

NTSB Findings: Broken Rail Caused 2003 Tamaroa Train Derailment

By Craig Shrum, Du Quoin Evening Call

Nearly two years after the train derailment and chemical spill that left Tamaroa a ghost town for several days in February 2003, the federal government has issued its final report outlining reasons why the accident happened.

On Tuesday, the National Transportation Safety Board concluded, among other things, that a broken rail in a section of track installed just 17 days prior to the accident resulted in the derailment.

An NTSB press release said that "a broken rail, due to inappropriate bond wire welds on the rail in an area of known soft ballast conditions, was the probable cause of the derailment of a Canadian National Railway freight train." The report says that the welding procedure that Canadian National workers used created untempered martensite--a brittle structure present in steel--that caused the rail to be more likely to crack.

Placement of the failed bond wire welds was authorized by a Canadian National signals supervisor, but the report says that the placement was "not in accordance with the company's exothermic bond wire welding policy" that had been implemented just two months prior to the accident.

The muddy rail bed in the area of the accident did not support the track adequately and caused increased rail flexibility, the report says. This factor, along with the welding procedures, contributed to fatigue in the rails.

Tamaroa village president Bill Place was "disheartened" by several factors brought out in the findings.

"From what I see on the report, there were existing conditions that the railroad knew about prior to the accident," Place said. "It appears that there were things that were not done according to railroad standards. It's not good to know that incorrect procedures were followed in the maintenance of the railway system."

Federal Railroad Administration officials were unable to comment as to whether the current NTSB findings would result in fines for Canadian National. Canadian National representative Karen Phillips was unavailable for comment Wednesday morning.

Attorney Joe Leberman, legal counsel for a group of over 500 Tamaroa citizens who have filed a class-action lawsuit against Canadian National, was unavailable for comment as to how the NTSB findings would affect his clients' case against the railroad.

Place said the findings of the report prompted him to join that suit. "In light of the information from the report, I as an individual will be joining that lawsuit," Place said.

As part of its report, the NTSB recommended that the Federal Railroad Administration label rail cracks resulting from bond wire attachments as rail defects and that the agency collect information on the location of those attachments. ERICO Products, maker of the welding system used to repair the rail, received a recommendation to inform users that the welds result in brittle martensite that can lead to fatigue cracking and rail failure.

"It's not to say that the accident was preventable, but potentially, it was," Place commented.

The derailment on February 9, 2003, cleared out the town of Tamaroa when a train traveling north from Memphis to Chicago at about 40 mph derailed 22 of its 108 cars. Four of the derailed cars contained methanol, which fueled a fire at the accident site. Other cars containing vinyl chloride, hydrochloric acid, and formaldehyde released chemicals but were not involved in the fire. Estimates say that the chemical cars were carrying between 23,000 and 30,000 gallons of liquids.

Canadian National has paid out hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages to Tamaroa residents affected by the accident. Clean-up costs and damages associated with the derailment totalled approximately \$1.9 million.

Place said that there is an approximately 100 by 100 foot section in town that is still being monitored for hazardous chemicals. He said that many water wells in town will be checked periodically for years to come.

The NTSB report also commended emergency personnel response to the disaster. "The response to the accident by emergency personnel and the train crew was timely and effective, and enhanced the safety of the community," the report said.

And in spite of what could have been a much worse situation, area residents are thankful that the derailment did not result in any deaths or injuries. "I'm grateful that no citizen was injured or hurt directly in the accident," Place said. "We were lucky