

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of:

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NORFOLK SOUTHERN TRAIN DERAILMENT
IN ELLISTON, VIRGINIA
ON JULY 6, 2023

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Accident No.: RRD23FR013

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Interview of: ERIC POLETTI, Road Manager
Norfolk Southern

Roanoke, Virginia

Sunday,
July 9, 2023

APPEARANCES:

MICHAEL BACHMEIER, Operations Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

JIM SOUTHWORTH, Investigator in Charge/Mechanical
Group Chairman
National Transportation Safety Board

ANNE GARCIA, Ph.D., Human Performance and System Safety
Group Chair
National Transportation Safety Board

BOB BEATON, Ph.D., Division Chief, Human Performance and
System Safety
National Transportation Safety Board

TIM LYNCH, Investigator in Charge
Federal Railroad Administration

JOHN RANSCHAERT, Inspector, Operating Practices
Federal Railroad Administration

DAVID GOODEN, Assistant General Manager, Southern Region
Norfolk Southern

ROBERT LEWIS, Regional Superintendent, Blue Ridge
Norfolk Southern

DIANNE BARNETT, Senior Director, Mechanical Operations,
Southern Region
Norfolk Southern

SCOTT BUNTEN, Investigator
BLET National Safety Task Force

RON SABOL, National Safety Task Force
SMART Transportation Division

DENNIS WILSON, Assistant National Representative
Brotherhood of Railway Carmen/TCU

ZACH SHROPSHIRE, Director
Norfolk Southern

I N D E X

<u>ITEM</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Interview of Eric Poletti:	
By Mr. Bachmeier	6
By Mr. Lynch	13
By Mr. Ranschaert	15
By Mr. Wilson	16
By Dr. Garcia	17
By Mr. Lewis	21
By Dr. Beaton	22
By Mr. Southworth	31
By Mr. Bunten	35
By Mr. Ranschaert	35
By Mr. Wilson	40
By Dr. Garcia	40
By Mr. Lewis	47
By Dr. Beaton	49
By Mr. Southworth	51
By Mr. Bachmeier	52
By Mr. Wilson	53
By Mr. Bachmeier	53

I N T E R V I E W

(3:02 p.m.)

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3 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay, my name is Mike Bachmeier and I am the
4 NTSB operations group chairman for the accident. We are here
5 today on July 9th at 3:02 in the Hampton Inn in Roanoke, Virginia,
6 to conduct an interview with Eric Poletti, who works for NS. This
7 interview is in conjunction with the NTSB's investigation of the
8 accident near Elliston, Virginia, accident reference number is
9 RRD23FR013. The purpose of the investigation is to increase
10 safety, not to assign fault, blame, or liability.

11 Before we begin our interview and questions, let's go around
12 the table and introduce ourselves. Please spell your last name,
13 who you are representing, and your title. I'd like to remind
14 everyone to speak clearly so we can get a good, accurate
15 recording. I'll start off and then pass it off to my right.
16 Again, my name is Michael Bachmeier and I am the operations group
17 chairman, B-a-c-h-m-e-i-e-r.

18 MR. LYNCH: Tim Lynch, L-y-n-c-h, I'm with the FRA and the
19 mechanical IIC here today to investigate.

20 MR. GOODEN: David Gooden, G-o-o-d-e-n, I am Assistant
21 General Manager with Norfolk Southern for the Southern Region.

22 MR. BUNTEN: Scott Bunten, B-u-n-t-e-n, BLET National Safety
23 Task Force.

24 MR. SABOL: Ron Sabol, Transportation Division, Sheet Metal,
25 Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers National Safety Team.

1 MR. RANSCHAERT: John Ranschaert, R-a-n-s-c-h-a-e-r-t, I'm
2 with the FRA, operating practices inspector

3 MR. WILSON: Dennis Wilson, W-i-l-s-o-n, Assistant National
4 Rep, Brotherhood of Railway Carmen and TCU.

5 MS. BARNETT: Dianne Barnett, Senior Director, Mechanical --
6 Dianne Barnett, B-a-r-n-e-t-t, Senior Director, Mechanical
7 Operations, Southern Region, Norfolk Southern.

8 DR. GARCIA: Anne Garcia, Human Performance and System Safety
9 Group Chair for this investigation for NTSB.

10 MR. LEWIS: Robert Lewis, L-e-w-i-s, Norfolk Southern's Blue
11 Ridge Division's division superintendent.

12 DR. BEATON: Bob Beaton, B-e-a-t-o-n, I'm the chief of the
13 System Safety Division at NTSB.

14 MR. SOUTHWORTH: Jim Southworth, S-o-u-t-h-w-o-r-t-h, I'm the
15 investigator in charge for this investigation and also the
16 Mechanical Group Chairman.

17 MR. POLETTI: Eric Poletti, P-o-l-e-t-t-i, Road Manager with
18 Norfolk Southern.

19 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay, thank you. Eric, do we have your
20 permission to record our discussion with you today?

21 MR. POLETTI: Yes.

22 MR. BACHMEIER: Do you understand the transcription will be
23 part of the public docket and as such, we cannot guarantee any
24 confidentiality?

25 MR. POLETTI: Yes.

1 MR. BACHMEIER: As we discussed outside, you can have a
2 representative with you today, is that correct?

3 MR. POLETTI: That is correct, yes.

4 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay. I'd like to ask everyone to clearly
5 announce your name and title before questioning. With that, let's
6 proceed.

7 INTERVIEW OF ERIC POLETTI

8 BY MR. BACHMEIER:

9 Q. Eric, could you please give us a synopsis of your work
10 experience, taking us up to your present job?

11 A. Yes, sir. Do you want me to start with my current job?

12 Q. Yeah.

13 A. Okay. So I've been with Norfolk Southern for going on about
14 five and a half years now. I originally hired on out of
15 Williamson, West Virginia. I hired on off the street as a
16 management trainee. I worked 2 years in Williamson, West Virginia
17 as a -- about a year as a yardmaster and then a year as a
18 trainmaster and then was moved to the Radford location, where I've
19 worked for the past, going on 3 years and 5 months as a road
20 manager. I've got about 200 employees that I manage, including
21 two assistant trainmasters, and that sums it up for my experience
22 at Norfolk Southern.

23 Q. Okay. Before Norfolk Southern, what was your --

24 A. Before Norfolk Southern, I worked 5 years retail management
25 for Staples and then I worked for Apple, a customer service

1 manager for about a 3-year period.

2 Q. Okay, okay. Well, thank you. So as a road manager, what is
3 like your daily -- let's just do a daily -- what's your day look
4 like?

5 A. Day to day, first thing in the morning, I job brief with my
6 locals, I have a total of seven locals on my side, that's usually
7 the first task in the morning and we go over the morning metrics
8 for the previous day so we can get everything ready for the
9 morning call. Usually check where my work event trains are that
10 work in the Radford and Bristol locations to see if they're going
11 to make it, to be able to complete their work events and if not,
12 line up the outbound crew to do the work.

13 And then throughout the day, it's communicating with the NOC,
14 with my local crews, and we've got a -- we cover a 300-mile
15 territory, Roanoke to Bluefield and Roanoke to Bristol, so we've
16 got a lot of trains on a daily basis. We're out there managing
17 the exception report, making sure we -- all engineers are in
18 compliance with their stop, authorized speed, restricted speed,
19 banner exceptions.

20 And on top of that, we spend a lot of time out in the field
21 making sure our employees are working safely, we've got a lot of
22 moving pieces on our territory, a lot of crews out there working,
23 switching. So that's the daily focus, is ensuring everybody's out
24 there working safely, working the rule compliance, following the
25 rules. That sums up really the daily basis of it.

1 Q. Okay. Do you have a set schedule or are you on call 24/7?

2 A. So 24/5, usually.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. The way we have it set up is we all get two rest days each
5 week.

6 Q. Okay, okay. Taking us back to July 6th, the accident train
7 hits a hot bearing detector, can you kind of walk us through that
8 event, taking us all the way up to the derailment?

