



Issued: August 31, 2026

Railroad Investigation Report: RIR-26-14

BNSF Railway Conductor Fatality

Location	Columbus, Montana
Date	October 19, 2025
Accident type	Conductor Fatality
Train	Mixed-freight train H-ALTPAS1-13A (stationary) Empty grain-train X-INBMCU9-17M (striking)
Track	Main Track
Hazardous materials	None
Fatalities	1
Injuries	0
Property Damage	None

Summary

On October 19, 2025, about 9:32 a.m. local time, a BNSF Railway (BNSF) conductor was fatally injured after being hit by a passing train in Columbus, Montana. The conductor was part of a crew assigned to operate a westbound BNSF freight train (H-ALTPAS1-13A) that was parked on the Columbus siding and secured with hand brakes.¹ The siding runs next to the main track near milepost 40.1 on BNSF's MRL Second Subdivision. While releasing hand brakes and walking east alongside the train, the conductor stepped into (or entered) the space of the main track and was struck by an eastbound BNSF empty grain-train (X-INBMCU9-17M). (See figure 1.) At the time of the accident, visibility conditions were clear, and the weather was 39°F with no precipitation.

¹ (a) All times in this report are local. (b) Visit [ntsb.gov](https://www.ntsb.gov) to find additional information in the [public docket](#) for this NTSB accident investigation (case number [RRD26FR001](#)), including detailed factual reports about the circumstances of the accident.

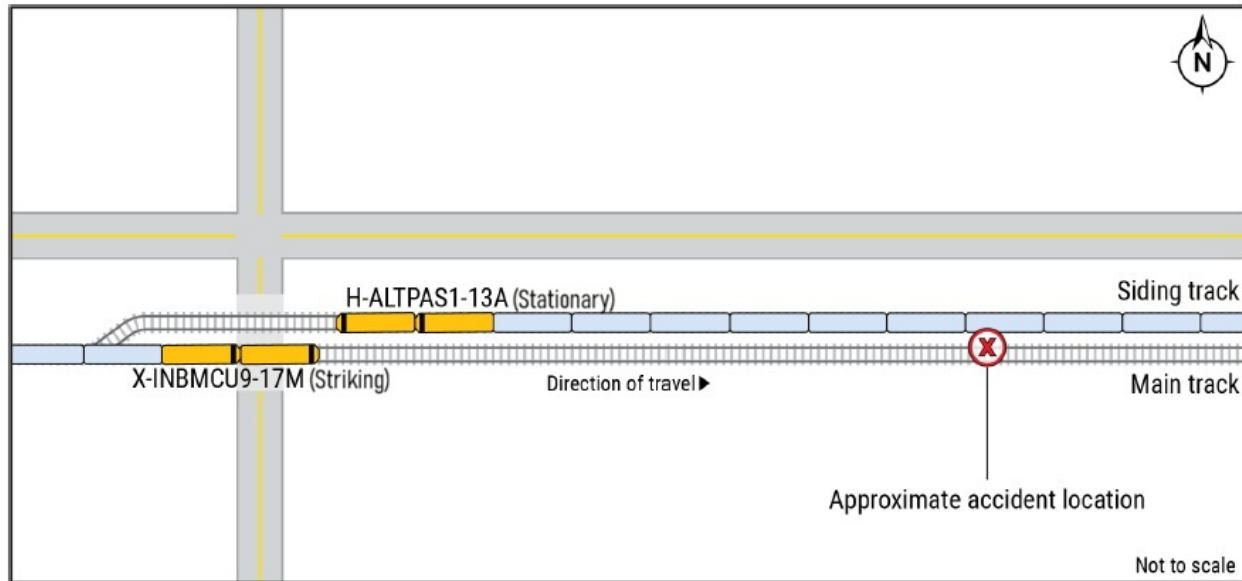


Figure 1. An overhead diagram of the accident scene.

The crew, which consisted of a locomotive engineer and a conductor, went on duty at 7:05 a.m. at Laurel Yard in Laurel, Montana. The crew was transported by van from Laurel to Columbus, Montana, to assume duties on the train for a trip to Helena, Montana. While performing pre-departure duties in the siding at Columbus, the conductor dismounted the locomotive and walked east between the siding and the main track to release hand brakes that had been applied on the first seven railcars of the train. The hand brakes were located on the south side of the stationary railcars, the side next to the main track. The hand brakes were not accessible from the opposite side.

While the conductor was in the process of releasing hand brakes on the siding track, the striking train was operating eastbound on the adjacent main track. The distance between the siding track and the main track was 14 feet and 4 inches from the center of each track. (See figure 2.) The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) reviewed video from the forward-facing camera on the lead locomotive of the striking train which recorded the conductor in the foul of the main track shortly before the accident.² When the engineer of the striking train saw the conductor of train H-ALTPAS1-13A (the stationary train), he attempted to warn the conductor by sounding his locomotive's horn and contacting the conductor on his radio, all while initiating an emergency brake application on the train. After the engineer activated emergency

² A track is *fouled* when an individual or equipment is in the gauge of the track or within 4 feet of the nearest rail of the track and hence can be struck by a moving train or on-track equipment.

braking, the train traveled about 232 feet in 4 seconds, before striking the conductor. The train speed at impact was 37.7 mph.

