

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: \*

FATAL UNION PACIFIC TRAIN CRASH \*  
IN SALTON SEA, CALIFORNIA \*  
ON SEPTEMBER 8, 2022, \*

Accident No.: RRD22LR014

\* \* \* \* \*

Interview of: THERON GAMBRELL, Engineer  
Amtrak

MARCOS ESPARZA, Engineer  
Amtrak

Indio, California

APPEARANCES:

RYAN FRIGO, Investigator  
National Transportation Safety Board

ISAAC MCKEITHEN, Operating Practices Track Inspector  
Federal Railroad Administration

KEN ABELL, Safety Task Force Investigator  
Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen

DAVID CARR, Operating Practices Accident Chief  
Federal Railroad Administration

THOMAS DUNLAP, Superintendent of Operations  
Amtrak

KEVIN GARCIA, Senior Manager of Train Operations  
Union Pacific

SCOTT JONES, National Safety Team Investigator  
SMART Union

CRAIG KNISLEY

THAD LAFERRIERE, Investigator/Inspector  
State of California PUC

JIM MAYNARD, Task Force Investigator  
Department of Transportation

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I N T E R V I E W

1  
2 MR. FRIGO: Okay. Good afternoon. My name is Ryan Frigo.  
3 I'm an investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board.  
4 We're here in Indio, California, conducting a discussion with  
5 Amtrak Number 2 engineers, Marcos (ph.) Esparza and Theron  
6 Gambrell.

7 In the room, I've got some individuals here that are  
8 assisting me. So, we'll go around the room first and introduce  
9 ourselves and then we'll go to the phone and introduce who's on  
10 the phone. I'll begin and then pass off to my right. Let's spell  
11 our last name for the benefit of the transcriptionist. Once  
12 again, my name is Ryan Frigo, F-r-i-g-o, NTSB.

13 MR. MCKEITHEN: Isaac McKeithen, M-c-K-e-i-t-h-e-n, FRA  
14 Operating Practices Track Inspector, Los Angeles.

15 MR. CARR: David Carr. Last name, C-a-r-r. Operating  
16 Practices Accident Chief.

17 MR. LAFERRIERE: Thad Laferriere, L-a-f-e-r-r-i-e-r-e. State  
18 of California, PUC, Operating Premises.

19 MR. MAYNARD: Jim Maynard. Maynard, M-a-y-n-a-r-d, DOT  
20 Safety Task Force Investigator.

21 MR. ABELL: Ken Abell, A as in apple, B as in boy, e-l-l.  
22 BLET Safety Task Force Investigator.

23 MR. GARCIA: Kevin Garcia, Union Pacific Railroad. Senior  
24 Manager of Train Operations, G-a-r-c-i-a.

25 MR. JONES: Scott Jones, J-o-n-e-s, SMART Union's National

1 Safety Team Investigator.

2 MR. FRIGO: Hey, Thomas, why don't you go ahead now on the  
3 phone.

4 MR. DUNLAP: Thomas Dunlap. D as in David, u-n-l-a-p.  
5 Superintendent Southwest Division for Amtrak.

6 MR. FRIGO: Craig.

7 MR. KNISLEY: Craig Knisley, K-n-i-s as in Sam, l-e-y,  
8 (indiscernible) Longhaulers (ph.), Los Angeles.

9 MR. FRIGO: Mr. Gambrell.

10 MR. GAMBRELL: Theron Gambrell, Locomotive Engineer, Amtrak  
11 Train Number 2, out of Los Angeles, L-O-S.

12 MR. FRIGO: Mr. Esparza.

13 MR. ESPARZA: Marco (ph.) Esparza, E-s-p-a-r-z-a, Locomotive  
14 Engineer out of Los Angeles.

15 MR. FRIGO: Okay, thanks, guys. And are you okay if we go on  
16 a first name basis?

17 MR. GAMBRELL: Sure.

18 MR. FRIGO: Okay, great.

19 MR. ESPARZA: Sure.

20 MR. FRIGO: Yeah. Thank you. I forgot. I forgot to read it  
21 into the record, but this is NTSB Accident Number RRD22LR014, UP  
22 collision with standing cars on September 8th.

23 INTERVIEW OF THERON GAMBRELL

24 BY MR. FRIGO:

25 Q. Gentlemen, I'm just wondering if maybe we start with whoever

1 was actually operating at the time and walk us through the events  
2 of that evening, kind of leading up to when you found out that  
3 something was going on.