9 A. Yes, yes, absolutely. I was notified on Thursday evening
10 around 6:20 p.m. by the New River dispatcher that Train 814 of the
11 fourth had received a critical hot bearing alert from the Yellow
12 Sulphur detector and I had asked the dispatcher, was the conductor
13 down and walking, which he informed me that he was, and I asked
14 the dispatcher if he would forward me the e-mail with the detector
15 details that wayside sent out.

16 I checked the e-mail and confirmed the car number in question
17 and asked the dispatcher if mechanical had been contacted. He
18 said that -- and Jason Little was the dispatcher, as well, just to
19 -- that's the guy that I was communicating with. He said he did
20 attempt to call general supervisor Mike Weaver, but Mr. Weaver did
21 not answer. I did later find out that Mr. Weaver had been out
22 over 24-plus hours due to a previous issue that he was out
23 handling, so he was observing rest at this time. I did not know
24 that, so once me and the dispatcher got off the phone, I tried to
25 call Mr. Weaver and he did not answer, as well.

1 Q. Yeah.

2 A. So I started getting ready to take off towards the train.
3 Once I got in my vehicle and I hit the road, I called the
4 dispatcher back and asked him if the conductor had put eyes on the
5 bearing yet, to which he said that the conductor did and the
6 bearing was hot and it did melt the temp stick.

7 At this time, I made a phone call to Mart Sweeney with
8 Roanoke mechanical, I believe it was at 6:53 p.m. when I made that
9 phone call and I notified Mr. Sweeney that the 814 on the
10 Whitethorne District had received a hot bearing alert up by North
11 Fork and I told him that the conductor did inspect it, that it did
12 melt the temp stick and we discussed -- we both agreed at that
13 point, since it melted the temp stick, that the car was to be set
14 out. From the very beginning of that, we agreed we were going to
15 set the car out.

16 I notified him that the next set-out point is between the
17 North Fork and Fagg signal, right there in the siding. He agreed
18 that that's going to be the most ideal set-out location. We got
19 off the phone and I contacted the dispatcher back for him to relay
20 this information to the 814 crew and that's when engineer Gammons,
21 on the 814, informed the dispatcher that they would unlikely be
22 able to shove the 71 loads back up the grade to set that car out
23 in that location. And the dispatcher immediately informed me of
24 that. I called Mr. Sweeney back at 7:02 p.m. and I informed him
25 of the engineer's statement and I asked him if we thought we would

1 be okay to set this car off at Riverside, which would be the next
2 siding eastward. At that point, Mr. Sweeney wanted me to confirm
3 more information with the conductor on the condition of the
4 bearing itself, he wanted to make sure that it was not glowing,
5 that the bearing did not look like it was coming apart or falling
6 apart, and I got with the dispatcher and relayed this information
7 to the conductor, which the conductor came back, that outside of
8 it slightly melting the temp stick, there was no visual
9 abnormalities that were seen from it.

10 And I relayed this information back to Mr. Sweeney and we
11 were both in agreement that the next location to set out would be
12 Riverside in the house track right there in the siding. Me and
13 Mr. Sweeney got off the phone, I notified the dispatcher of the
14 plan and he relayed this information to the train crew.

15 At that point I contacted track supervisor Cameron Barrow
16 (ph.) to ask him if the house track and the siding at Riverside
17 was unlocked, they usually have a maintenance-of-way lock on it,
18 and he was unsure so he said he was going to dispatch his track
19 guy, Justin Hodges (ph.), to go down and make sure it was unlocked
20 and help the crew actually spot that car where it needed to be
21 spotted in that track. At that point, the crew, I know they had
22 -- I didn't hear the full conversation on the radio with wayside,
23 but I couldn't hear the crew talking to them, I could hear wayside
24 talking to the crew and at that point, they contacted wayside and
25 after speaking with wayside, that's when they proceeded on

1 eastward to set the car off and then at 7:53 p.m., that's when I
2 was notified by the dispatcher that 814 had went in emergency at
3 V262, which is about a mile short -- well, a mile west of the
4 house track where we intended to set the car off at. And at this
5 point I contacted track supervisor Barrow back to reach out to his
6 guy, Justin Hodges, who was on -- well, close by, unlocking the
7 house track and Justin Hodges went down and confirmed he saw cars
8 with wheels on the ground.

9 That's when I notified division leadership on the Blue Ridge
10 and the Network Operation Center in Atlanta, I contacted
11 Mart Sweeney back and notified him that we did have wheels on the
12 ground and he started making calls to get mechanical forces that
13 way. At that point, I had went and re-averted myself towards
14 Radford to pick up my local crew to take and actually put on the
15 head end of 814 because I knew the crew was approaching their
16 hours of service time limits.

17 Once we arrived on scene, I interviewed Mr. Gammons, engineer
18 Gammons, and conductor Mike Montgomery and received their written
19 statements and I did confirm with Mr. Montgomery that he had one
20 of the new temp sticks that we passed out, the 169-degree sticks.
21 I did retrieve that temp stick from him and provided him with a
22 new one. At that point, after we got their statements, the crews
23 did swap out and then we got them a ride back to Roanoke so they
24 could be put off duty and get some rest. And after that point,
25 then we continued on with the cleanup process of the derailment

1 itself.

2 Q. Okay. Well, thank you, that was very, very good. So how
3 many hot bearing alerts have you been called out to, do you think?

4 A. Over the past 5 years, if I had to -- I couldn't put, you
5 know, an exact number on it and I would say probably 5 to 10 --

6 Q. Yeah.

7 A. -- over the past 5 years.

8 Q. Okay. And what kind of training do you get in the management
9 training, do you go through like mechanical, all the different --
10 do you get training on every one? So like if you see something,
11 do you -- would you know how to spot a defect or --

12 A. Just from the time I've spent out here, I mean, if
13 something's standing out visually, you know, I can detect it. But
14 in terms of specific training for like bearings, mechanical-wise,
15 no, I've not had any specific training in that.

16 Q. And then is there like a procedure when it gets a critical
17 hot bearing, there must be something that tells what to do?

18 A. Nothing step by step. We have Operating Rule 147, which
19 gives a breakdown of what you do in terms of inspect -- the crew
20 actually inspecting that bearing and if the crew cannot inspect
21 that bearing due to location-wise, you know, it states you can
22 move the train no more than 10 miles per hour to a point where you
23 can inspect it. But outside of that, we had OB-21, an operation
24 bulletin that was released July 7th, the day after the derailment,
25 that specified actual step-by-step instructions of what to do in

1 it now.

2 Q. Okay. You were saying that the -- I forget the rule number
3 you just said, but --

4 A. Oh.

5 Q. -- but it did specify a speed in there?

6 A. If you can -- yeah, so the original rule, Operating Rule 147,
7 it's got the 10 mile per hour if you cannot access to actually
8 check the bearing, for example, if the conductor cannot -- if he
9 gets to a bridge and he can't back by that bridge, you can pull it
10 no more than 10 miles per hour after talking with wayside.

11 Q. Okay. So like in this instance on Thursday night, they went
12 out there, put their hot stick on it, melted it, had the
13 conversations, going to set it out, there's nothing, no speed
14 restrictions up.

15 A. No set speed restrictions, no.

16 Q. Okay.

17 A. Not that I know of.

18 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay. Tim, I'll hand it off to you.

19 BY MR. LYNCH:

20 Q. Tim Lynch, MP&E, FRA. Eric, a couple small details here to
21 look forward to. When you were notified of the hot box and the
22 discussions were between you and the dispatcher, what point was
23 the first time that you had -- that the decision was going to be
24 made to set the car out and who made that decision?

25 A. I was notified around 6:30 and then I called Mr. Sweeney at

1 6:52 when we found out that the conductor actually had checked it
2 and it did melt the temp stick. So right when I called
3 Mr. Sweeney and explained to him, we were both in agreement that
4 the car was setting out, so it would've been within 25 minutes of
5 my notification and then my conversation with Mr. Sweeney that we
6 were setting the car out.

7 Q. Okay, so let's -- you and Mr. Sweeney decided to set this car
8 out because of the hot box detector had went off, correct?

