

STATEMENT OF EDWARD R. ENGLISH

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

BEFORE THE  
GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES AND TRANSPORTATION SUBCOMMITTEE  
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Good morning, Madam Chairperson and members of the subcommittee. I am Edward R. English, Director of the Office of Safety Enforcement, a subordinate element in the Office of Safety of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) at the Department of Transportation. I am glad to have been asked to appear before the subcommittee, today, and testify as to what we know, up to now about this accident. I don't think that it would be useful for me to dwell on the several details of this accident that are widely known by now. Unfortunately, the derailment did occur and we know the consequences of the event. So, it may be helpful to the subcommittee if I focus instead on FRA's role and the status of our investigation.

When an FRA inspector or team of inspectors arrive at the scene of an accident, an investigation having three co-equal objectives is launched:

First, FRA joins with the National Transportation Board and the carrier in attempting determine cause. Many times,

an accident is caused by the near-simultaneous occurrence of several inter-related events. When this happens it can seriously complicate and delay cause identification.

Second, we determine whether the circumstances of the accident involved any violation of either the federal regulations or the rules of the railroad.

The final step in the process is to factor data developed in the first two phases into a consideration of what may be necessary to prevent or curtail recurrence.

We still have not been able to arrive at a cause for this accident. There were no defects in the track or the derailed equipment, for that matter, that could have been causal factors. Concentration is now being directed to finding out the origin of unexpected longitudinal train action stresses that seem to have forced the derailed cars over the inside rail of the curve on the bridge. Several early possible scenarios have now been eliminated as highly unlikely. Following the re-railing of the derailed locomotive, all four power units were taken to Eugene, Oregon where extensive tests and inspections were carried out by FRA personnel. From this we were able to determine that mechanical problems on the second and third units led to power surges just prior to the derailment. This may be the source of the longitudinal train action stresses. Additionally, we are

conducting a computer simulation replicating the trip of the derailed train through this area. Results of this simulation will provide an understanding of locomotive and individual car behavior as the train proceeded to the point of derailment. FRA is now considering various enforcement actions directed at the carrier based on the defects discovered on the locomotives following the accident

In a matter of days or weeks, at the most, we will draw lessons from this accident investigation. However, it is important that we not leap to unfounded conclusions. For instance, it is incorrect to contend that this mountainous stretch of railroad is the root problem. The fact is that the railroad's route alignment through this part of northern California is in mountainous terrain and such country always presents a difficult train operating regime in terms of gradient and curvature. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that railroads in various parts of the country contend successfully every day with the physical features of rugged-country route layouts. It is the responsibility of railroads carrying out mountain railroading to exercise the extra care in equipment maintenance and staff training necessary to cope with the rigors of this type of operation.

FRA works every day to promote the safety of railroad operations. We will apply the well-considered and valid lessons of this

accident as we pursue our statutory mission.