the route prior to the accident?

12 A. I'd have to check that for sure, but probably about -- it's
13 been about a week since I've run that way.

14 Q. Okay. All right. And so then about 25 percent of your time
15 you work on it.

16 A. Yeah.

17 Q. Okay.

18 A. Yeah, that's correct.

19 Q. All right. Can you kind of walk me through the job? So you
20 sign up in Denver for this typically. Is it the same -- meaning
21 Denver south, are you pretty much doing the same kind of work?

22 A. It's fairly consistent. Most of our traffic is coal going
23 south. So we have coal loads and, yeah, they're typically, you
24 know, 120 to 124 car, 17,000 tons, you know, 6700 feet, 6900 feet
25 long. Yeah, and they'll go from Denver to La Junta, and we'll

1 crew exchange at La Junta for that route. But I would say 70, 75
2 percent of our traffic going south is coal.

3 Q. Okay. Now, prior to the accident, was the last time you
4 worked period?

5 A. That would have been 20 hours prior. It was almost 21 hours
6 I had been off.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. And I think I worked to Sterling and back if I'm not -- yeah,
9 I think that's right.

10 Q. Okay. Do you feel you were rested for the trip?

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. Okay. All right. Now, the Denver south route, do you have
13 many setoffs or any kind of other work in between Denver and La
14 Junta?

15 A. Yeah, we'll typically -- coal trains usually don't have any
16 work. They're straight through. Sometimes you may have a motor
17 to set out or pick up, but that's -- that doesn't happen too
18 often. You might have freight trains where we'll do work at Big
19 Lift, Colorado. There's also work that might be done in Pueblo,
20 set outs and pick ups on the way to La Junta.

21 Q. Okay. How long is your normal trip when you're going from
22 Denver to La Junta just on average?

23 A. Twelve hours.

24 Q. Twelve hours.

25 A. I mean a van from La Junta to Trinidad --

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. -- which is about another hour and 40 minutes, a van ride.

3 So those trips are usually 12 hours to 13, 14 hours in length.

4 Q. Okay. And what are you -- are you taking something back from
5 Trinidad the next day?

6 A. Out of Trinidad, yeah. It will be typically coal empties.

7 Q. Okay.

8 A. So we have an empty train, yeah.

9 Q. And you're bringing that back to Denver?

10 A. Correct.

11 Q. Okay. All right. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to kind
12 of switch over to the day of the accident itself. So what time
13 did you sign up that particular day?

14 A. We were on duty at 0900.

15 Q. Okay. And then can you kind of walk me through the job
16 brief, what you guys did and discussed?

17 A. Sure. We went on duty at 0900. The train arrived at Denver
18 probably 15 minutes after we were on duty. So we were all ready
19 to go. We crew exchanged out front of Denver, 31st Street is what
20 we call it, and we took off from Denver I would say 9:30, 9:45,
21 had a really good trip going. We were clear signals, pretty much.
22 Getting out of Denver, you know, we had crossed over a few times
23 but, you know, there weren't any delays. So we ran, once we got
24 to I think Littleton, we were on clear signals all the way to the
25 incident.

1 Q. Okay. So let's go back to -- so, you relieved a train crew
2 that brought the coal in I take it?

3 A. Yeah, um-hum.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. So that train came out of Sterling, and we crew exchanged
6 right out front of our Denver depot.

7 Q. Okay. All right. Did the outgoing crew, did they -- did you
8 do a job brief with the outgoing crew?

9 A. Yeah, they said everything was fine. Everything was running
10 good.

11 Q. Okay. So no issues with --

12 A. No.

13 Q. -- any of the equipment?

14 A. No.

15 Q. Okay. All right. And then -- so once you did that, so kind
16 of back to the job. Did you do a job brief with the engineer
17 before them or did you just kind of do it all at the same time
18 with the engineer?

19 A. The job briefing was pretty simple with, you know, we really
20 didn't have -- there's no Form Bs. It was a Sunday. So, you
21 know, we went over, you know, the, you know, how many axles, that
22 kind of thing with my engineer. I'm trying to think back to our
23 conversations. Yeah, so there wasn't really a whole lot of
24 briefing because there's not a lot of work to be done. And the
25 slows are pretty typical. So there was nothing out of the

1 ordinary that we had to discuss. You know, the train was good and
2 go over the first detector, we both confirmed and verified that we
3 had everything we needed, and continued on our trip.