9 A. Well, because the -- it melted the temp stick is the -- we
10 had decided to set the car out.

11 Q. All right, after you made this decision to set the car out,
12 was this the first information that the dispatcher had, or the
13 wayside desk, that the car was going to be set-out or had they
14 previously already knew was going to set it out anyway?

15 A. No, no previous instruction was provided in terms of the
16 dispatcher or the NOC, what we were going to do with it, yeah.

17 Q. So you notified the New River Valley dispatcher that the car
18 would be set out per -- by you and Mr. Sweeney's direction?

19 A. Right, right.

20 Q. All right. At that point, was the speed or any kind of
21 restrictions put on that car?

22 A. No, no. And me and Mr. Sweeney, we didn't discuss any type
23 of speed or speed restriction on it.

24 MR. LYNCH: No further questions for me.

25 MR. GOODEN: David Gooden with Norfolk Southern, I have no

1 questions.

2 MR. BUNTEN: Scott Bunten, BLET, I have no questions.

3 MR. SABOL: Ron Sabol, SMART TD, I have no questions.

4 MR. BACHMEIER: John.

5 BY MR. RANSCHAERT:

6 Q. John Ranschaert with the FRA, Operating Practices. Can you
7 talk a little bit about your training as a supervisor? You said
8 you were a yardmaster and then you were a manager trainee?

9 A. Yes, sir.

10 Q. Did you go to any schooling for that position?

11 A. I did. In terms of like education-wise before, yeah, I've
12 got a bachelor's degree in healthcare administration and then a
13 master's of business administration degree and from King
14 University.

15 Q. So did Norfolk Southern provide the schooling --

16 A. So I did --

17 Q. -- for that position?

18 A. I did go through, when originally hired, the 2-week program
19 in McDonough, Georgia, to become a certified conductor.

20 Q. Did you ever work as a conductor, sir?

21 A. No, not on the ground.

22 Q. When you made the decision with Mr. Sweeney on the bearing,
23 what were you basing that off of?

24 A. Strictly basing it off of it melting the temp stick, that the
25 temp stick melted with -- that's the reason the car was to be set

1 out.

2 Q. Okay. And you both simultaneously made that decision or was
3 that something you said to him, hey, I want to set the car out and
4 he agreed with you or was it you asked him what to do and he told
5 you, hey, set the car out?

6 A. I don't remember exactly the verbiage we used, but I know we
7 -- it felt like we were both in agreement that the car was to be
8 set out --

9 Q. Okay.

10 A. -- for sure.

11 MR. RANSCHAERT: At the moment, I don't have any further
12 questions.

13 BY MR. WILSON:

14 Q. Dennis Wilson with TCU. Sir, may I get your name again? I'm
15 sorry.

16 A. Yeah, Eric --

17 Q. Eric.

18 A. -- Poletti.

19 Q. Poletti?

20 A. Yeah, P-o-l-e-t-t-i.

21 Q. I butchered your name. Mr. Poletti, you stated that there
22 was no talk of a speed restriction between you and Mr. Sweeney.
23 Do you have the authority to issue a speed restriction?

24 A. I don't know, to be honest. In terms of a speed restriction,
25 I would say no. Usually the restrictions are put on by the

1 mechanical or track department.

2 Q. Okay. And also, Mr. Poletti, you mentioned the engineer and
3 conductor. Specifically, conductor Mike Montgomery, do you know
4 his approximate years of service?

5 A. Yes, he was hired in October of 2004, so he would be
6 approaching 19 years, so it would be about 18 years and what, 8
7 months right now.

8 MR. WILSON: Thank you, I've got no further questions.

9 MS. BARNETT: Dianne Barnett, Senior Director, no questions.

10 MR. BACHMEIER: Anne.

11 MR. SHROPSHIRE: Zach Shropshire (ph.), Director, no
12 questions.

13 BY DR. GARCIA:

14 Q. Anne Garcia, Human Performance and System Safety, NTSB, I've
15 got a couple questions for you. So we're talking about your
16 decision to have the car set out at the siding, so which siding
17 did you determine to have it set out?

18 A. The initial siding was going to be between the North Fork
19 signal and the Fagg signal, which would've been about -- from the
20 original location they stopped would've been about approximately 4
21 miles eastward and that was the next location to set it out and
22 that's when -- when I had dispatch inform the crew of this
23 information, that's when engineer Gammons informed he probably
24 didn't have enough power to shove 71 loads back up the grade,
25 which it is -- there is a good grade right there, so he's probably

1 correct, he probably would not have been able to shove it back to
2 set that car out in that siding.

3 Q. Okay. So I'm going to ask you to walk us through that. So
4 then the decision was made to have it set out where?

5 A. So after that, I made the phone call back to Mr. Sweeney and
6 we had discussed setting it out at the next siding, which was
7 Riverside, and it was going to set out on the house track right
8 there in the siding.

9 Q. How far?

10 A. So the Fagg signal is 2 -- 268 and then the house track is
11 right around 261, so it would've been about another additional 7
12 miles eastward.

13 Q. Okay. And the train derailed prior to that?

14 A. Yeah, it derailed 1 mile west of the actual set-out location.

15 Q. Prior?

16 A. Right, prior to reaching the set-out location.

17 Q. Was there another place where it could've been set out
18 between those two?

19 A. There was one house track at Milepost V266 that -- on the
20 bulletins, it showed out of service due to maintenance-of-way
21 equipment that was in it by Clay Kline (ph.).

22 Q. Okay. So did you consider that one or you knew that was not
23 an option?

24 A. It should've been considered because afterwards we went and
25 reviewed it, me and Mr. Lewis drove up there and the actual --

1 well, stub track, it did not have maintenance-of-way equipment in
2 it, so that bulletin should've been removed.

3 Q. Okay. So when it was -- you determined to have it set out
4 and the location that you initially determined to set it out, it
5 was determined that wasn't possible and so then the decision was
6 made to move it up to the next one. Did you do any type of
7 additional safety or risk assessment at that point when you were
8 determining to move it up to the next location?

9 A. Outside of, you know, Mr. Sweeney, when I had the discussion
10 with him about moving it to the next location, Riverside, he
11 wanted to make clear that -- to have another conversation with the
12 conductor to make sure that the bearing wasn't glowing, looked
13 abnormal, or looked like it was coming apart, so that would be the
14 safety follow-up that we did with the conductor just to ensure
15 that everything with the bearing itself physically looked intact.

16 Q. Okay. And prior to that decision, then, and that additional
17 assessment, the train had not been moved.

18 A. That's correct, yeah, the train had not moved from the
19 original stopping location where they inspected the bearing.

20 Q. Okay, thank you. I appreciate that. So you mentioned that
21 you're not the one to instruct the train to go at restricted
22 speed, but is that something that you think that the train
23 should've been instructed to do?

24 A. I think my decision-making process, if I would've changed one
25 thing is I would go back and I would've asked do we need to set a

1 speed restriction on this car, so I would say yes.

2 Q. Okay. And is that something that's come up in your training
3 as a question to ask?

4 A. Not specifically, no, not in the training I've had.

5 Q. Okay. And is that something that, prior to this incident,
6 that it was in any Norfolk Southern rule procedures to ask that
7 question or to make that --

8 A. Not in writing, no, I don't believe so.

9 Q. Okay. Not in writing, but in other methods?

10 A. I know -- which I don't want to get them mixed up and
11 confused, I know, for example, a detector, if it gives like a
12 condemnable bearing defect message, I know from past experiences
13 with that, with working with mechanical, that we always -- you
14 know, we put some type of restriction on it and I think my
15 decision making, that's where I still think I could've done better
16 and asked, had that conversation, had that question, do we need to
17 put a speed restriction on this.

18 Because it was a hot bearing detector message instead of a
19 condemnable bearing, I think, in my mind, that's why I did not ask
20 that question, but it should've been asked, looking back at it, I
21 believe, now.

22 Q. And the bulletin that's come out prior, since this incident,
23 is that in there?

24 A. It is, yeah. Yeah, there's a restriction, a 10-mile-per-hour
25 restriction and it's got to meet certain requirements to even move

1 it at that level.

