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Train carrying boosters for space shuttle derails

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MYRTLEWOOD -- A freight train transporting rocket boosters for NASA's space shuttle partially derailed Wednesday in western Alabama on its way to Cape Canaveral, Fla. Six people were injured.

Four cars derailed after the bridge collapsed as the train crossed it. Investigators are still trying to determine why the recently repaired bridge collapsed. The train was traveling on tracks owned by Meridian & Bigbee Railroad. The tracks and trestle where the accident occurred were closed for repairs Sunday night and reopened Wednesday morning.



The Meridian & Bigbee Railroad runs from Meridian, Miss., 51 miles southeast to Myrtlewood. The accident occurred in a remote and heavily wooded area about one mile from the Tombigbee River in Myrtlewood, a Marengo County town of about 200 people. Myrtlewood is located two hours west of Montgomery. The train's next stop would have been in the Capital City en route to Florida, said Gerry Gates, an official with Genesee and Wyoming Inc., the parent company of the Meridian and Bigbee Railroad.

Kevin McKinney, director of the Marengo County Emergency Management Agency, said the wreck was the county's third accident this year on Meridian & Bigbee tracks. "They've had a lot of derailments on this track between here and Selma," said Jon Haydrick, who lives about a mile from the accident site on Alabama 114. "It's a swamp down there."

It was the second time in less than a week that the train was involved in an accident while transporting the booster segments from the manufacturer, ATK Launch Systems Group of Promontory, Utah, to Cape Canaveral, Fla., said NASA spokesman Kyle Herring. Last Friday, two axles on one car came off the tracks for unknown reasons about 60 miles west of Salina, Kan., while the train was traveling at less than 20 mph, he said. The train was back on the tracks after several hours. Two of the six people injured in today's accident were airlifted by helicopter to a hospital in Tuscaloosa. One suffered serious injuries. "(Officials) were saying mostly broken bones," McKinney said. "I don't think anyone had any life-threatening injuries."

The rocket boosters were carrying aluminum perchlorate, a solid fuel, which did not pose a threat of igniting or spilling, said NASA spokesman Steve Roy. "It takes a very intense ignition source to set off the rocket fuel," Roy said. "It's far more stable than the gasoline in your car."

A remote sensor linked to a Global Positioning System lets NASA officials monitor the rocket boosters during transport. "So we know almost instantaneously if there's been a disturbance to the solid rocket motor equipment," Roy said. "If there's been damage, obviously they're not going to fly on the space shuttle."

The rocket boosters, which take a week to reach Cape Canaveral by train, were to be used on shuttle Discovery's STS-120 mission in October and shuttle Atlantis's STS-122 mission in December. "This is the most serious incident we've had moving rocket boosters and solid rocket fuel to Kennedy Space Center involving rail transport," Roy said. "The damage assessment and how the accident will affect the October and December launches are not yet known", Roy said.

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