4 Q. Okay. Now, when you got aboard, did the engineer re-
5 initialize PTC do you know?

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. Okay. Did he have any issues getting logged in --

8 A. No.

9 Q. -- and getting set up?

10 A. No.

11 Q. Okay. All right. Did he have any PTC issues en route?

12 A. No, not that I'm aware of.

13 Q. Okay.

14 A. I don't recall.

15 Q. All right. Did you have any slow orders between Denver and
16 the accident site?

17 A. Several. We were -- there is a slow -- I think we were still
18 in it. There's like milepost 108.1 to 108.5, I think there was a
19 40. So we're a 45 mile an hour train because we're over 100 TOB.
20 So we were below 40 miles an hour, and South Bragdon is 109 --
21 milepost 109.6. So we were just coming out of that or still in
22 it. So we were less than 40 at that time of the incident but,
23 yeah, there were several slows. I couldn't tell you what they
24 were throughout, what we encountered prior to that, but I do know
25 that we were at 40 right there at 108.1 or 108.5.

1 Q. All right. Now, you did fantastic, Scott. Do you know if
2 the PTCI team picked it up, the slow orders.

3 A. Oh, yeah.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. I think we were, yeah, we were doing fine. Nico's (ph.) a
6 pretty good -- my engineer is -- he's pretty solid.

7 Q. Okay. All right. So you proceeded south. You had pretty
8 much clear signals. You got down to South Bragdon, and then
9 you're coming up on the bridge. Can you kind of describe to me
10 what you saw as you came up prior to the derailment?

11 A. Sure. I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. We --
12 South Bragdon is right there at the bridge. So I wouldn't even
13 say 1/10 of a mile between South Bragdon and the bridge. It's
14 right -- the bridge is right there. So coming up to it, I didn't
15 see anything out of the ordinary. Once we hit South Bragdon -- I
16 think when I wrote my -- wrote everything down, I mentioned that
17 we encountered some rough track between South Bragdon and the
18 bridge. It's such a small area. I couldn't tell you if it was
19 right on the bridge or right at South Bragdon. I know that things
20 happened pretty fast, but we did encounter -- I didn't see
21 anything, but we could definitely feel something.

22 Q. Can you describe what you felt?

23 A. Yeah. It was different than, you know, usually when you
24 encounter rough track, you might have a -- it'll shift you around
25 a little bit. This was a little different and the sensation was

1 we did rock back and forth and then there was kind of a shimmy, a
2 shattering feeling. And, I think I mentioned to Nico, that was
3 rough, and then he said, oh, no. And that's when we experienced
4 an emergency application. I know we were on the bridge at that
5 time. So I was -- immediately we're that wasn't good, and I think
6 I was trying to call an emergency and look back at what was going
7 on behind me at the same time. I could see I-25 northbound
8 traffic screeching to a halt. I'm not even sure if I was able to
9 call out emergency, emergency, emergency properly. I don't
10 recall, but I was looking at the road at the same time, and I
11 could see the dust back there, and I was trying to stop.

12 Q. Okay. So let's go back to the area of the rocking. Did you
13 feel any up and down movement or was it just rocking?

14 A. Oh, boy.

15 Q. Just to the best of your recollection. If you don't -- it
16 doesn't require an answer.

17 A. Yeah.

18 Q. Just --

19 A. I don't really -- yeah, I think it was more of a rocking, not
20 so much up and down. There was a strange kind of shaking,
21 shattering, you know, different than I had experienced before when
22 I had, you know, when you go over rough track, there's, you know,
23 you might go up and down a little bit or rock back and forth, but
24 this was a little different.

25 Q. I got you. Okay. Now, you've been on this route before.

1 Have you ever felt any of that rocking movement? I know not to
2 that extent but have you had any issues coming up on that bridge
3 before where you felt any movement prior to going over the bridge?

4 A. No.

5 Q. Okay.

6 A. No, I haven't.

7 Q. This is the first time?

8 A. Yeah.

9 Q. Okay. And you may not know this, but do you have an idea
10 about what your speed -- what the train speed was at that time
11 when you entered the bridge?

12 A. Yes. We were I would say between 35 and 40. I know we were
13 less than 40 I'm pretty sure.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. I would guess we were at, you know, 38.

16 Q. Okay. All right. Now, once -- you said you got an emergency
17 application, and then the train traveled across the bridge?

18 A. Yeah, we --

19 Q. Go ahead.

20 A. Yeah. We were on the bridge. We came to a stop. So the --
21 South Bragdon is 109.6, milepost 106.6, and we came to a stop at
22 109.9. The two locomotives were detached from the first four
23 cars. The first four cars were on the tracks, lines 5 I want to
24 say through 11 were on their sides, and maybe 11 through 35 were
25 piled up accordion on 525 northbound lane. So they were off --

1 they were dangling off the bridge and onto the road.