2 DR. GARCIA: Thank you.

3 BY MR. LEWIS:

4 Q. Eric, Robert Lewis with Norfolk Southern. You made comments
5 earlier that you've seen 5 to 10 bearings or responded to 5 to 10
6 bearings throughout your career. In those 5 to 10 bearings have
7 you seen what not to move?

8 A. I have, yes, I've had -- I'd have to go back to the
9 condemnable bearing defect message. I would say the majority of
10 the ones that I've dealt with had been condemnable bearing and not
11 just hot bearing and the condemnable bearing ones, visually, the
12 ones I've seen before, you can tell that that bearing is in rough
13 shape. And I've dealt with one recently this year that we had on
14 the Blask (ph.) District, that you could tell that, you know, you
15 wanted mechanical eyes on it before we move that car.

16 Q. Could you describe what you saw on that particular bearing?

17 A. Yeah, that bearing was actually popped out, I would say,
18 about 4 inches with grease leaking all over the place.

19 Q. And in your tenure as a trainmaster and yardmaster, have you
20 ever put a restriction or a hold on a car because it had an issue
21 and you felt like it was unsafe to move?

22 A. Not myself. Usually, at that point, I'm not going to move
23 the car without mechanical's approval or unless I've got a picture
24 that I can get to mechanical and then discuss with them if we're
25 even going to move the car and I usually get the speed restriction

1 from them, in terms of if we're going to move it.

2 Q. But you have the authority not to move it until it's further
3 checked?

4 A. Yes, absolutely.

5 MR. LEWIS: Okay, that's all the questions I have.

6 BY DR. BEATON:

7 Q. Hi, Eric, I'm Bob Beaton from NTSB. Thanks for spending your
8 afternoon with us. I'm sure we all want to get through this, so
9 I'll be efficient with my questions, but I have a few --

10 A. Yeah.

11 Q. -- because I'm trying to understand a couple different things
12 and let me start out with your job title, you're a road manager.

13 A. Correct.

14 Q. How does a road manager differ from a trainmaster?

15 A. Essentially, it's the same thing, it's just --

16 Q. The same thing?

17 A. Yeah, the titles have just changed, yes.

18 Q. Okay. Just changed at Norfolk Southern?

19 A. I don't know that it changed --

20 Q. Or is that industry-wide?

21 A. Yeah, I don't know if they've changed company-wide, I know
22 they have with us over the past several years.

23 Q. Okay. So as a road master, you were describing your typical
24 day at the office, ensuring that the 200-plus people that work for
25 you or report to you, at least, are working safely and that

1 they're complying with rules, is that correct?

2 A. Correct, yes.

3 Q. Okay. That sounds to me like an operations supervisor, that
4 you're looking at crews that are dispatched for roadway work and
5 you want to make sure that they've got the right PPE, that they've
6 got the right work orders, that they understand what sort of rules
7 and restrictions and bulletins apply to them.

8 A. Correct.

9 Q. More from an operation point of view than a mechanical
10 discipline.

11 A. Yes, that's correct.

12 Q. Okay. I just wanted to be clear on that. So I appreciated
13 the background on your work history and your management
14 experience. I bet it was fun being an Apple service rep, that's
15 got to be a cool company to work for.

16 A. It was, it was work from home, so --

17 Q. Okay, you didn't go to one of those fancy Apple stores and --

18 A. No.

19 Q. -- get big discounts and load up on all that stuff.

20 A. You still get the discounts, but it gets tiring working from
21 home every day, so --

22 Q. Okay, yeah. I'm a huge Apple fan, so having said that, I'm
23 interested if you could make some comments about in your -- in
24 your role as a road manager and apparently you're the person who
25 gets called when a train has a mechanical problem like a hot wheel

1 bearing and most of your job is operations related, and how
2 dependent upon you -- how dependent are you on people such as
3 Mr. Sweeney for that mechanical set of eyeballs on the issue and
4 to help you make the operations decision of whether the train can
5 move forward safely or not?

6 A. I would say fully dependent. It's not a -- I wouldn't make
7 the decision to move that train to set it out at a location
8 without getting agreement from a mechanical perspective.

9 Q. Yeah. Now, Mr. Sweeney is the senior general superintendent
10 of mechanical for the Mechanical Department and he apparently has
11 two other colleagues, is that correct?

12 A. That is correct.

13 Q. So if you couldn't get Mr. Sweeney, hopefully you'd get one
14 of the other two.

15 A. Right.

16 Q. If none of them were available on the night that you got the
17 call about this derailment, what would you have done?

18 A. I would call one of Bluefield's supervisors. I've got a real
19 good working relationship with the three in Bluefield and the
20 three in Roanoke.

21 Q. Okay. So you've got a network of mechanical people that can
22 give you that support.

23 A. Yeah.

24 Q. Okay, all right. When you got Mr. Sweeney on the phone and
25 you appraised him of the situation, I suspect that that was the

1 first he had heard about it, at about 7 o'clock in the evening?

2 A. It is, yeah. The dispatcher said he had only tried to call
3 Mr. Weaver, he didn't try to call the other two which would've
4 actually been on call at the moment.

5 Q. Okay. And Mr. Sweeney's knowledge about what the conductor
6 was conveying, that was being relayed through you.

7 A. That's correct.

8 Q. Okay. So Mr. Sweeney was giving you advice based on at least
9 secondhand, if not third-hand --

10 A. Right.

11 Q. -- information.

12 A. Everything he received information-wise came directly from
13 me, that I received from the dispatcher and conductor.

14 Q. In your experience as a road master, what factors allow you
15 to trust the conductor assessment of the bearing? I mean, you
16 actually said that you were -- you passed the conductor's test,
17 2-week test.

18 A. Correct, yes.

19 Q. Okay, but you haven't worked as a conductor. But why did you
20 trust the conductor in this case?

21 A. This specific conductor, Mr. Montgomery, he's -- you know,
22 with this time and experience out here, I -- you know, and I've
23 spent plenty of time with him.

24 Q. Okay, you know him.

25 A. Yeah, I've -- communicating with him, you know, I'm not going

1 to let him decide on his own that hey, this car is okay to move,
2 but the description of the actual bearing itself, I was confident
3 in his assessment of it to go off of that information to pass it
4 to mechanical and go from there. Now, it would be a completely
5 different scenario, I will say, we've got a lot of, you know,
6 brand-new conductors out here and it would be a completely
7 different scenario --

8 Q. Okay, I can --

9 A. -- in that type of situation.

10 Q. If I asked you to explain what 49 C.F.R. Part 215, Appendix D
11 was, could you just give me a high-level, 3-seconds description of
12 that?

13 A. I'd have to get on Google for a minute.

14 Q. Okay.

15 (Laughter.)

16 BY DR. BEATON:

17 Q. So you're not familiar with Part 215, Appendix D. Are you
18 aware that this conductor that you're trusting and probably for a
19 very good reason, I'm not questioning your trust, I just want to
20 make the connection here, are you aware or not if he's aware of
21 Part 215?

22 A. I would say probably not.

23 Q. Probably not. Not even Appendix D?

24 A. Not even that one.

25 Q. Not even Appendix D. All right. You were asked previously

1 about the five or six past experiences you've had as a road
2 manager with hot wheels, hot wheel bearings, and I think I'd like
3 to follow up on that a little bit and I don't want to be redundant
4 to what you've just been asked, but I think you were asked an
5 important question. What factors, mechanical factors, are you
6 aware of or -- I mean, I realize you're getting support and that's
7 very wise of you to do that, get support from the mechanical
8 group, but what factors do you, after five and a half years at NS
9 and 3 years and 5 months as a -- down at Radford as the road
10 manager, what factors do you take into consideration when you have
11 a bad bearing situation as to whether the car can be moved safely
12 on the rails?

13 A. I would say the main factors is going to be what -- in terms
14 of when we get eyes on it and, you know, if it's a condemnable
15 bearing message, I always -- I want to have my eyes on it and
16 mechanical's eyes on it. The hot bearing, you know, I felt like I
17 did -- I guess with the response of it, the visual look of it, I
18 didn't think it was as bad as a condemnable bearing type message
19 and moving forward, you know, that's not going to be the case,
20 obviously.

