



# Federal Railroad Administration Accident Investigation Fact Sheet

## Role of the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA)

The FRA conducts wide-ranging regulatory oversight activities to promote safety in every area of railroad operations to reduce rail-related accidents, incidents and casualties. As part of these efforts, the FRA conducts investigations of select railroad accidents in order to determine root causation, and any contributing factors, so that parties can implement corrective actions to prevent similar incidents in the future. Such corrective actions cover a broad range of activities, including, but not limited to: ensuring that simple repairs are made; changing operating rules; modifications to equipment and infrastructure inspection procedures; or developing a new federal regulation or safety standard.

FRA headquarters staff assigns investigations for about 100 railroad accidents each calendar year as well as for every railroad employee fatality. Investigations vary considerably in duration. However, FRA seeks to complete all major accident investigation within 270 days. Once completed, a formal written report is produced describing the accident in detail.

## FRA Accident Investigation Criteria

Railroads are required to report a vast array of incidents, however not all meet the criteria warranting an FRA investigation. The decision to assign a railroad accident for investigation generally follows a railroad's telephonic notification directly to FRA or to the National Response Center, the primary Federal entity to which all major transportation accidents are reported. FRA generally investigates accidents meeting the following criteria:

- A collision, derailment, or passenger train incident resulting in at least one fatality or serious injury to railroad passengers or crew members;
- All railroad employee fatalities
- Certain highway-rail grade crossing collisions resulting in:
  - A death of one or more persons in a commercial motor vehicle or school bus; or serious injuries sustained by several persons transported by such vehicles;
  - Three or more motor vehicle occupant fatalities; or
  - No fatality, but involving credible evidence of a malfunction or failure of an active warning device which is alleged to have contributed to or caused the accident;
- Incidents involving Amtrak passenger trains;
- Train accidents resulting in damages to track or equipment exceeding \$1 million;
- Train accidents resulting in the derailment of a locomotive and/or large number of cars, resulting in extensive property damage;
- Accidents resulting in a serious fire, explosion, or unintended release of hazardous materials, and incidents involving an evacuation, especially if it poses an imminent safety hazard to persons in the surrounding locale;
- Train accident involving the transport of nuclear or radioactive materials;

- Incidents involving run-away equipment, with or without locomotives;
- Collisions between trains and maintenance-of-way or hi-rail equipment;
- Incidents caused by failure of a locomotive or any part of a locomotive, or a person coming in contact with an electrical power sources that result in a serious injury or death of one or more persons; and
- Incidents that arouse considerable public interest.

## **FRA Accident Investigation Process**

FRA inspectors specialize in several disciplines, including: track & structures, railroad operating practices, signal & train control systems, motive power & equipment (i.e. locomotives and rail cars), hazardous materials, and highway-rail grade crossings. In addition to their areas of expertise, most FRA field personnel receive extensive training to help identify the root causes of accidents.

Typically, investigations involve:

- Inspecting and testing track, signal systems, and other infrastructure, as well as locomotives, rail cars and other equipment;
- Interviewing train crews or railroad employees whose actions may have contributed to the incident and recording other eyewitness accounts;
- Reviewing a railroad's records concerning inspections, testing, maintenance, and employee training and hours of service;
- Retrieving and reviewing locomotive event recorder (black box) data and other information regarding railroad communications, including the actions of railroad dispatchers; and
- Exchanging information with other federal or state and local entities as appropriate.

For more information on FRA's Accident Investigation Regulations, please click [here](#).

For additional information, please contact  
FRA Public Affairs (202) 493-6024  
[www.fra.dot.gov](http://www.fra.dot.gov)  
February 2013