The conductor's handheld radio was found in his bag on the locomotive. The conductor, therefore, did not hear radio communication from the engineer while working on the ground. A review of the radio recordings confirmed that there was no conversation between the conductor and the dispatcher regarding approaching trains and the scheduled work on the ground. During an interview, the engineer stated that he and the conductor had a job safety briefing before starting on their pre-departure tasks. They discussed the location of the hand brakes on the railcars but did not discuss other trains on the main track or the need for any on-track safety measures.³



Figure 2. A photograph of the lead locomotive of the striking train staged at the accident location to show the clearance between the siding and the main track.

³ On-track safety refers to an authority or procedure established to prevent a worker from being struck by a train or equipment. These procedures are used to designate working limits or allow workers to foul a track. Working limits are referred to as a segment of track with definite boundaries upon which trains and engines may move only as authorized by the person in charge of that segment.

Analysis

The conductor was fatally struck by a passing train while in the process of releasing hand brakes on his stationary train in the Columbus siding. The distance between the siding track and the main track (14 feet and 4 inches between track centers) created a close clearance situation where the conductor could unknowingly foul the live track. The Federal Railroad Administration's adjacent track rules for roadway workers apply whenever the tracks are spaced 19 feet apart or less.⁴ The adjacent track rules do not apply to conductors or engineers working in the same conditions. The conductor had about 4 feet and 4 inches of space between tracks to remain clear of a passing train and only 2 feet and 10 inches to stay clear of fouling the main track. (See figure 3.) This can be dangerous even if the employee stays clear of the passing train. BNSF train, yard, and engine (TY&E) Safety Rule S-1.6.2, requires employees to be alert to train movement at any time on any track and in any direction; however, given the space between the tracks, it would be difficult to work without accidentally fouling the main track.

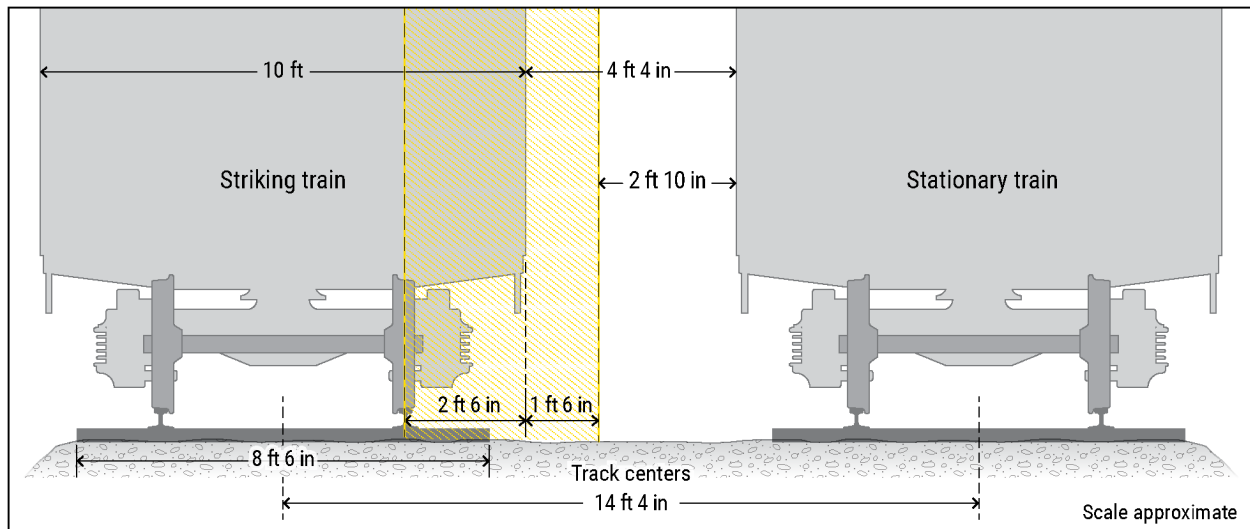


Figure 3. Diagram of the accident location showing the approximate distance between the tracks and the fouling zone.