2 Q. Now, you said you guys kind of looked back and you started to
3 see the derailment. Were you able to tell which car began
4 derailling?

5 A. No.

6 Q. Okay. All right. Now, once you guys came to a stop, I know
7 you announced emergency. Did you leave out and go walk the
8 equipment?

9 A. Yeah, I was immediately out the door. I mean I grabbed my
10 radio and went out and, you know, I could see immediately we --
11 the bridge was partially down and we had several cars piled up.

12 Q. Okay. How far did you go back?

13 A. I went back to the bridge. I checked both sides. So I could
14 see there was a semi underneath the bridge. I tried to see if
15 there were any other cars, if there was any hazmat marking on the
16 truck. So that was on the south side, but I think I first went
17 back on the north side, and then I could -- we were detached south
18 of the bridge. So I could cross over the tracks. I went and
19 checked out the south side of the bridge, and traffic was stopped
20 and the first responders were pretty quick getting to the scene.
21 There wasn't anything I could do as far as helping the driver.
22 There was really no way to access the semi, and I couldn't see --
23 I was trying to see if there was any other cars buried or vehicles
24 buried around I-25.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. I did not go back and -- you know, I was just there. I
2 didn't walk the rest of my train or anything like that. I just --
3 I didn't want to do anything because that vehicle was underneath
4 the cars.

5 Q. No, I understand. Do you know who called 911?

6 A. On the radio --

7 Q. Well --

8 A. -- or --

9 Q. Well, I know you announced emergency on the radio. But do
10 you know --

11 A. Well, I dialed up 911 on our radio.

12 Q. Okay.

13 A. And -- but as far as making a phone call to 911, I don't know
14 who made those calls.

15 Q. Okay. That's fine. I just didn't know if you knew. So, now
16 on the north side of that bridge, I know it landed on that truck.
17 So was there a car on top of the truck or was it coal on top of
18 the truck?

19 A. Yeah, there were -- it looked like part of the bridge was on
20 top of the truck and the cars -- there seemed to be a couple of
21 cars there accordion -- to be honest with you, I couldn't even see
22 the cab of the truck. It was crushed.

23 Q. Yeah.

24 A. So.

25 Q. Was underneath a car or was it underneath the bridge?

1 A. It was -- it's hard to say.

2 Q. Okay.

3 A. Yeah.

4 Q. Okay. Now, you said first responders arrived pretty quickly.
5 Do you have an estimate like how long it took them to get there?

6 A. Five minutes, five, ten minutes, yeah. It was pretty quick.

7 Q. Okay. All right. And then how long, how long did you and
8 the engineer stay on scene after that?

9 A. That all happened about 3 -- 1520-ish, 1525. Probably 2 or 3
10 hours past that.

11 Q. Okay. So the derailment happened right around between 3:15
12 and 3:25?

13 A. I would say so, yeah.

14 Q. Okay. Okay. Scott, I appreciate it. I'm going to turn you
15 now over to the next questions.

16 A. Okay.

17 MR. ARCHIE: This is J. D. Archie, your FRA inspector.

18 MR. KURTZ: Okay.

19 MR. ARCHIE: I don't have anything at the moment. I'm
20 writing and you're pretty thorough on your answers. So we can
21 pass it on to who's next.

22 BY MR. REMINGTON:

23 Q. Scott, John Remington, BNSF. From the time you hit the rough
24 spot that you described, do you know about how long before the
25 emergency application happened second-wise or so?

1 A. Yeah, I would say within a couple seconds. It was pretty
2 quick. So we went over that rough spot, and I think I mentioned
3 to Nico that that was pretty rough, and then he said, oh, no.
4 And, then I felt the train go in emergency.

5 Q. Okay. That's all I had.

6 MR. FACKLAM: Steve Facklam, F-a-c-k-l-a-m, BLET, safety task
7 force.

8 BY MR. FACKLAM:

9 Q. Just a couple of questions, Scott. In that area, on your
10 prior trips, had there been any slow orders around that area prior
11 to maybe on the -- you said the last time you worked that area was
12 maybe a week ago, but going back a month, 2 months, do you
13 remember that being an area where there was slow orders or --

14 A. Yeah, there seems to be slow orders around Bragdon, North and
15 South Bragdon, i think pretty regularly.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. Yeah.