21 But in terms of the factors, the visual aspect of it, and if
22 it melts the temp stick, then, you know, we're setting that car
23 out, there's no questions about it. If it melts the temp stick,
24 we're going to set it out and then visually, you know, I would
25 like mechanical to always get eyes on it, as well. I think that's

1 an important factor.

2 Q. Yeah. And just to be clear, I'm not talking about the
3 decision to set things out, I'm talking about the decision to move
4 the car --

5 A. Right.

6 Q. -- safely on the rails. So let me just make this more
7 straightforward. Is the weight of the car important in deciding
8 whether the car can be moved safely?

9 A. Absolutely.

10 Q. And is the speed of the car important?

11 A. Absolutely, yes.

12 Q. Okay. And in-train forces, is that important?

13 A. It would be, yes.

14 Q. Okay. When you have a wheel bearing that's hot enough to set
15 off a wayside detector, would you say that that's a failed
16 bearing?

17 A. I would say it's a bearing that is working its way to a
18 failed bearing.

19 Q. Okay. Now, I appreciate the fact that you're not a
20 mechanical engineer, this is not a trick question, okay?

21 A. Right.

22 Q. But, you know, if I had a bearing heat up to 170 degrees, why
23 isn't that a failed right there? Because I know at 170 degrees,
24 200 degrees above ambient, I'm burning off a lot of lubricant --

25 A. Right.

1 Q. -- and I'm probably fracturing, thermally fracturing some of
2 the gaskets in that bearing and maybe causing spalling in the race
3 of that bearing. That bearing, to me, would seem like, you know,
4 it's past the point of no return.

5 A. Right.

6 Q. Would you agree with that?

7 A. Yeah. And you're probably right on that because, you know,
8 this bearing visually, you know, looked fine but it still melted
9 the temp stick. So with us setting it off, I'm assuming, and I
10 don't know for sure, but I'm assuming the wheel would've been
11 changed on it.

12 Q. Yeah.

13 A. So technically, a failed bearing.

14 Q. So this is where I come back to your past experiences moving
15 these five cars previously. Do you have a sense for how far you
16 can move a loaded coal car downhill with a bad failed bearing? I
17 mean, is there a distance that you're sort of -- a rule of thumb
18 that you've come to appreciate?

19 A. No, not a certain distance itself. I mean, my mindset is,
20 you know, I want to get it set off as --

21 Q. As soon as possible.

22 A. Yeah, as soon as possible, without moving the car.

23 Q. So you're aware that this needs to get off the road.

24 A. Right, absolutely.

25 Q. And you want to do it as fast as possible, that's not a

1 question, it's just where do you do it at.

2 A. Right.

3 Q. Okay. So just for my clarification, the Fagg siding, you
4 couldn't get out, you couldn't set it out in North Fork because of
5 the maintenance-of-way equipment.

6 A. Oh, that would have been at the Ironto V266.

7 Q. Okay, okay. And so the only option you had was to take it
8 down to Riverside.

9 A. That would've been the next set-out.

10 Q. Yeah. And that was about 7 miles away.

11 A. Correct.

12 Q. Based on what we've said, did you have any reluctance or were
13 there any precautions or fingers crossed kind of moments or things
14 that you were thinking about when you said all right, let's move
15 it down to Riverside and you knew it was seven or so miles away?

16 A. Right. At that time I did not know, not at that time. You
17 know, speaking with Mr. Sweeney, I guess getting his okay, we both
18 agreed that, you know, that would be the next available location
19 to set off at that point. So I was confident that we were going
20 to be able to set it off without having issues.

21 Q. Okay. So don't let me put words in your mouth, but I think
22 your experience I'm trying to capture is primarily operations
23 related, so I'm assuming that what you're telling me now is that
24 you had no reluctances based on the operational aspects of the
25 move and with the support of Mr. Sweeney, you inferred some

1 comfort related to the mechanical aspects of the move. Is that
2 fair?

3 A. I would say, yeah, that's accurate to say.

4 DR. BEATON: Okay. All right, I'm going to stop right there.
5 I appreciate, Eric, your answers and I'll get another turn, I
6 think, here in a little bit. Thanks.

7 BY MR. SOUTHWORTH:

8 Q. Jim Southworth. Just for the group, I'm going to do some
9 clarifying questions and all. The grades you're dealing with out
10 there, particularly the North Fork to Fagg, what is that?

11 A. The grade right there at the Fagg signal would be a 0.7.

12 Q. Okay, so a little less than 1 percent, correct?

13 A. Correct.

14 Q. And that's pretty good --

15 A. It is.

16 Q. -- a pretty good grade for moving cars and especially loaded
17 coal cars, a hundred and five of them. Trailing tonnage, length
18 and everything else. So when you're trying to decide what to do
19 and where to go and you get feedback back from the engineer, who
20 had good experience, at how difficult -- it would be maybe even
21 unsafe to do certain procedures at those locations, that all comes
22 into your judgment and concern and discussion about what to do.

23 A. Correct.

24 Q. So if they make a repair on the main, we're taking out a
25 whole wheel set, correct?

1 A. That is correct.

2 Q. We don't just replace a bearing, you get a whole wheel set,
3 which means separating cars --

4 A. Correct.

5 Q. -- moving them so you can get something in there that lifts
6 the car and of course, having a wheel set to put under there,
7 okay. So that's what makes this a difficult thing to do. It's
8 not like you're missing a brake shoe or anything like that, that's
9 pretty easy, this is a complex operation, it has to be safe and
10 all that's taken into consideration, as well, when you're trying
11 to find a place to put this car off. I also appreciate very much
12 the way you're able to recall times and everything else and even
13 the grades, so you're doing a great job.

14 A. Thank you.

15 Q. So keep going. And I'm glad you gave me the milepost for
16 these different places, so we're talking between 2 and 7 miles and
17 if we could've gotten it off at Ironto, we would've only moved it
18 2 miles, okay. What I want to be clear on is that there wasn't a
19 discussion about the speed which you would go at.

20 A. That's correct.

21 Q. Okay. And I know, and I haven't got it yet, there was an
22 OB-21 out. Can you tell me a little bit about what's in OB-21?

23 A. Yeah. So OB-21 deals with the hot box -- well, all detectors
24 and if you get a critical alarm, alert, there's a certain
25 restriction that that train cannot move. If you do have to set

1 out a car or if you have to, you know, pull that car by location-
2 wise to like a bridge to get to you, that car is not to go past 10
3 miles per hour and there's certain restrictions on it that
4 mechanical, if it is a critical alarm, that mechanical actually,
5 they've got to get there, they've got to inspect the car before it
6 can be moved.

7 Q. Okay. And that goes to some comments I just made about how
8 difficult it is to do something like this out on a line, on a main
9 line. And now they have been dictated, if you want to use that
10 word, or presented to the world of Norfolk Southern. If you're
11 going to move it, you're going to move at 10 mile an hour. Or
12 less.

13 A. And if it is okay for movement, if it -- if you have to go
14 further than 3 miles, it's to be inspected every 3 miles.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. Even while going at 10 miles per hour.

17 Q. So we got movement at 10 miles per hour and you're still
18 going to look at it to see if it's slowly disintegrating every 3
19 miles. Or you might catch it before that, at 10 miles an hour you
20 might be able to. So it's not really walking speed, but it's much
21 closer, okay. And no one has to make that decision because now
22 it's a bulletin and it's actually part of the rules. So does that
23 end up making a revision of the old Rule 147 or does it get
24 totally rewritten and superseded or --

25 A. From what is my understanding, it supersedes --

1 Q. Okay.

2 A. -- the previous one.

3 Q. And OB-21 goes what, system-wide?

4 A. System-wide, yes.

5 Q. To every folk just like you?

6 A. That's correct.

7 Q. Mr. Sweeney?

8 A. That's correct.

9 Q. Okay, great. All right. And that was effective right away?

10 A. Yeah, within 24 hours it was effective.

11 Q. Okay. I need to get my hands on that bulletin.

12 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: I have it on my computer and so

13 (indiscernible) so I'll send it to you.

