



PRELIMINARY REPORT

HIGHWAY

HWY15MH004

The information in this report is preliminary and will be supplemented or corrected during the course of the investigation.

On January 14, 2015, about 7:50 a.m. (local time), a 2015 Bluebird prisoner transport bus operated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice was traveling westbound on Interstate 20 (I-20) near Penwell, Texas.¹ The bus—occupied by three corrections officers and 12 inmates—was en route from the Middleton Corrections Facility in Abilene, Texas, to the Sanchez Facility in El Paso, Texas. The bus had departed from Abilene at about 4:40 a.m., and, after traveling for approximately 3 hours, was approaching a highway overpass on I-20 which crossed over a set of railroad tracks. A freight train, with four locomotives and 58 cars, operated by the Union Pacific (UP) Railroad occupied the tracks. The train was en route from Los Angeles, California, to Marion, Arkansas, and was traveling at 45 mph, which was below the maximum authorized speed for that area.

On the previous day, the 225-foot-long metal beam guardrail leading up to the overpass was damaged in a vehicle collision. The Texas Department of Transportation responded, photographed the damage and placed traffic cones in the area.



Figure 1. Prior damage to median guardrail from vehicle collision on January 13.
(Source: Texas Department of Transportation)

¹ I-20 is a four-lane (two in each direction) interstate with a grassy median and a posted speed limit of 75 mph.

Early on the morning of January 14, three additional crashes, attributed to icy road conditions, occurred, with the last crash taking place about 7:35 a.m. In two of these crashes, an eastbound vehicle went out of control, crossed the center median, and traveled through the area of the previously damaged guardrail—possibly displacing it partially into the left traffic lane. A witness in a vehicle traveling forward of the bus reported that moments before the bus reached the overpass the guardrail wreckage was about 2 feet into the travel lane.

As the bus, which was in the left lane of travel, approached the section of guardrail laying in the roadway, it was following behind a tractor-semitrailer combination while passing a slower moving tractor-semitrailer combination vehicle. The bus struck the guardrail, veered to the left, and overrode the guardrail wreckage in the median. The bus traveled about 22 feet across the earthen median into an opening between the eastbound and westbound traffic lanes of I-20. The bus encountered a 21-foot embankment and became airborne. The bus struck the base of the embankment and continued forward toward the railroad tracks, where it impacted the fifty-fourth rail car and side of a piggy-back trailer of the UP train.

As a result of the crash, two corrections officers and eight inmates died. The remaining five bus occupants were seriously injured and transported to the Medical Center Hospital in Odessa, Texas, for treatment.

NTSB investigators documented the damage to the crash scene and the bus using three-dimensional (3D) laser scanning technology. A 3D scan of the left side of the bus is provided in figure 2 below.



Figure 2. Three-dimensional scan of the left side of the bus involved in the January 14 crash in Penwell, Texas.