4 A. Okay. This is Engineer Gambrell. I was operating the -- I  
5 was the engineer of record on our -- on that train that night. I  
6 was operating the train when it happened. I took over the --  
7 legally (ph.) swapped out just, just around Beaumont (ph.), when I  
8 (indiscernible) following other trains. I noticed based on the  
9 PTC, not so much radio traffic, but I heard  
10 -- or I saw it on the PTC, right about, right about Mecca, I  
11 started seeing color up ahead and I kind of laid back a little  
12 bit, which I normally do when I, when I start seeing some color  
13 and I kind of figure out -- I saw the yellow fence on the PTC.

14 My standard operating -- the way I work it, is I usually lay  
15 back when I think I'm going to start coming up on a freight train  
16 or something. I -- usually were running 79 all the way until you  
17 get to the 73rd (ph.) at Mortmar. But I laid back a little bit,  
18 went into dynos (ph.). I noticed that I was catching up to him.  
19 I kind of slowed down, used my dynos and a little bit of territory  
20 to slow the train as I approached Mortmar. I was catching up to  
21 him a little bit even faster and I started to hear a little bit of  
22 chatter on the radio. But a lot of times when you're -- it's kind  
23 of spotty. You can barely hear them. They don't talk real loud.  
24 A lot of times the on the freight, when they call, you rarely hear  
25 them call signals, much less, you just kind of figure out what's

1 going on with the PTC.

2       So anyway, I'm approaching Mortmar. I see the flashing  
3 yellow, and I advance approach (ph.). I had a clear at the west  
4 end of Mortmar. I see the advance approach, I'm already down to  
5 like probably 60, maybe under 60 at the time as I'm rounding the  
6 curve at Mortmar. I go by the advance approach at East Mortmar.  
7 I see that I'm catching up with him. I can already see the  
8 restricting -- actually there was a red -- there was a stop signal  
9 at Salton.

10       So, I see the -- I see -- I'm going way down on my speed with  
11 my dynos. I get -- then I get -- just take the approach signal on  
12 the approach to Salton, and that's when I got the diverging clear.  
13 And at that point, I was well under 50, which is the turnout to be  
14 Salton. So, I was taking the Number 1 main. So, they crossed me  
15 over. I figured, okay, they -- he's finally going to let me run  
16 around this guy. About that time, I heard a little bit of chatter  
17 on the radio about come in -- I was on a clear, by the way, at  
18 that point, and then I got my train up to 79, went over to  
19 (indiscernible).

20       About that time, I started hearing some chatter about, come  
21 in Helper Brown (ph.), Helper Brown, come in Helper Brown, with no  
22 answer, no answer. I get an approach clear of 60, I'm doing all  
23 of 79 and then I hear come in -- I hear a little bit of urgency in  
24 what I'm assuming was the engineer's voice because the conductor,  
25 after talking to him, it -- the voices were a little bit

1 different. There was a little bit of urgency going on. I could  
2 see -- I mean, I can hear, tell that there was some type of  
3 urgency.

4 So, as I got the approach clear, I could see the approach  
5 clear 50, but I hadn't taken a signal yet because that's about  
6 where their headlight was. But I was assuming that I was  
7 following these guys. I had no idea that there was engines on  
8 both ends and that there was two crews going out. Because I never  
9 -- I just thought when he called Helper Brown, Helper Brown, I  
10 thought maybe the conductor was on the -- had got off the train or  
11 something because as I approached them, I had my headlight up  
12 bright, because I'm not -- I usually don't dim my light for a DPU.

13 So, at this point, I really had no idea that there was two  
14 crews on this train. So, as I was approaching the approach clear  
15 50, which would be the west signal, the west end of Bertram, I had  
16 just taken the approach clear 60 and I was doing all 79, and all  
17 of a sudden, I heard from the conductor, emergency, emergency,  
18 emergency.

