

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

NTSB Says Two Track Workers Killed in Amtrak Crash Had Drugs in System

Cocaine, Oxycodone among controlled substances found in workers; agency says no indication drug use contributed to Chester, Pa., accident

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Jan. 26, 2017

Two Amtrak track workers killed in a collision with a train near Philadelphia last year had drugs in their system at the time, as did the engineer driving the train, according to new records released Thursday.

There is no indication that drug use contributed to the accident, or any sign that any of the men was impaired on the morning of April 3, when a southbound Amtrak train barreled down a track that was supposed to be closed due to maintenance work.

Still, the positive test results, released Thursday by the National Transportation Safety Board, which is investigating the accident, came amid data showing rising instances of drug use in the relatively safe railroad industry. The increase has alarmed regulators and railroad executives, and helped trigger an expansion of drug prohibitions and testing that began just weeks after the accident.

In a letter to employees Thursday, Amtrak Chief Executive Charles “Wick” Moorman said that the NTSB findings “do not reflect that drug use was the cause of this incident.” But he added: “Any positive drug test result is completely unacceptable.”

A summary of toxicology tests published by the NTSB on Thursday shows that Joseph Carter Jr., the backhoe operator, tested positive for cocaine, while Peter Adamovich, a supervisor who was standing next to the backhoe when it was struck, tested positive for oxycodone, codeine and morphine. The train engineer, Alexander Hunter, had trace amounts of marijuana in his bloodstream.

A lawyer for the family of Mr. Adamovich declined to comment because he hadn’t seen the documents in question. **A lawyer for Mr. Carter’s family, Thomas R. Kline, said the fault for the accident lay with the railroad.**

“Mr. Carter was in the most vulnerable position and was dependent on everyone from the tower operator to the locomotive engineer, regardless whether he tested positive or negative for any substances,” said Mr. Kline, who has sued Amtrak on behalf of Mr. Carter’s family.

Federal regulations prohibit certain transportation workers, including train engineers, from using controlled substances, a category that includes marijuana, cocaine and opioids. Federal Railroad Administration rules adopted after the Chester crash extended that class of transportation workers to include track workers, though railroad rules, including Amtrak’s, already prohibited the use of most controlled substances by track workers.

The crash “obliterated” the backhoe on which the two men were working, NTSB summaries said, killing them and seriously injuring another worker. More than 40 passengers aboard the train were taken to area hospitals, the NTSB said.

The NTSB has yet to determine an official cause of the crash, but evidence in the docket unveiled Thursday strongly suggests that a botched communication between two foremen and a train dispatcher—and the failure to use some basic safeguards on the tracks—was the cause.

Transcripts and interviews show miscommunication and violations of safety procedures during the changing of two shifts of track workers. That resulted in a dispatcher clearing southbound Amtrak Train 89 to proceed at more than 100 miles an hour down a track that Messrs. Adamovich and Carter and their colleagues were using as they repaired an adjacent track—believing themselves to be out of harm’s way.

Records say the 47-year-old veteran engineer was in good health, and didn’t suffer from sleep apnea, a common culprit in recent train crashes. The engineer attempted to brake the train when he spotted the workers on the track, the records said. “He also stated that he felt alert when he went on duty,” the report said.

The positive tests come amid heightened concerns from federal safety regulators about drug use among rail workers. The FRA pushed to expand mandatory drug testing at passenger and freight railroads in the immediate aftermath of the Chester crash, and warned that the relatively safe railroad sector is also susceptible to a nationwide trend of increasing drug use, including of opioids.

The federal agency expanded its mandatory drug testing program to include track workers just weeks after the crash. Amtrak, in announcing the appointment of Mr. Moorman, in August, specifically invoked his safety record as CEO of Norfolk Southern Corp.

In September, Sarah Feinberg, then the administrator of the FRA, convened group meetings of both major railroads and railroad unions, urging them to confront the likelihood that the nation’s opioid addiction crisis “has begun creeping into the rail industry.” In November, the agency rejected an industry petition to delay the new testing requirements by one year.

The FRA’s drug testing program dates to 1987, and in recent years the agency has seen an increase in positive drug test results—both in random testing and after accidents. In 2014, FRA data showed no positive toxicology tests in post-accident testing. That rose to 2.9% in 2015, then to 4.8% in 2016.

Investigators have been trying to determine if the temporary restriction on the track, known as a “foul,” was improperly ordered to be removed during the handover of the work site from one crew of workers to the next, people familiar with the investigation have said.

A simple piece of safety equipment, called a supplemental shunting device or shunt, would have alerted the railroad’s signal system to the presence of workers on the affected area of track, but the device wasn’t in use despite Amtrak rules that required it, according to railroad and union officials.