

Train with space shuttle parts derails in Alabama

Thu May 3, 2007 5:34PM EDT

By Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - A train carrying space shuttle rocket booster parts to Florida derailed in Alabama on Wednesday, but the accident will not affect the next space shuttle launch, a NASA spokeswoman said.

The train went off the tracks when a wooden trestle collapsed beneath it near the Tombigbee River in western Alabama, a local emergency management official said.

Six people were injured and two of them were airlifted to hospitals in Mobile and Tuscaloosa but none of the injuries was life threatening, the official said.

The solid rocket boosters for the next shuttle mission, the launch of Atlantis scheduled for June, are already at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, the shuttle's launch site.

That mission is already long delayed. Atlantis had been scheduled to fly in March, but its fuel tank was damaged by a freak hailstorm that passed over the launch pad in late February.

The collapsed train trestle was more than 60 years old and was under repair, according to Kevin McKinney, emergency management director for Marengo County.

He said two train engines and a converted passenger car used for crew fell from the trestle while the cars carrying the NASA equipment stayed on the tracks.

The train, which derailed near Myrtlewood, Alabama, was carrying eight solid rocket booster motors and two end cones destined for shuttle missions in October and December, said Katherine Trinidad, a NASA spokeswoman.

"These motor segments are interchangeable. They are not mission specific," she said. "But it remains to be seen whether the (October and December) missions will be affected."

The towering solid rocket boosters, about 150 feet (46 meters) long and 12 feet in diameter, provide most of the thrust that powers the U.S. shuttle off the launch pad.

The same train was involved in another incident in Kansas on Friday, a NASA official said. Two wheels came off a car, but the damage was quickly repaired at a nearby rail yard and the journey continued on the weekend.

The train was en route to the Florida launch site from Utah, where ATK Thiokol, a NASA contractor, is based.

(Additional reporting by Jeff Franks in Houston and Jim Loney in Miami)