19 At that point, I started to kind (indiscernible). No  
20 milepost or anything. I didn't -- I still had no idea who was  
21 calling out emergency. And he said, Amtrak, Amtrak, is that you  
22 approaching Bertram, something to that extent, and I said, yes, is  
23 that you at Bertram. And he's like, yeah. So, I immediately --  
24 he's like, can you pass my train at restricted speed? I said,  
25 absolutely. And I repeated it; okay, I understand you want me to



1 pass your train at restricted speed. Are you in emergency? And I  
2 just went almost a handle off to try to -- and I didn't want to  
3 plug the train, but I just went all the way to handle off. And I  
4 was like -- I was getting the train down to a controlled speed. I  
5 was going to stop, but as I started, almost got to his head end,  
6 the conductor, I saw him climbing out of the motor, and he was  
7 already on the ground with his radio. And I could see him, and he  
8 was like, I need you to pick me up. I'm like, okay. So, I slowed  
9 down to about walking speed and I kind of -- and I reached out the  
10 window. I said, get on the diner (ph.), get on the diner. And  
11 he's like, okay. So, I pulled up, stopped, the conductor, got on.

12 And at that point, the engineer was like very urgently, like,  
13 you could hear the whatever he's got in his voice. He was like,  
14 tell me what you see on the east end. Tell me what you see on the  
15 east end. And I looked over at Marcos, and I go, why don't you  
16 tell me what you see on the east end, out loud, kind of like not  
17 on the radio, but I was like, why don't you tell me what you see.  
18 You're on the east end. I thought he was on the east end because  
19 he was pulling into the siding (ph.). So, I had no idea, you  
20 know, other than, I thought he was the engineer. And the  
21 conductor got on the diner car. Marcos and I were both still kind  
22 of a little bit confused as to what was going on with the train.  
23 He's like, okay, so we're -- now we're going to proceed at  
24 restricted speed.

25 And I was, I was crawling, like at five, eight miles an hour

1 around the whole thing. Like when we got -- we had already -- I  
2 just took the approach clear 50, and I was -- my train was even --  
3 I don't think it was even -- my whole train wasn't even passed the  
4 signal when I came around the curb and there was -- I just saw the  
5 wreckage and it was just a mess. And I pulled up. I stopped and  
6 then I called out to the dispatcher, indicated, yeah, you need to  
7 get, you know, I don't remember exactly what I said, but I said,  
8 you know, it's a mess out here and there's cars all over the  
9 place. You need to get EMS, or some people out here right away.  
10 And then we secured the engine. I called back on the radio that,  
11 hey, we're going to go in and make sure -- see if we can render  
12 aid to anybody. And we tied down the train. Marcos tied down the  
13 second motor. I tied down the first motor. Put -- took  
14 (indiscernible) out. Full set (ph.), put the brake on, and we  
15 climbed down, and we ran over there to try to see what was going  
16 on.

17 The container that was propped up in the air leaning, you  
18 know, I made a comment to like, let's not get underneath that  
19 thing. And I can't remember who -- I think I went around the  
20 front and like some -- maybe the conductor or something went  
21 around the back, maybe called over the motor or something like  
22 that. I think I might have been with the conductor or -- I can't  
23 even remember. I might have gone by myself, but I climbed up over  
24 on top of the -- one of the (indiscernible) cars that was -- that  
25 he had come to a rest at, the lead locomotive. And I was just --

1 when I looked up and saw the destruction of that locomotive, I was  
2 just beside myself. I just -- my heart was beating. I was like,  
3 holy -- but when I came around the front of that locomotive, I  
4 could smell the repugnant stench of something.

5 And I was just like, you know, it's 3:15, 3:20 in the morning  
6 at this point, and I'm looking with my flashlight, I saw the  
7 engineer's lower torso hanging off the locomotive. And that's  
8 when I was like, ah, shit, you know, like -- ah, it was just like  
9 couldn't believe it. You know? And I'm looking -- I'm calling  
10 out.

11 At that point, some of the guys from the rear had come from  
12 the other side and we're kind of all in the same area near the  
13 lead locomotive. And we're calling out like, hello, hello? Like,  
14 is there anybody else? Because we didn't see the other employee.  
15 A conductor on the equipment had indicated that there was two.  
16 There was a lookout and an engineer. I'm assuming that was the  
17 engineer that was, you know, that was in the locomotive, hanging  
18 on the locomotive. I mean, that was just my assumption. That was  
19 bad. I just never seen anything like that, and I've been doing  
20 this 29 years now.

21 And so, we started looking around the car and out calling  
22 out. Marcos indicated or instructed one of the conductors to go  
23 shut off that second locomotive because it was still running. I  
24 don't know how it was still running because I thought, you know,  
25 them being (indiscernible), the first one was completely dead.

1 The second one was still running. And so, we were up and around  
2 all the equipment. We couldn't find anyone else. Nobody else was  
3 answering.