14 MR. SOUTHWORTH: Okay, I knew about it, I just didn't have it
15 yet. And everybody stole some of my questions. Shouldn't allow
16 that.

17 (Laughter.)

18 BY MR. SOUTHWORTH:

19 Q. Okay. You made some comments that almost sounded like, and
20 this is my own characterization, hindsight is a 20/20 kind of a
21 thing. If you go back and look at all that happened, I wonder if
22 there would've been a conversation about hey, we got to move this
23 thing slow.

24 A. Right.

25 Q. Without that, was there an assumption in your mind that they

1 could do this thing at timetable speed? Although it probably
2 would not get to that speed with the distance they're going, but
3 what do you think? What do you say?

4 A. I still -- looking back, that's the one thing in my decision-
5 making process I think I left out. I should've asked that
6 question.

7 MR. SOUTHWORTH: Well, for what's it worth, I think that's
8 admirable, I really do, and I commend you. And obviously, Norfolk
9 Southern identifies that, as well, like coming out with an OB-21.
10 I don't have any further questions.

11 MR. BACHMEIER: Eric, I -- well, no questions.

12 MR. LYNCH: I don't have any right now.

13 MR. GOODEN: David Gooden, Norfolk Southern, no questions.

14 BY MR. BUNTEN:

15 Q. Scott Buntten, BLET. Mr. Poletti, did the crew at any time
16 ask you or anybody else, according to your knowledge, if the car
17 had restricted speed on it?

18 A. Not to my knowledge, no, they did not ask me, no. I haven't
19 listened to all the voice tapes with the conversation from the
20 dispatcher, but not to my knowledge.

21 MR. BUNTEN: Okay. I have no further questions.

22 MR. SABOL: Ron Sabol, no questions.

23 BY MR. RANSCHAERT:

24 Q. John Ranschaert, FRA, Operating Practices. Can I take you
25 back to your previous 5 to 10 bearing experiences before this one?

1 Out of those that you experienced, was mechanical forces at all of
2 them, some of them, none of them?

3 A. Not all of them, which some of those that are included in
4 there are ones where, you know, nothing was found. The bearing
5 checked out okay.

6 Q. So was a mechanical employee at that one where they checked
7 out okay?

8 A. No, not all the time. There's been, I'd say, two or three
9 that end up checking out okay and all 20 axles ahead and behind
10 were checked and nothing was found.

11 Q. And were mechanical forces looked at?

12 A. Not on every occasion and, you know, probably one or two of
13 those was years ago, so I can't give a definitive answer on it.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. Now, I can say, for every like condemnable bearing message
16 that we received, I've had mechanical forces.

17 Q. Did the mechanical forces show up because of it was an
18 obvious condemnable bearing?

19 A. More of just the message itself.

20 Q. The message --

21 A. Yeah.

22 Q. -- is what prompted the mechanical forces.

23 A. Yeah.

24 Q. Okay. Do you think it was odd that mechanical forces didn't
25 look at this particular car?

1 A. I think it was more location wise, it would've been probably,
2 I'd say, at least two, two and a half hours to get -- to get
3 mechanical forces to the location at that point.

4 Q. So time was a thought?

5 A. We didn't specifically mention time, but I think our decision
6 to set the car out was we were going to proceed with going ahead
7 and setting it out and at that point the visual aspect of it, in
8 my mind, I thought it was safe to move down the road a little bit
9 to set out.

10 Q. Where were you when you received this call?

11 A. I was in Bluefield.

12 Q. You were in Bluefield.

13 A. Yeah, so I was about --

14 Q. How far away is that from this location?

15 A. About an hour and 30, 35 minutes.

16 Q. Thirty-five minute drive. Okay. You mentioned earlier that
17 you headed out, did you start to come to that direction or --

18 A. Yeah, yeah. I approached it while -- and when I received the
19 phone call that they were in emergency, we had, actually,
20 Cameron Barrow, track supervisor, and Justin Hodges ride around
21 there, so I re-averted back to Radford, which was about 20 minutes
22 away, to pick up the crew, my local crew, to go swap out with them
23 on the head end where they were approaching their hours of
24 service.

25 Q. Okay. So you were an hour and 35 minutes away at Bluefield

1 and you were heading to the location or were you heading to
2 Radford?

3 A. Originally, I was headed towards Riverside.

4 Q. Okay.

5 A. Yeah, where we were going to set it out on the stub track.

6 Q. And you were there to assist or provide help?

7 A. Well, I had a conversation with the dispatcher that if they
8 ended up having to -- once they set off in the siding, we may have
9 had them tie that train down in the siding due to them approaching
10 hours of service and I was going to bring the -- they had two
11 trains behind them, the 826 and the 50Z and I had a conversation
12 with the dispatcher that we would bring one of those crews back
13 out to drag that train into Roanoke.

14 Q. So you talked about the crew's working time, how many hours
15 that they had left to work. When was that a first thought in your
16 mind, was that when the detector went off the first time and he
17 stopped to walk the train or was that later?

18 A. It was after we -- it was after we had decided to set the car
19 off at Riverside because that's when I had communicated with the
20 dispatcher if they didn't have time, that we'll plan on tying it
21 down in the siding and then the train behind them, once they get
22 in Roanoke, will come back out and drag this train in.

23 Q. So your plan -- so the train was still stopped during --
24 doing the inspection on the car and you were making a decision, or
25 it departed to go to Fagg or to another location.

1 A. It would've been right when they were getting ready to
2 depart, originally, to get back on the move.

3 Q. Okay. So that probably had some indication or some standard
4 thought process about putting a car -- setting the car out, then?

5 A. I don't think it affected my decision-making process. I
6 mean, that's something, you know, just on a daily basis I've got
7 to manage with trains, you know, getting short on time and, you
8 know, coming up with a plan B, where they can tie down and who we
9 can put on them. So I don't think it affected my decision-making
10 process in this.

11 Q. Okay. And you were about 20 minutes away from Riverside when
12 they derailed?

13 A. It was 7:53 when I got the notification. I was probably only
14 about 15 minutes away.

15 Q. Fifteen minutes away?

16 A. Yeah. And I re-averted back to Radford, which was 20 minutes
17 back, back to grab that crew.

18 Q. And then after you dropped the Radford crew off to re-crew
19 them, you took the --

20 A. No, the original crew, we had a taxi waiting on them. After
21 we discussed with them and interviewed them and got their
22 statements, we had a taxi waiting for them to take them back to
23 Roanoke and put off and get rest.

24 Q. And then you stayed at the derailment site?

25 A. Yeah, yeah, I was at the derailment site for the next,

1 well --

2 MR. RANSCHAERT: No further questions, thank you.

3 BY MR. WILSON:

4 Q. Dennis Wilson, TCU. Mr. Poletti, the crew in question, they
5 got on the train in Bluefield, is that correct?

6 A. That is correct.

7 Q. The crew that got off the train in Bluefield, are they under
8 your command, as well?

9 A. No, no, they are not.

10 Q. So you don't know that crew's names or where they got on the
11 train to begin?

12 A. I don't, no, I'm not for sure if it was a Williamson crew or
13 a Bluefield crew.

14 MR. WILSON: Thank you, I've got no further questions.

15 MS. BARNETT: Dianne Barnett, NS, no further questions.

16 MR. SHROPSHIRE: Zach Shropshire, NS, no further questions.

17 BY DR. GARCIA:

18 Q. Anne Garcia, NTSB, I have a couple more questions for you.
19 So you talked about the Ironto siding?

20 A. That's correct, yes.

21 Q. Okay, that the maintenance of way had the -- had locked up
22 and the train went past there.

23 A. Yes.

24 Q. And it was after it passed it that it derailed.

25 A. That is correct, yes.

1 Q. When the train was going past it, would the crew have been
2 able to see that there were no cars in that siding?

3 A. They would've been, yes.

4 Q. As they approached it could they have seen that?

5 A. Yeah, they could've saw that.

6 Q. Okay. But they didn't -- were they aware that that was a
7 possibility to use that?

8 A. Their clearances would've showed that it was actually out of
9 service on their clearances.

10 Q. Would it show why it was out of service?

11 A. It says, yeah, maintenance-of-way equipment by Clay Kline.

12 Q. Okay. And they could've seen that there wasn't equipment
13 there?

14 A. Yeah, yeah, they could have. I don't know if they would've
15 been able to get it down and stop before then. And I'd have to
16 look at the grade, I know right there is flat, but once they pull
17 down a little further, I don't know if they would've been able to
18 set off, potentially, there or not.