18 Q. Just a -- I'll ask the engineer this, but to your knowledge,
19 the lead engine, it wasn't optimizer equipped or was it optimizer
20 equipped and not working?

21 A. You know, I think it was. I'm not sure. You're going to
22 have to talk to Nico.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. Yeah.

25 Q. But to your knowledge, the engineer was running the train

1 manually, not with any kind of energy management system, correct?

2 A. I believe so, yeah.

3 Q. Okay. The weather that day, do you remember what the weather
4 was like the night before you went to work --

5 A. Nice, sunny.

6 Q. -- and then the weather at the time of the accident?

7 A. Yeah, it was -- it was a nice day. It was probably sunny,
8 and I imagine it was in the 50's when we were reporting for duty.
9 It was probably in the 70s, sunny in the 70s.

10 Q. Do you happen to know when reporting on duty about the
11 temperature either that night or when you came on duty in the
12 morning?

13 A. It was pretty -- no, we've had good weather. I don't think
14 there was any kind of weather to speak of at all.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. It's been pretty mild.

17 Q. Okay. And, I think you stated, to the best of your
18 knowledge, you thought it was around 35 to 40 miles an hour at the
19 time of the incident?

20 A. Yeah.

21 Q. That's all I have for right now. Thank you.

22 A. Okay.

23 BY MR. WARREN:

24 Q. Hey, Scott. Thanks for your testimony. You're doing a great
25 job. This is Brad Warren, SMART TD. A couple questions. When

1 you came on duty, do you typically check your train list? I know
2 this was coal train, but you typically check out the car tonnages
3 and that sort of thing?

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. Okay. And was there anything over 143 tons do you remember
6 on this train?

7 A. I don't think there was.

8 Q. Okay.

9 A. Yeah. I did -- typically if I can, I print out a hard copy,
10 and I had one with me. So that's the first thing that I do is I
11 look at, you know, my weights, my TOB, how many cars, now many
12 axels, you know, the soup of the train, and occasionally we'll
13 have set out and pick up of motors. So I always check that and
14 see if there's any work and I'll plan for it.

15 Q. Okay. In that area there at South Bragdon, is it CTC right
16 there or is it TWCIDS (ph.)?

17 A. It's CTC.

18 Q. And there weren't any tonnage restrictions or anything like
19 that on that bridge at the time?

20 A. No.

21 Q. I think that's all I have for now.

22 A. Okay.

23 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: Okay. Scott, it's Richard Skolnekovich
24 again. I'm going to look around the table real quick and see if
25 there's any follow-on questions. Do you have any follow-on

1 questions?

2 MR. ARCHIE: No.

3 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: John.

4 MR. REMINGTON: No, sir.

5 MR. FACKLAM: No.

6 MR. WARREN: No.

7 BY MR. SKOLNEKOVICH:

8 Q. Okay. So, Scott, there's no more follow-on questions. You
9 did a fantastic job. I appreciate your candor and you're
10 willingness to help us investigate this. Now, I'd like to ask,
11 the last question what I'm going to ask you is, is there anything
12 that you can think of that, you know, might have prevented the
13 accident or anything that you would like to add about this
14 accident?

15 A. No, I mean obviously I'm sorry it happened and the fatality.
16 I don't think anybody could have done anything differently as far
17 as how Nico and operated, just -- and just -- I don't know if the
18 track failed or the bridge was failing. I couldn't tell, you
19 know, if we caused the bridge to go down because we were derailling
20 or the bridge was going. I could not tell you that. I wish I
21 knew, but I don't. So I've tried to share with you guys as much
22 as I know about the situation.

23 Q. Well, you've done a terrific job, Scott, and I appreciate it.
24 In the future, if we have any more questions, do you mind if we
25 contact you directly?

1 A. No problem.

2 Q. Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

3 A. No.

4 Q. Okay. Well, then, Scott, on behalf of the NTSB, I'd like to
5 thank you for your time and your candor and your cooperation and
6 information you provided us today.

7 A. Sure.

8 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: So I'm just going to go ahead and end the
9 interview.

10 MR. KURTZ: All right. Thanks.

11 MR. SKOLNEKOVICH: The time is now 1:38.

12 (Whereupon, at 1:38 p.m., 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: COAL TRAIN DERAILMENT & BRIDGE
COLLAPSE NEAR PUEBLO, COLORADO
ON OCTOBER 15, 2023
Interview of Scott Kurtz

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD24FR001

PLACE: Telephonic

DATE: October 17, 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.



Kathryn A. Mirfin
Transcriber