4 We went back around the other side, and in between on the  
5 north side, where we had stopped, where all -- the first car was  
6 on the north side or whatever, by the main tracks. We were  
7 looking around, looking around, looking around. And finally, we  
8 came upon another -- the other deceased crew member, and he had  
9 his arm was missing completely. His left arm was ripped off,  
10 which we later found about 30 feet over kind of buried in the  
11 ballast (ph.) a little bit. And we indicated that that was -- he  
12 said that was -- I think that was the conductor and the other guy  
13 was the engineer. And we just, we were just looking around and  
14 just trying to try to take assessment of the whole thing, trying  
15 to figure out, like, what the hell happened.

16 At that point, I think -- there was still no one on scene.  
17 And I believe the first people to show up were Border Patrol.  
18 There were a few Border Patrol agents that came. And then after  
19 that, there was -- I think the guys indicated they were from Track  
20 or Signal or something. And a couple of UP guys. And they were  
21 just kind of walking around and taking assessment or something  
22 like that. We didn't really talk to them.

23 I do remember this, that I was standing next to that car just  
24 to the west of the wreckage adjacent to the train, and the  
25 conductor had the dispatcher on the phone on speaker. And he's

1 like -- he said, hey, you know, there's -- that side is clear.  
2 And the conductor said, no, it's not. He said, no, that side is  
3 clear, it's supposed to be clear. There's no cars on that side.  
4 He goes, I'm telling you, there is. You know, he said something  
5 to the effect, like, you know, I'm looking at a freaking train  
6 that's crashed with two dead bodies or something, and I'm telling  
7 you there's cars on the side. He goes -- he's like, no, that side  
8 -- he's like, damn it that side is supposed to be clear. And I'm  
9 like -- and the conductor indicated to me, based on conversation  
10 we had that he heard him call out a diverging approach. I didn't  
11 hear that on the radio. The first thing I heard from those guys  
12 was Helper Brown, come in, Helper Brown.

13       And then the second thing I heard was emergency, emergency,  
14 emergency. But that was already -- I mean, that transpired right  
15 about the time I was almost approaching their -- the rear of their  
16 train. So, you know, I don't know what the signal was. I mean,  
17 like I said, I didn't hear him call it out, but the conductor  
18 indicated that it was a divergent approach. So, my -- and the  
19 dispatcher even indicated that he didn't feel -- or he was like  
20 dumbfounded that there was any cars in that side because he  
21 thought there was no cars, it was clear. I'm like, I don't know  
22 why he would even line a train -- I don't know how long that train  
23 was. Maybe it was, what, 7,000, 8,000 feet? 10,000 feet? Not  
24 even that. And there was no room for that train in there anyway.  
25 You know what I mean?

1           So, we just were talking to the conductor about a few things,  
2 you know, trying to -- we're just trying to make sense of the  
3 whole matter. I just -- and, you know, the fact that -- I feel  
4 lucky that he called out to emergency, emergency, emergency when  
5 he did. Because if he hadn't, we were doing all of 79 and I  
6 wouldn't even have set up for that cross -- I could see the signal  
7 in diverging clear for me on Main 1, but if we had gone past that,  
8 and we would have hit that, that car was fouling (ph.) our track.  
9 All of -- it was on top of our track. I don't know why he didn't  
10 shut the rail, but it -- it did not shut the rail because I had an  
11 approach clear 50 to divergent clear. And there was wreckage all  
12 over our track.

13           With that being said, the fact that he called it a diverging  
14 approach with cars on the side, I don't know how that happened  
15 either. So, I know that that's going to come out in the  
16 investigation. But everything I talked to that conductor about  
17 was indicating that it was a diverging approach. He did indicate  
18 to me that previously he said that he was told -- or I don't know  
19 if he said he was told or he saw cars on that siding, or he  
20 thought there was cars on that siding.

21           And whether it was the dispatcher or the other crew or  
22 someone disagreed with him and said it was clear. He's like, no,  
23 I was told there's cars in that siding. He said that several  
24 times. So, to my, to my recollection in talking to that  
25 conductor, he said that he thought there was cars on that siding.

1 I don't recall how he thought or knew that there was cars in the  
2 sidings, but he did say that several times. I never talked to the  
3 engineer. We never even saw the engineer. He was up on the head  
4 end the whole time, never came down. So that's my rendition of  
5 it.

