

New York Division Engineering Employees Respond to Portal Bridge Fire



A fast moving fire struck Amtrak's Portal drawbridge across the Hackensack River between Kearny and Secaucus on the evening of May 12, 2005. The fire started at approximately 7:03 pm on the wood

pilings located at the base of the bridge and quickly spread across a pier supporting one end of the structure. The devastating fire disrupted rail passenger travel into and out of New York until the following morning.

Quick response by both management and craft employees working in the New York Division's engineering department was evident on May 12. As fire crews battled the fierce flames, engineering employees arrived on the scene to assist fire crews, and initiate a plan to restore service. Most of these employees had just finished their regular tour of duty, and were returning to their homes when news of the fire broke out. According to Division Engineer, Steven Falkenstein, "Division employees really showed their commitment to Amtrak and our passengers. Employees arrived at the work site

ready for work without being told to be there. Work was coordinated and done without injury. Their quick response to this crisis saved the track infrastructure and temporarily restored signal service to the bridge in record time.”

Amtrak’s Portal Bridge was built approximately 95 years ago to provide access to both river and rail traffic. This steel and wood structure requires a cabling system that provides mechanical power to operate the lift portion of the bridge for river traffic, bridge lighting, and power to the signal system for rail traffic. Each bridge timber along the top of the bridge supporting the rail is manufactured individually to fit like a glove.

Quick thinking by engineering employees saved site-specific bridge timbers by



requesting Fire crews focus their attention on wetting down the timbers before they burned completely. Although the effect of the fire knocked out all power cabling on the bridge structure,

engineering employees designed a temporary cabling system to restore power to the signal system and bridge.

Representatives of New Jersey Transit worked with Amtrak representatives to reduce traffic on the bridge until more cable could be installed. Working throughout the night, these employees installed temporary cables across Portal Bridge. Electric Traction employees, along with Track and Bridge and Building employees, repaired the damaged catenary system and walkways. Thanks to their efforts, reduced service was restored by Friday’s morning rush hour. Then less than 48 hours later, full service was

restored to Track 2 and full service restored to Track 3 by Sunday, May 22, 2005. The temporary cabling will be in operation until permanent cabling is installed in the riverbed under the bridge with a new fender system. River traffic was restored Monday, May 23, 2005.

“New York Division employees rose to this unique challenge because rail traffic into New York from New Jersey was essentially shut off. Their quick thinking are admirable and saved Amtrak money,” said Steven Falkenstein, Division Engineer-New York Division. “Returning service in this short amount of time was extraordinary. We received an unexpected call from the Governor of New Jersey and from officials within New Jersey Transit. Both calls were complementary of how effective our employees managed this catastrophic event. Their actions made the company look good. As Division Engineer, I want to thank all of the employees on the division for a job well done. We operated the railroad under the worst conditions imaginable, partnered with the Transportation Department, and were able to restore service safely in record time.”