

ORIGINAL

Decision No. 69527

BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

In the matter of the petition of SOUTHERN)
PACIFIC COMPANY to modify or rescind)
Resolution No. ET-1012 regarding Crossing)
BAM-428.6, Searles Road, in Kern County,)
California.)

Application No. 47113

Investigation into the status, safety,)
maintenance, use and protection or closing)
of the crossing at grade of the lines of)
the SOUTHERN PACIFIC COMPANY in the County)
of Kern, California, with Searles Road;)
Crossing No. BAM-428.6.)

Case No. 8109

Walt A. Steiger, for Southern Pacific Company,
applicant in Application No. 47113 and respondent
in Case No. 8109.

Dennis N. Reid, Office of the County Counsel,
for the County of Kern, respondent.

J. S. Latham, for Trona Railway Company, Joseph
Wooldridge, for Young, Wooldridge and Paulden
and self and Richard B. Lynch, for Muroc
Unified School District, interested parties.

Robert C. Marks, for the Commission staff.

O P I N I O N

Public hearing on these two matters was held before Examiner Power at Bakersfield on April 6, 1965 and the matters were submitted on the sole issue of protection, other issues being left to agreement of the parties or possible further hearing.

Staff counsel moved to broaden Case No. 8109 to include Trona Railway Company as a respondent. The evidence adduced at the hearing suggested the propriety of so-doing and the motion will be granted.

Searles Road crosses two tracks belonging to Southern Pacific Company at the point under scrutiny here. One of these tracks is leased to and maintained by the Trona Railway. Searles is located in the high desert at the eastern edge of Kern County.

It is in Southern Pacific's San Joaquin Division on the Lone Pine Branch. This branch extends from Mojave to Lone Pine.

Searles Station is the interchange point between Southern Pacific and Trona. Except for Searles Road and the tracks there is nothing there. The location is uninhabited, the nearest house being .7 of a mile distant. There is no available supply of commercial electricity.

Searles Road crosses the tracks at right angles. Vehicular traffic averages about 100 crossings per day. Authorized vehicle speed is 65 miles per hour. The present protection is two Standard No. 1 signs augmented by fuses.

The rail traffic consists of seven trains daily, three Southern Pacific and four Trona Railway. Southern Pacific sends a train up the branch to Lone Pine three days a week returning on the alternate days. In both directions these schedules pass through Searles in the daylight hours and therefore present no problem. The same is true for one of the Trona Railway turnarounds. The lack of buildings and trees makes the visibility good at this crossing during the daylight hours.

The serious hazard at this crossing occurs between 8 P.M. and 12 P.M. During this period a Southern Pacific train called the "Searles Turn" and the second of the two Trona turnarounds are both at Searles and both do switching. The staff study reveals that Southern Pacific accounts for the activity during the early part of this period. As observed by the staff engineer the Southern Pacific departed at 10:32 P.M. and the Trona train after eight switching moves at 11:40 P.M.

The staff engineer observed 16 moves across the crossing including only four in the daylight hours. After 8 p.m. there were twelve moves including nine that blocked Searles Road for more than

one minute. The longest Southern Pacific block exceeded 24 minutes; the longest by Trona was 6 minutes.

There has been only one accident reported for this crossing. This occurred at night. An automobile containing five persons hit a covered hopper car which partially blocked the roadway. The result was four deaths and one injury. Undoubtedly the lack of illumination was a contributing factor.

From the nature of the accident described above it appears that the protection at this crossing should be upgraded. Furthermore the protection should be such as to physically block the roadway and to not be ambiguous to approaching vehicle drivers. These requirements can best be met by Standard No. 8 Flashing Light Signals equipped with automatic gate arms.

After the accident referred to, the Commission adopted Resolution No. ET-1012 on May 5, 1964. This resolution required fusees on each side of the track when trains were operated across the crossing. It also required members of the train crew to protect traffic by flagging. This is the resolution that Southern Pacific is seeking to have rescinded in Application No. 47113.

Southern Pacific's chief objection is to the requirement for flagging. This puts a member of the train crew into a dangerous position.

The chief objection to automatic gates is that the highway traffic is too thin to justify such an expensive installation. However, the one accident that did happen suggests that any accident at this crossing would be a serious one. The lack of a settlement at Searles means that there is no background against which the silhouette of a car might loom. Using a member of a train crew as flagman probably reduces and certainly transfers the risk but does not completely eliminate it.

The Commission accordingly finds that public health and safety require that:

1. Searles Road crossing, over tracks of Southern Pacific

Company's Lone Pine Branch should be protected by two Standard No. 8 Flashing Light Signals equipped with automatic gate arms.

2. The approaches to Searles Road crossing should be widened to 24 feet.

3. Trona Railway Company is a necessary and proper party to this investigation.

The Commission concludes that:

1. Searles Road crossing should have the protection provided by the following order.

2. Resolution No. ET-1012 should be rescinded as soon as the new protection becomes operational.

3. The approaches to Searles Road crossing should be widened.

Case No. 8109 will not be discontinued because it may become necessary to reopen it if the parties fail to reach an agreement on division of costs.

O R D E R

IT IS ORDERED that:

1. Southern Pacific Company shall, within six months after the effective date of this order, improve the protection of the crossing of Searles Road with tracks of its Lone Pine Branch No. BAM-428.6 by installing at said crossing two Standard No. 8 Flashing Light Signals equipped with automatic crossing gate arms.

2. The Commission's Resolution No. ET-1012, adopted May 5, 1964, shall stand rescinded simultaneously with the going into service of the protection required by Paragraph No. 1 of this order.

3. Within six months after the effective date of this order County of Kern shall widen the approaches of Searles Road crossing to 24 feet.

4. Case No. 8109 is continued to a date to be set.

5. Trona Railway Company is hereby designated a respondent in this proceeding.

The effective date of this order shall be twenty days after the date hereof.

Dated at San Francisco, California, this 10th day of AUGUST, 1965.

Fredrick B. Hodelhoff
President

Augustus

William L. Bennett

Commissioners

Commissioner George G. Grover, being necessarily absent, did not participate in the disposition of this proceeding.