

An engineer at the controls of a train that derailed, polluting a pristine McKean County trout stream, told his employer he didn't think he had fallen asleep but remembered the conductor yelling his name as the train sped down a steep grade at more than 70 mph, a state trooper testified.

Reading from portions of testimony Michael Seifert gave at a hearing when he was fired from Norfolk Southern Railway, Trooper Gary Stuckey said Mr. Seifert admitted to operating the train June 30 when it crested a summit at about 10 mph.

The next thing Mr. Seifert said he realized was the conductor shouting his name and the train barreling down, Trooper Stuckey said.

"I'm still trying to figure out what happened," Mr. Seifert said at the railroad hearing.

After a preliminary hearing Monday, Mr. Seifert, 45, of Buffalo, N.Y., was ordered to stand trial on charges of causing or risking a catastrophe and reckless endangerment.

During the railroad hearing, Mr. Seifert admitted the train was not being operated according to the company's rules and the derailment was a result of a failure to follow procedure, Mr. Stuckey said.

Rather than engaging the emergency brakes, Mr. Seifert said he decided to "ride it out," a procedure he did with a supervisor and other railroad officials on board during a training run on that track in 2000, according to the testimony.

About 42,000 gallons of the caustic chemical sodium hydroxide, also known as lye or caustic soda, spilled into the Sinnemahoning-Portage Creek near Gardeau, McKean County, after 32 cars derailed. The train reached a speed of 77 mph in a 15 mph zone before jumping the tracks, according to a criminal complaint.

Prosecutors also said Seifert was under the influence of drugs -- opiates and benzodiazepines -- at the time of the crash.

Benzodiazepines are commonly used to ease anxiety and opiates are found in numerous drugs, from prescription pain relievers to heroin.