6 Other than that, I think -- I'd really love to know what that  
7 signal was that they went in on, and why our signal was approach  
8 clear 50 when there was cars all over it. Why it didn't shut the  
9 rail, I don't know.

10 Q. And we're looking into it. I mean, it's -- you know, that's  
11 something we're trying to figure out and --

12 A. Right.

13 Q. -- I appreciate that detailed recollection that you have.

14 INTERVIEW OF MARCOS ESPARZA

15 BY MR. FRIGO:

16 Q. Marcos, do you do you have stuff that you can add to that for  
17 us?

18 A. Not really. I think pretty much everything that Theron said  
19 is exactly as it went down. I mean, for sure -- I mean, I  
20 couldn't agree with him more had that conductor not called out an  
21 emergency -- it wasn't just that that wreckage was fouling our  
22 track, like it was right on it, like he said, it wasn't shunting.  
23 I mean, even Theron had to get back on the phone with the  
24 dispatcher to give out that signal. Because we could clearly see  
25 it. It was diverging clear for us. So how it didn't shunt, I

1 don't know. But I'm just grateful that that conductor called  
2 emergency. If not, we would have just blown right through that  
3 and then who knows what happened to our train as well.

4 But as far as everything else, I mean, it's pretty much  
5 exactly how it all went down. I was with him when the conductor  
6 was saying this, as far as like when he made that call with the  
7 dispatcher, the dispatcher (indiscernible) as though he was --  
8 like you could tell he was shocked because he was saying, no, it's  
9 clear. He's like, on my screen, it shows clear. You know, we  
10 were right. We're like, no, it's not clear. You got two dead  
11 guys here. There's no way. He's like, my screen says it's clear.

12 So, I'm concerned, just like Theron is, as far as like how  
13 you even get a diverging approach on an occupied track. The best  
14 signal those guys should have had was a restricting, you know,  
15 based on those cars being in there. I mean, like I said, we  
16 didn't hear them call diverging approach, but the conductors that  
17 we were talking to (indiscernible) about it, based on the  
18 wreckage, you would -- I mean, I'm not an expert or anything like  
19 you guys, but it looks like they were going at a speed where -- I  
20 mean, just look at the carnage, you know?

21 So, I mean, it's concerning to us because, I mean, that could  
22 have been us if they slide us up into a siding that -- with a  
23 diverging approach and there's obviously like a train or cars in  
24 there. So hopefully, you know, you guys get to the bottom of  
25 that.



1 Q. We're working on it. Let me -- I'm looking around the room.  
2 I think there's a few questions that we have.

3 INTERVIEW OF THERON GAMBRELL

4 BY MR. MCKEITHEN:

5 Q. Theron, this is Isaac McKeithen, FRA. I've got actually a  
6 couple questions. Which conductor were you referencing? The  
7 conductor on the freight, or your conductor?

8 A. The conductor on freight.

9 Q. Okay. And the second question is, are you all a regular on  
10 one and two?

11 A. Right. That's the only train we operate. But we don't  
12 always operate the same trip. We're all extra (ph.) board, so we  
13 might work -- I typically work a Wednesday trip and -- it's also  
14 kind of how the rotation goes. Because the train only operates  
15 Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday. So, with my day off being a  
16 Tuesday -- I'm sorry, a Thursday, I typically fall on the  
17 Wednesday trip and, you know, based on vacations and such. So, it  
18 always varies. But yes, that is the only train that we operate.  
19 Yes.

20 Q. Could you remember if you ever noticed cars being in that  
21 track on any one of your trips for either east or west?

22 A. I notice cars there, I'd say 90 percent of the time I go by  
23 there there's cars on that track. Almost all the time. I rarely  
24 see that track empty.

25 Q. Okay. Thank you.

1 A. Okay.

2 MR. FRIGO: Gentlemen, I want to thank you again for taking  
3 the time out to talk with us today. You know, you've helped,  
4 you've helped add to the story that we're gathering here. And,  
5 you know, I can't thank you enough for talking to us.

6 I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording here in the  
7 room.

8 (Whereupon, the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

IN THE MATTER OF:            FATAL UNION PACIFIC TRAIN CRASH  
                                      IN SALTON SEA, CALIFORNIA  
                                      ON SEPTEMBER 8, 2022  
                                      Interview of Theron Gambrell  
                                      & Marcos Esparza

ACCIDENT NO.:                RRD22LR014

PLACE:                         Indio, California

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.



Melissa Bousquette  
Transcriber