

## **Human Error Cited in Ride Crash at California's Disneyland**

By Michele Himmelberg, The Orange County Register, Calif.  
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**Apr. 7** - State regulators said Tuesday that two Disneyland workers were responsible for a weekend collision on the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, less than a month after the ride reopened following an investigation into a fatal crash.

This accident was different from the one last September in several ways. The two trains that collided late Saturday were empty, and the computer system that prevents such accidents had been switched to manual.

But one aspect was familiar: State investigators cited human error and ordered Disney to retrain its employees.

Disney agreed to do so -- only seven months after retraining Big Thunder employees who were involved in the accident that killed Marcelo Torres of Gardena.

The 25-year-old roller coaster reopened in midmorning Sunday, minus the two damaged trains.

The Division of Occupational Safety & Health said an employee who works in the train's tower and a supervisor made errors during a reset procedure that led to the crash. The tower employee failed to verify that two trains were in the same brake zone when he gave the clear signal to send one through, and it rear-ended the second train.

State regulations require theme parks only to report accidents that involve injuries, so Disney was not obliged to report Saturday's collision. But DOSH investigated after a complaint was filed. Although this is the second accident involving mistakes by Disney employees, DOSH spokesman Dean Fryer said the state is not concerned about Disney's training procedures.

"This involved two individual employees," Fryer said. "The training that has been provided to operators has been reviewed and approved as adequate. There is no way to guarantee that employees, even if properly trained, will follow the proper guidelines."

Last fall, the state cited Disney for inadequate training and errors by the Big Thunder maintenance staff in the Sept. 5 accident that killed Torres and injured 10 others. That accident closed the attraction for six months; it reopened March 11.

In that accident, a wheel fell from the train and experts later found that no one had safety-wired or tightened two bolts holding the guide wheel to the train.

In the latest accident, a guest pushed open a safety gate at the loading area, tripping a safety emergency stop. The ride was evacuated and operators reset the gate.

To reset the train, Disney staff shifted it to a manual-operating mode -- one that is not used when guests are on board. The employee in the tower failed to verify that one train was sitting in a brake zone near the loading area when he dispatched a second train. The second train picked up speed down a hill and rammed the first train.

The front end of the locomotive was smashed and three train cars derailed, damaging the wheels.

Ed Pribonic, a theme-park safety consultant and former Disneyland engineer, believes Disney's computerized ride-control systems are trustworthy.

"It's when you go into manual mode that an individual is in charge of where the trains go and when," said Pribonic, head of Magnatar Corp. in Seal Beach. "If somebody doesn't pay attention, you can have an accident. Disney would never risk running the ride with guests on board in manual mode."

Disney spokesman Bob Tucker also said the reset procedure is performed on this ride only when guests are not on board.

"We reviewed our operation procedures," Tucker said. "Some were not followed and we retrained accordingly."

Lines for the popular roller coaster could be long and slow for several days with just three trains operating on the tracks. The attraction originally had six trains, but one was seriously damaged in the Sept. 5 accident and now these two must be repaired.

"We hope to add a fourth train very soon," Tucker said.

Although it is not required to do so, Disney said it will allow state regulators to inspect the Big Thunder trains once repairs are completed, before they are put back into use.

Safety consultant Bill Avery, of Avery Safety Consulting in Orlando, Fla., said he was surprised to hear about the accident. "I thought after what (Disney management) had been through, that they would have put employees through super-intense training, and that there would have been so many redundant systems built in that it would almost impossible for this to happen again."

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