



# NTSB RECORD OF CONVERSATION

**Investigator name: Jim Southworth; Investigator in Charge**  
**Investigator name: Ryan Frigo; Investigator, Operations & System Safety**  
**Investigator name: Paul Suffern; Meteorologist Investigator**  
**Mode: Railroad**

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**Date: August 29, 2019, 1300 CDT**  
**Persons Contacted: Erin Batt & Randy Eardensohn, Union Pacific Railroad**  
**NTSB Accident Number: RRD19FR007**

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**Narrative:** On Thursday August 29<sup>th</sup> at approximately 1300 CDT NTSB Investigators Frigo, Southworth, and Suffern met with Union Pacific Railroad (UP) Chief Safety Officer (CSO) Erin Batt and Sr. Operating Practices Director Randy Eardensohn at UP Headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska.

The CSO explained that since the accident, UP has made changes to operating rule 6.21 related to flash flooding. This change to rule 6.21, and any rule change information, is sent out to all crews via the UP-portal network. This computer portal network is used for crew sign up and paperwork downloads before and after work shifts. The network then creates a record of which employees have received and acknowledged seeing the updated document. The change to rule 6.21 was completed in May 2019. The CSO explained to investigators that UP receives approximately 3000 weather warnings a year, and that each warning is taken as a potential serious incident. The CSO further highlighted that the vagueness of rule 6.21 (prior to the change) led to crews not having a clear understanding of how to proceed once a warning was received. This was a determining factor for the rule change.

Additionally, UP is developing an in-house flash flood washout model which takes into account historical data and current precipitation. Investigator Suffern requested more information on the model and a field demonstration of the product and/or software.



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The CSO discussed the method of obtaining weather information through the UP Harriman Dispatching Center and that the flash flooding criteria come directly from Accuweather and UP has no input on changing those flash flooding and/or weather threshold criteria. Weather warnings that are received from Accuweather are seen at the dispatching center and sent to crew via radio and then logged and tracked within UP's dispatching software. Flash flood warnings are seen quite routinely on the order of 3,000 times per year so a bit of a "cry-wolf" syndrome since flash flood warnings are received so often.

There was additional discussion regarding pushing out common weather picture graphics to all crews. It is seen and discussed at management level at 0730 CDT each day, but not something required or seen by train crews daily. Most of the crew weather is whatever weather they receive or understand before shift, then any warnings received from dispatch while working.

NTSB Investigators were shown the weather alert display screens in the Harriman Dispatching Center and Investigator Suffern requested the Accuweather contract from UP.

NTSB Investigators then received a briefing on the changes that are being made to UP's management of safety since under the new leadership of the CSO (April 2019). UP is developing its safety program through the four pillars of a Safety Management System (SMS). There is a policy statement on safety that comes from the highest level of the organization and there are examples of existing and emerging risk mitigation procedures and programs. There is also a push to further develop risk analysis metrics and evaluation tools additionally safety promotion and communication was discussed.

In recent months UP has made a significant change to its efficiency check program. This program which is used by management to ensure the compliance by employees with UP rules has shifted from a wide scope of "all" rule compliance to a targeted approach on the "most



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significant” 31 rules which when violated have the greatest potential to result in a significant or fatal injury. These targeted rules along with the other rules are observed by managers and violations now result in a discussion and coaching session whereas previous could be met with immediate termination. It was explained to investigators that this presents a significant shift in how management will interact with employees. Additionally, all managers received training on how to implement the new program and how to better interact with employees. The CSO and Mr. Eardensohn explained that the labor unions are extremely pleased with this new system. The CSO further highlighted the importance of understanding “why” a rule was broken vs. punishment for violating the rule, it was acknowledged that some rules can create the necessity to break other rules and that neither situation is in the best interest of safety. This was highlighted as the cornerstone of the new approach to safety management and the CSO described UP’s SMS as in the initial stages of development and maturity.

Another initiative that was discussed is UP’s push to evaluate decisions that have been made over the past several years and the impact that those decisions have had on the safety of train operations. This was explained as an ongoing initiative. Staffing levels of the safety office were discussed and that the safety office is expected to grow in the coming year.

Investigators and the CSO both displayed interest in a continued discussion on UP’s SMS and its development.

**End of Summary**