



Fouling Other Railroad Tracks

The problem

In many rail yards and railroad stations, different service operators own the tracks. One operator's tracks may run next to a different operator's tracks. Railroad employees work on and around these tracks. There are many locations where they can foul another railroad's tracks without protection. Fouling means being close enough to a track to be struck by a moving train or, in any case, within 4 feet of the nearest rail.

- Because employees of different railroads use different radio channels, they may be unaware of the train traffic.
- With multiple tracks on the other railroad, the trains can approach from multiple directions.
- Employees would not know the direction or speed of the approaching trains.
- Employees of the other railroad's trains would be unaware that others are possibly fouling their tracks.

Related accident

On June 27, 2017, at 11:18 p.m. eastern daylight time, two CSX Transportation (CSX) employees (conductor and conductor trainee) were struck and killed by southbound Amtrak (National Railroad Passenger Corporation) train P175 at Amtrak milepost (MP) 134.5 in Ivy City, a small neighborhood in Northeast Washington, DC. The two employees were on the track walking toward the front of their southbound train after inspecting a railcar with elevated temperature reported by a track-side detector. Their backs were to the approaching southbound Amtrak train when they were struck.

After completing their inspection of the train equipment, the employees, for unknown reasons, did not use the north (field) side of the CSX train during their walk back to the head end despite the fact that they could have safely crossed over their train and walked well away from the live Amtrak tracks. Instead, they walked along the tracks nearest Amtrak main track 3. Moreover, rather than walking on the ballast close to the CSX train and clear of the other active tracks, they walked on the end of the crossties along Amtrak main track 3. (See figure 1.) National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigators learned that many railroad workers found it easier to walk on the crossties rather than directly on the ballast and sometimes did this when the track was either protected or out of service.

As the employees walked toward the head end of the train on Amtrak main track 3, a northbound Amtrak train (operating on Amtrak main track 2) moved toward them from the front, and the southbound Amtrak train (operating on Amtrak main track 3) approached them from behind. Both trains were traveling at similar speeds, and both trains had their headlights on as they entered the area. Each engineer observed the two employees several hundred feet away. About the same time, they continuously sounded the locomotive horns. About 15 to 20 seconds later, the two trains reached the two employees at the same time. The employees did not move away from Amtrak main track 3 to a safe location as the two trains traveled toward them.

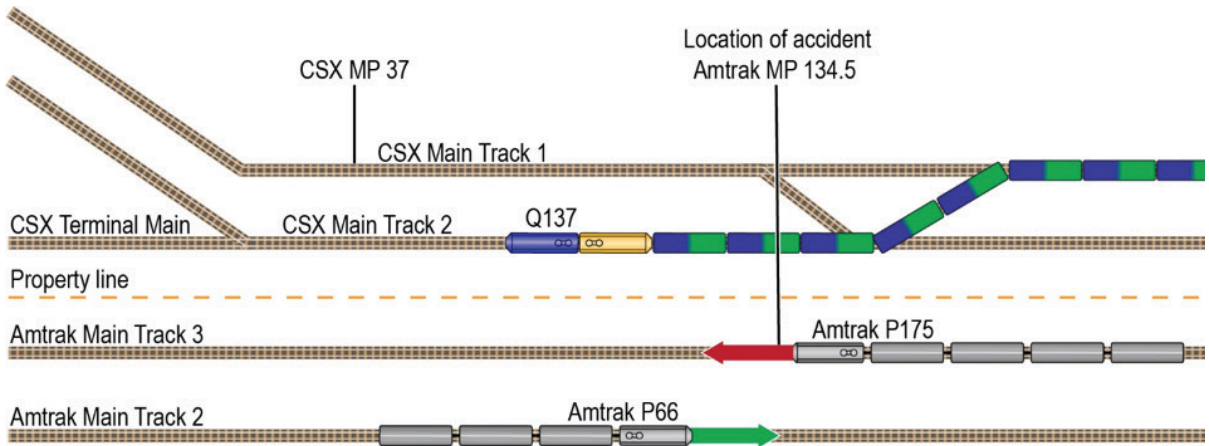


Figure 1. Diagram of accident site.


Not to scale

The CSX engineer mentioned that he did not understand why the employees had stayed on the side of the train closest to the Amtrak tracks. The NTSB believes that the crew should have been prohibited from walking near the live tracks of the other railroad unless it was necessary. In that case, they should not have fouled the Amtrak tracks without additional protection.

The NTSB investigators examined reasons why the employees did not appear to evade the approaching trains. They may have visually and audibly detected only a single train approaching them. As they walked southbound, the beam of light from the southbound locomotive, which could have illuminated a sign or object ahead of them, may have competed with or been masked by the light emanating from the northbound locomotive. As a result, they may not have noticed any visual cues from the southbound train. Additionally, given the simultaneous and similar horn and bell sounds from the two trains, the employees may not have discerned two sources of the sounds and, consequently, concluded that the sounds originated from only one train—the one that they saw ahead of them. As a result, it appears they were unaware that a second train was approaching them from behind.

Railroad employees can often be informed of other trains nearby and on adjacent tracks from either radio conversations or direct notification by the train dispatcher when operating on their own tracks. However, CSX and Amtrak operate on different radio channels, and the operating crews have very limited, if any, communications with the other railroad's train dispatcher during routine operations.

How to avoid similar accidents?

- **Whenever there is a choice, stay on the opposite side of your train from another railroad's tracks.**
- **If you must be on the same side as the other tracks, do not foul the other tracks.**
- **In the few situations where it is necessary to foul another railroad's tracks, contact your train dispatcher to get protection before you foul the track.**

Other considerations

- **Communication between train dispatchers of the different railroads will probably be necessary.**
- **Radio channels are often different, and you may have to relay communications through multiple train dispatchers.**
- **Ambient lighting and noise may affect your ability to detect approaching trains.**
- **Never let your guard down, and always expect train movements at any time from any direction.**

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