

Jetliners collide, killing eight

ROMULUS, Mich. (AP) — A jetliner clipped another while preparing to take off from the Detroit airport in heavy fog Monday, igniting a fire that left one plane in smoking ruins. At least eight people were killed and 20 injured, officials said.

It was not immediately clear what caused the collision between a DC-9 and a Boeing 727-200, both operated by Northwest Airlines. A spokesman for air traffic controllers said the DC-9 appeared to have become lost on a slick, foggy taxiway and strayed into the 727's path.

For nearly an hour after the accident, smoke billowed out of the fuselage of the DC-9, where passengers apparently became trapped by the fast-moving fire. By the time the fire was extinguished, much of the plane's roof was open to the overcast sky.

Officials had initially said that 19 people were killed, but Northwest officials and Wayne County Executive Edward McNamara later said that was wrong.

McNamara said the medical examiner had "swept through the wreckage twice" and found eight bodies.

Northwest spokesman Bob Gibbons stressed that authorities were not ruling out further changes in the death toll. "This is probably going to go up or down all evening," he said shortly after 7 p.m.

The DC-9, Flight 1482 to Pittsburgh, was carrying 39 passengers and four crewmembers, according to the airline. The 727, Flight 299 to Memphis, was carrying 146 passengers.

Both flights had originated in Detroit, said Patrick McCann, a Northwest spokesman at its headquarters in Eagan, Minn.

"Apparently the right wing of the 727 hit the aft section, the engine, of the DC9, taking the engine off," said Alan Muncaster, another Northwest spokesman. "That resulted in the fire. That, at this point, is all we know."

At the time of the crash, visibility was poor and the ground was wet from a morning snow and sleet storm that delayed flights at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. Muncaster said the airport had been closed to inbound traffic but that planes were being allowed to take off.

Tony Dresden, a spokesman for the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, a union representing air traffic controllers, said there was about a quarter-mile visibility in the air, but only about 800 feet on the ground.

"We've had some discussions with our people out there," Dresden said. "The DC-9 pilot became lost on the runways. The pilot gave the ground controller erroneous information about his position and turned right onto the runway where the 727 was taxiing."

"The DC-9 pilot discovered at the very last moment where he was, and so the ground controller told him to immediately get off that runway, but it was too late."

He stressed that his information was preliminary. The Federal Aviation Administration, which supervises air traffic controllers, did not immediately comment about Dresden's statement.

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board were being dispatched to begin a probe aimed at determining the cause of the accident, a safety board spokesman said.

One survivor from the DC-9, 41-year-old John Izzo, said he was dozing when he "heard a bang, felt a thud and then all of a sudden, there was a blast."

"I saw the fire to the right rear. The whole top burned away, but something was definitely blown away because something flew over my head," said Izzo, a Westinghouse nuclear engineer who was returning to Pittsburgh from a business trip.

Izzo said he escaped by jumping from a wing to the ground. He was not hurt.

Chicken Little-esque claim persists, but no quake yet

GOLDEN, Colo. (AP) — At least four moderate earthquakes rattled parts of the world, but there was nary a tremor Monday along the New Madrid Fault, where a scientist said a earthquake was likely to occur.

"This is just a normal day," said Waverly Person, chief of the U.S. Geological Survey's National Earthquake Information Center. "We're not backing the prediction at all."

Along the New Madrid Fault, some schools were canceled and residents purchased earthquake emergency kits and others left town, just in case climatologist Iben Browning was right.

Browning said there was a 50-50 chance for a major earthquake early this week along the fault, which stretches from Marked Tree, Ark., northeast through New Madrid, Mo., to Cairo, Ill. He believes tidal forces can trigger earthquakes, a theory most scientists reject.

"There's just no way to predict an earthquake precisely," said Person, who has been with the U.S. Geological Survey for more than 25 years. "There are no two earthquakes alike."

The center received more than 50 calls about the New Madrid forecast Monday morning and hundreds last week, said Person, who began doing interviews for radio and television stations just after midnight.

As Person talked, 24 seismographs etched out activity recorded by monitoring equipment in different parts of the United States, ranging from Alaska to Tennessee.

A needle jumped a few inches across the seismograph connected to monitoring equipment in Tonopah, Nev. Person scanned the chart and called to a colleague. "It may be a nuclear test. That's where they conduct those tests."

A few minutes later, the needle jumped again. "That's not a test," he said. "That's a quake."

With a measured eye, he estimated the quake was magnitude 2.5 to 3.0 on the Richter scale. Quick calculations showed the quake was magnitude 3.5, centered about 30 miles southwest of Ely, Nev.

Between midnight and evening, four moderate quakes were recorded at Golden. Three were in the South Pacific, a 5.9-magnitude shaker near New Caledonia, and quakes of 5.1 and 5.0 in the area of Tonga. The fourth was a 5.9-magnitude temblor in northern Colombia.

A quake of that size can cause considerable damage in a populated area, but aren't considered serious in remote spots. About 800 quakes between magnitudes 5.0 and 5.9 are recorded each year, said USGS spokesman Don Finley in Washington.

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