19 Q. Okay. About what speed were they going at that time?

20 A. I do not know, not at that time.

21 Q. Okay. Is that something that the train crew is normally
22 instructed to do or a normal process to do, that when they're
23 looking for a siding to set a car off, that they also look to see
24 what's the next possibility?

25 A. I wouldn't say that they're required for that. It's more of,

1 I guess, from an operational standpoint where we had came up with
2 the plan that they would probably -- you know, this is where we're
3 setting that car off at.

4 Q. Okay. And who is it that's responsible for clearing that so
5 that it's shown as a -- a use for space?

6 A. It should've been cleared by whoever put the bulletin out,
7 which I'm assuming it would be Clay Kline, where his name was on
8 it.

9 Q. And he's who?

10 A. I'm not for sure what role he is, he's with the track
11 department, but I'm not for sure what his title is.

12 Q. Okay. But when he put that out, that's what dispatch would
13 be looking at to see if that siding was available?

14 A. That's correct, yes.

15 Q. Okay. Is that done electronically, then?

16 A. Yeah, yeah, every time a crew -- any train that's scheduled
17 to run on that Whitethorne line, Bluefield to Roanoke, it will
18 actually print their clearances out and it will say what's in
19 service and what's out of service, and to remove it, the
20 dispatcher is the one who can actually remove it, but it's got to
21 be removed by the person that actually put it out.

22 Q. Okay. Thank you. So we talked about the train crew had
23 reduced speed and that the train crew had not asked if they should
24 proceed at reduced speed, but does the train crew have the
25 authority to run the reduced speed even if they're not instructed

1 to do so?

2 A. I mean, they've got certain -- with the way it works now,
3 they've got to reach a certain percentage if they're running like
4 Trip Optimizer, which I don't believe they were on that, so I
5 mean, they can do what they need to do to control the train
6 safely. But, you know, with him not being -- with Mr. Gammons, no
7 speed restriction was given, so I think he -- he did the right
8 thing with running it how he did.

9 Q. Okay. And do you know -- you mentioned that you had a number
10 of hot wheel bearing incidents over the last several years. Have
11 those trains, do you recall, been told to travel at reduced speed?

12 A. Some of them, yeah, the ones with like the condemnable
13 bearings, they all had some type of speed restriction with it.

14 Q. Okay. And you mentioned that term a couple times,
15 condemnable bearings.

16 A. Yes.

17 Q. What does that mean?

18 A. Yeah. A condemnable -- every condemnable bearing that I've
19 seen, it's -- you can tell that, you know, it's a failed bearing,
20 that the car needs to sit out, from my experience with it. You
21 know, I still only had a handful of them. Compared to just a hot
22 bearing, you know, in this aspect of it, the bearing was hot, it
23 looked visually fine, but obviously it wasn't fine internally.

24 Q. Okay. Thank you. Just a couple more questions. So would
25 you say that Norfolk Southern leadership prioritizes operations

1 over safety?

2 A. No, definitely not. No, safety, in my opinion, from the top
3 down is the number one focus all around the company.

4 Q. And you've been there 5-plus years?

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. Would you say that that's been consistent over the 5-plus
7 years or has there been a shift?

8 A. There was a shift, you know, we had some leadership come in
9 that teetered a different way, but I think it's been very, very
10 consistent here over the past couple years, that safety is the
11 number one factor out here and I think it's going to continue to
12 -- that's going to always be the number one factor with Norfolk
13 Southern.

14 Q. Okay. And when you work -- what did you say, you supervise
15 roughly 200 people?

16 A. Yes, ma'am.

17 Q. So when you work with them, what are the methods that you use
18 to communicate that safety is first?

19 A. Really, with my people, it's about building relationships and
20 -- which here, recently we've got a lot of -- I'd say about 50 of
21 those 200 are employees with less than 6 months experience out
22 here and that's a challenge at itself. With the lack of
23 experience out here, it's something new to them and that's who you
24 really have to put your time with to ensure they know what they're
25 doing out here and give them the tools and resources and support

1 if they have any questions. So that's my main thing, is build a
2 working relationship with them and know that they have some type
3 of contact that they can reach out to if they have questions and
4 provide them with resources, which we actually have a safety
5 contact that we do every month and it's a new topic each month in
6 terms of safety focus out in the field and we contact every single
7 employee that we have and we go over it with them and I think
8 that's been very impactful, especially to the new employees. It
9 really emphasizes the focus on safety out here and I think that's
10 important with them.

11 But not just them, I mean, because it's, you know, 20-,
12 30-year employees as well, you know, going over it with them as
13 well, it just reemphasizes it because they've gone through a lot
14 out here over the years in terms of leadership, so I think it's
15 important to bring awareness to it that -- where we stand with
16 safety and for the most part, everybody is on the same page, from
17 what I can tell, at least on my side.

18 Q. Okay. So that's 50 out of 200, that's about 25 percent of
19 your employees are less than 6 months?

20 A. Yeah, that's a good portion of them.

21 Q. Okay. And what crafts are they?

22 A. All conductors, yeah.

23 Q. They're all conductors?

24 A. Yeah.

25 Q. Okay. And what is the reason for that, is that because

1 people left or because they were dismissed or because you got new
2 slots?

3 A. A combination of all of it. We've had a lot of retirees on
4 the Radford division, but business as well, just the volumes
5 increase, increase in volumes out here calls for the need of more
6 employees, especially in T&E.

7 Q. So how many additional employees have you been granted, how
8 many positions have you been granted?

9 A. I don't know a specific number. We still have for, I know,
10 the Roanoke territory about 20 in the pipeline, conductor trainee-
11 wise, but I'm for sure on a specific number.

12 Q. Okay. So my question I was trying to get at is the number of
13 positions that you have, has that increased?

14 A. Oh, absolutely, yes.

15 Q. About how many?

16 A. Well, on my side alone, my whole extra list now is all new
17 people, so I would say, you know, as of right now, around 50.

18 Q. Those are additional positions that you didn't have, say, a
19 year ago?

20 A. Correct.

21 Q. Fifty?

22 A. Yes.

23 Q. And what about the other side?

24 A. I couldn't speak to it. I know we've had a lot of hires all
25 around the east, north, south, at Roanoke, so --

1 DR. GARCIA: Thank you. That's all I have right now.

2 BY MR. LEWIS:

3 Q. Robert Lewis with NS. Mr. Poletti, are there any temporary
4 transfers or go-team members --

5 (Background noise interference.)

6 MR. POLETTI: Yes, we've got, right now, six go-team
7 engineers and 10 go-team conductors at the moment.

8 BY MR. LEWIS:

9 Q. And can you explain what a go-team member is?

10 A. Yeah, so a go-team member, they're basically sent to a
11 location that is in need of additional workers, T&E workers. The
12 volume of trains that we're running right now on our district, we
13 don't have enough engineers and conductors to put on those trains
14 without halting them, so we've got six go-team engineers and 10
15 go-team conductors right now on our side working, working as T&E
16 folks.

17 Q. So that's to augment your manpower ability to move trains?

18 A. It has, yes.

19 Q. You touched on safety contacts. Do you remember what the
20 last couple of safety contacts are? Could you explain what those
21 -- what safety contacts are?