On-track safety procedures on the adjacent main track were not required by FRA or BNSF rules. Had some form of on-track safety been established on the main track, the passing train would not have been permitted to operate through the area while the conductor was on the ground, or additional safeguards would have been in place such

⁴ A roadway worker is any employee of a railroad, or contractor, whose duties include inspection, construction, maintenance or repair of railroad track, bridges, roadway, signal and communications systems, electric traction systems, roadway facilities or roadway maintenance machinery on or near the track.

as a speed restriction for passing trains and the train crew would have had more time to identify an approaching train. The absence of on-track safety protection left the conductor exposed to passing trains and directly resulted in the conductor being struck. In comparison, roadway workers are required to establish on-track safety when working on the ground with equipment when near an adjacent controlled track. Thus, in this location, a roadway worker would have been required to follow on-track safety procedures according to BNSF Maintenance of Way Operating Rule 12.2 and establish working limits on the adjacent track or use train approach warning.⁵

According to BNSF's TY&E Safety Rules S-1.1, employees must participate in a job safety briefing at the beginning of the shift, before changing jobs, and as conditions change. The purpose of a job safety briefing is to identify hazards associated with the work and to establish communication among crew members. This rule requires employees to discuss the tasks to be performed, identify the risks associated with the tasks, and implement methods to control or minimize the risks. Prior to this accident, the job safety briefing between the conductor and engineer did not address the specific hazards associated with the work location. An assessment of the work environment and a thorough job safety briefing should have identified the risks of working in the close clearance location of the accident site and the need for on-track safety on the adjacent track. At a minimum, the briefing should have prompted communication with the dispatcher to determine trains operating in the area (which is a common risk of working on or near live tracks). In March 2021, the Switching Operations Fatality Analysis (SOFA) Committee published a safety alert identifying the leading causes of TY&E fatalities. The alert identified inadequate job briefings and employees who were struck by a mainline train in 20% and 17% of the fatalities, respectively.⁶

BNSF rules do not require train crews to communicate with the dispatcher before working near a live track. A dispatcher's responsibilities include maintaining awareness of authorized train movements and coordinating their movements on the main track and sidings. When train crews perform work on the ground, communication with the dispatcher is essential to identify hazards and prevent conflicts with train movements. In this accident, before releasing hand brakes on the train, the crew did not communicate with the dispatcher to determine whether any trains were operating in the area. Further, no request was made by the conductor to confirm track occupancy, restrict movements, or otherwise alert the dispatcher that he would be on the ground near the main track. Communication between the dispatcher and a train crew would have allowed the

⁵ Train approach warning is a method of on-track safety which uses a lookout or watchman to warn roadway workers of the approach of trains in ample time for them to move to a place of safety.

⁶ See <https://railroads.dot.gov/elibrary/sofa-alert-mar-3-2021>.

dispatcher to warn trains operating on the main track to look out for people on the ground and to inform the conductor that train movement on the main track was imminent. As part of the investigation, other conductors on the division were interviewed. These conductors stated that it was common practice to wait until after completing the pre-departure tasks, such as releasing hand brakes, before contacting the dispatcher. This practice limited the opportunity for dispatchers to make crews aware of approaching trains or inform approaching trains of the crew's presence.

The conductor was not carrying a handheld radio at the time of the accident, nor did BNSF rules require the conductor to carry one. The crew of the striking train attempted to warn the conductor after he was seen fouling the track but, without a radio in his possession, the conductor was unable to hear any attempted communications. During the job safety briefing the conductor told the engineer that he would contact him over the radio if he needed to go between the railcars, suggesting that he planned to carry the handheld radio with him. It is unknown why he was not carrying a radio at the time of the accident. Had BNSF required crew members to carry operative radios when conducting work on the ground near live tracks, the conductor would likely have heard the engineer's warning about the approaching train.

Probable Cause

The National Transportation Safety Board determines that the probable cause of the conductor fatality on October 19, 2025, when a BNSF Railway conductor was struck by a passing train while fouling the main track, was the lack of a requirement for train crews to establish on-track safety on an adjacent track when on the ground and positioned in a location with a high risk of fouling. Contributing to the accident was the inadequate job safety briefing between the crew members that did not identify the hazards of the work location and the lack of communication with the train dispatcher to identify hazards and prevent conflicts with train movements.

Lessons Learned

Railroad conductors face the risk of death or injury when working near live tracks where train movement is authorized. When inspecting railcars or preparing railcars for movement, conductors often work on the ground near adjacent live tracks. An adjacent live track, which may only be a few feet away from the conductor's location on the ground, can be dangerous because the conductor can accidentally foul the live track.

To call attention to the risks posed when railroad employees are required to work near live tracks, the NTSB issued a [safety alert](#), Know the Risk of Working Near Live Tracks in September 2026 discussing the steps conductors and railroads can take to be safe while working near live tracks. In response to this accident, BNSF Railway revised

Operating Rule 2.7 to include a new portable radio requirement and mandating that train crew members assigned to ground service positions carry a handheld radio.

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For more detailed background information on this report, visit the [NTSB Case Analysis and Reporting Online \(CAROL\) website](#) and search for NTSB accident ID RRD26FR001. Recent publications are available in their entirety on the [NTSB website](#). Other information about available publications also may be obtained from the website or by contacting—

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