



In this June 24, 2012, file photo, smoke rises from two cargo trains that collided near Goodwell, Okla. The National Transportation Safety Board meeting in Washington on Tuesday is attempting to find a cause for the June 24, 2012, accident near Goodwell that killed three railroad workers. AP photo/Guymon Daily Herald, Trudy Hartm file

By JUSTIN J. JUOZAPAVICIUS

• Associated Press

TULSA, Okla. — The driver of one of two freight trains that collided in the Oklahoma Panhandle last year, killing three railroad workers, had complained that he couldn't distinguish between red and green signals, an investigator told the National Transportation Safety Board on Tuesday.

Dr. Mary Pat McKay presented a medical report to the NTSB in Washington, D.C. The agency is trying to determine the cause of the June 24, 2012, Union Pacific Railroad crash near Goodwell, and is expected to recommend how to prevent future accidents.

Inspectors said signals warned the eastbound and westbound trains to slow down and stop at a siding. The westbound train slowed down, but the eastbound train did not, roaring past the siding at 68 mph before colliding with the oncoming train.

McKay told the panel said that driver of the eastbound train had suffered from glaucoma and cataracts, and that from 2006 to 2009 he complained of deteriorating vision in his left eye.

“He repeatedly complained that his vision fluctuated and was described as OK one day, not OK the next,” McKay told the board.

The Federal Railway Administration does not require comprehensive medical screening, instead relying on operators to report medical conditions to the company, McKay said. Since 2009, the driver of the eastbound train had undergone 12 separate eye procedures and complained that he was having trouble reading train signals. Doctors diagnosed him with protonosis, in which red and green are perceived as a shade of yellow, she said.

“Had the railroad tested the eastbound engineer’s vision in 2010, medical records demonstrate that he would have failed ... any of the standard color vision tests,” McKay said.

The Associated Press left a message seeking comment from a Union Pacific spokeswoman Tuesday.

Another investigator said controlling trains remotely, through a system known as Positive Train Control, rather than relying on train drivers to read trackside signals, would have eliminated the possibility of an accident that day.

Tim DePaepe, who attended the accident site last year, said Positive Train Control would have presented visual and audible warnings to the engineer and crew that the train was in trouble. If warnings are ignored, the system applies brakes automatically.

“This accident would not have occurred,” DePaepe said.

Inspectors recovered no recordings of crew communications and couldn't perform autopsies on those who died. A westbound crew member survived by jumping from his train before the accident.