22 A. Yeah, absolutely. So the monthly focus in terms of the
23 safety contacts where we're reaching out, we had our closed
24 clearance safety contact, which is especially for new employees
25 out here, that's one that I really focus on in terms of them

1 understanding what is closed clearance, what is not. And that one
2 also included equipment in the clear. I think them going through
3 the process of the training program and it focuses on these rules,
4 but us actually having that one-on-one contact with them really,
5 really kind of breaks it down. And when I do it, specifically, we
6 go over the rule actually on the printout, there's a flyer that's
7 actually with the safety contact that we pass out that's got
8 specific rules to go over with them and I think it really helps
9 them a lot doing that.

10 Q. Has there been any safety contacts here towards detectors or
11 Tempilstiks?

12 A. Yes, yes. So over the past, let's say, 2 to 3 months, we
13 have switched from -- specifically to a 169-degree Tempilstik.
14 We've got a job aide that we meet with each conductor and
15 engineers, all engineers are -- have been getting them as well,
16 that the job aide specifically shows what you do if you have a hot
17 bearing, if you have a hot wheel, and how to use the Tempilstik.

18 And we're collecting all the old Tempilstiks and disposing of
19 them. I've seen anywhere from 300-degree to 200 to 250
20 Tempilstiks that I've collected and replaced with the 169-degree
21 one. And I think that, moving forward, for situations like this
22 with bearings is going to make a big, big difference because if it
23 melts the stick, we're setting it out, is where we're at on that.
24 But reaching out to each employee and making sure they have that
25 new one and how to actually do the test is important, especially

1 with these new conductors that we have out here.

2 MR. LEWIS: Okay, thank you. That's all I have.

3 BY DR. BEATON:

4 Q. Bob Beaton, NTSB. Eric, I really appreciate your stamina
5 putting up with all of these questions, so I'll keep mine as brief
6 as possible. I heard you say that there was no speed restriction
7 given to the crew. Was the crew told anything about speed?

8 A. The dispatcher, yeah.

9 Q. And what was it that they were told?

10 A. At track speed.

11 Q. So okay, they weren't given any speed restriction, but they
12 were told to run at track speed by the dispatcher.

13 A. Yeah, the signal indication, we had track speed.

14 Q. Okay, they got that message through signals, a green signal?

15 A. Correct.

16 Q. Okay. Did they hear that from a dispatcher or the chief
17 dispatcher?

18 A. I would have to check the tapes, I'm not for sure.

19 Q. Okay, okay. Thanks for that clarification. Does the
20 township of East Palestine, Ohio ring a bell with you?

21 A. Absolutely, yes, sir.

22 Q. And I'm referring to the derailment, of course. Since the
23 East Palestine derailment, how has your job been affected, not
24 just in a practical self-constructive way, but from an official
25 Norfolk Southern policy perspective?

1 A. I would say a lot has changed. I don't want to say the focus
2 on safety has increased, but it's -- we're doing more to pass it
3 down the line is how I would say it, in terms from the very top
4 leadership all the way down the line and it's --

5 Q. Now, when you say pass it down, you're talking about safe
6 operating practices?

7 A. Right. Well, just the whole focus on safety in general
8 and --

9 Q. Okay, thank you.

10 A. And we see it on a daily, daily basis from, you know,
11 executive leadership, they have been in the front lines, in the
12 ballast, riding trains with T&E folks and that's made a big, big
13 difference from what I can tell and it's made me, I guess, look at
14 my leadership. We've had specifically a new training that they've
15 sent us to Atlanta and Pittsburgh and a couple different locations
16 that is really focusing on your own leadership style and what you
17 can do to be a better leader and that's really focused on the
18 safety aspect of it, too, which is kind of bringing all of it in
19 together to really highlight that safety is number one and it's
20 always going to be number one.

21 DR. BEATON: Good, I appreciate that. That's very good to
22 hear. And as Mr. Southworth said earlier, I, too, applaud your
23 honesty and openness and willingness to kind of look objectively
24 at what worked and what could've been done better from a
25 continuous quality improvement perspective. I believe that's all

1 the questions I have. And again, thank you very much.

2 BY MR. SOUTHWORTH:

3 Q. A couple real short things. So you got the crew statements?

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. Okay. And were they written?

6 A. Yeah, written statements.

7 Q. And they signed them?

8 A. Yes.

9 Q. And what did you do with them?

10 A. I've got a copy of them on my e-mail, but the claims, Chris
11 Gilbert, has the actual physical copies.

12 Q. The originals, okay. You took the stick?

13 A. Yeah, we've got the temp stick.

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. I gave it to Mr. Lewis.

16 Q. Okay. Let's see. The job aide, is that a different
17 publication, a different pamphlet or whatever it all includes, the
18 OB-21?

19 A. No, sir, the job aide is different, the job aide came out 2
20 or 3 months ago when we officially switched to the new Tempilstiks
21 and it is a printout that actually shows -- shows you how to
22 physically use a Tempilstik.

23 Q. Okay. So that's since East Palestine?

24 A. That is correct, yes.

25 Q. Need that, too. And then earlier there were some comments

1 that you made to questions he made about 215 and Appendix D.

2 A. Yeah.

3 Q. Let me hit you with one that might be more familiar to you.

4 Are you familiar with the C-100?

5 A. Absolutely.

6 Q. Okay. The C-100, really, is Appendix D.

7 A. Oh, okay.

8 Q. That's basically -- there's like 12 items there that a crew
9 can do when they go into this type of --

10 A. Correct.

11 Q. I just thought I'd fix it up for you, so you're still smarter
12 than you actually --

13 A. There we go.

14 Q. So you don't have to go --

15 (Laughter.)

16 MR. SOUTHWORTH: You don't need to into Google tonight and
17 Google 215 up and read 150 pages, okay? It's C-100.

18 UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you, Jim.

19 MR. SOUTHWORTH: So I don't have anything more.

20 BY MR. BACHMEIER:

21 Q. Okay. One thing, I got a couple questions here. What was --
22 Mike Bachmeier. What was the -- is this PTC territory?

23 A. No, no. So the Whitethorne line is not PTC territory,
24 they've got to log into PTC, but they've got to disengage it.

25 Q. Okay. Do your conductors, do the NS conductors have

1 Hammerheads or handheld computers or anything like that?

2 A. They've got iPhones, yeah, which are called MTR devices,
3 where they do -- they arrive and depart their train and do their
4 car moves.

5 Q. Okay. So like if this does happen, these guys could take
6 their phone back there, take a picture and send it to mechanical?

7 A. I don't believe the cameras have been activated on them.
8 They've got a lot of restrictions on them, in terms of what they
9 can do.

10 MR. BACHMEIER: Yeah, yeah. Okay. I don't normally let
11 anyone else ask any more questions, but Dennis had one.

12 BY MR. WILSON:

13 Q. Yes, sir, Dennis Wilson with TCU. Mr. Poletti -- and this
14 was a follow-up on some of the questions you were asked. In 2019
15 and 2020 there were some mass layoffs. Was your crew members
16 affected by the mass layoffs?

17 A. Yes. At that time I was -- I was working Williamson and,
18 yeah, we had some layoffs of my crew members.

19 Q. So for this area, you don't know what the number was and what
20 it went to?

21 A. I don't for this, the Radford side, no.

22 MR. WILSON: Okay.

23 BY MR. BACHMEIER:

24 Q. Okay, Eric, do you have anything you would like to add?

25 A. No, nothing I'd like to add.

1 Q. With everything -- is there anything that you think that
2 could've possibly prevented this accident?

3 A. I still -- the one thing with my decision making that I
4 would've changed is I would've asked that question, do we need to
5 put a speed restriction. I don't know if that would've prevented
6 it, but that's the one thing I would've changed with my decision-
7 making process.

8 Q. Appreciate that, yeah. If we have any follow-up questions,
9 would you mind if we reached out to you?

10 A. That's fine.

11 MR. BACHMEIER: Okay. On behalf of the NTSB and our team
12 here, thank you for your time and cooperation. And this concludes
13 our interview.

14 (Whereupon, at 4:26 p.m., the interview 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 DERAILMENT
 IN ELLISTON, VIRGINIA
 ON JULY 6, 2023
 Interview of Eric Poletti

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD23FR013

PLACE: Roanoke, Virginia

DATE: July 9, 2023

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



David A. Martini
Transcriber