

Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO

RAIL LABOR DIVISION

March 11, 2025

The Honorable Sean Duffy
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20590

RE: Protecting FRA Staffing to Safeguard Rail Workers and Public Safety

Dear Secretary Duffy,

On behalf of the undersigned rail labor organizations, we write to express our deep concern regarding the February 26th memorandum issued by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), which proposes reductions in personnel at the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). The proposed staffing cuts would have devastating consequences for rail safety, increasing risks for both rail workers and the general public.

Rail labor has consistently advocated for stronger federal oversight, particularly as we continue to see a troubling rise in derailments, hazardous material spills, and safety violations across the freight and passenger rail industry. FRA personnel are essential to enforcing rail safety regulations, conducting inspections, investigating accidents, and ensuring compliance with maintenance and operational standards. Cutting FRA staff to pre-2021 levels would significantly hinder these safety-critical functions, increasing the likelihood of preventable rail disasters.

The claim in the memorandum that federal funds are being misallocated to “unproductive and unnecessary programs” is not applicable to FRA’s personnel growth. In reality, FRA’s expansion has been a direct response to a Congressional mandate to manage the significant increase in rail funding that includes critical safety improvements from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). With \$66 billion in advanced appropriations for rail grants and an additional \$13 billion allocated through annual congressional appropriations (FY 2024-2025), FRA’s oversight role, including the personnel in the Railroad Development Office, has never been more vital in ensuring these funds translate into meaningful safety improvements.

Rail projects funded by the IIJA are already enhancing safety for workers and communities alike. These projects, including track upgrades, bridge construction, signal modernization, and grade crossing safety improvements—directly impact the working conditions of rail employees and the overall integrity of the rail network. Reducing FRA staffing would slow the administration of the Federal-State Partnership for Intercity Passenger Rail (FSP), the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) program, the Railroad Crossing Elimination Grant Program, and other essential safety initiatives, leading to increased hazards on the job.

Furthermore, the Railroad Development Office plays a critical role in ensuring that safety-related projects funded through federal grants are implemented efficiently and effectively. These personnel oversee the planning, allocation, and execution of funds intended for infrastructure upgrades, hazard mitigation, and system-wide safety enhancements. Cutting staff in this office would introduce delays, create administrative bottlenecks, and compromise the ability of railroads and state agencies to complete projects that directly improve safety conditions for both rail workers and the public. Without adequate staffing in

the Railroad Development Office, essential projects that modernize aging rail infrastructure and prevent accidents will be left in limbo, increasing risks across the rail network.

At a time when rail-related accidents continue to pose serious risks, any cuts to FRA personnel would undermine efforts to improve safety standards and enforcement. The absence of sufficient FRA inspectors and safety personnel could lead to more overlooked defects, longer response times for accident investigations, and a weakening of essential safety protocols. These consequences would endanger not only rail workers but also the millions of Americans who rely on rail transport daily.

Additionally, we strongly urge the Department of Transportation to maintain the integrity and independence of the FRA Office of Research, Data, and Innovation (RDI). This office plays a crucial role in advancing rail safety through data-driven research, technological advancements, and evidence-based policy recommendations. The RDI's expertise in these subjects is irreplaceable, and any consolidation with other offices would hinder or slow down these vital efforts. Weakening or merging RDI functions could result in a diminished capacity to analyze safety trends, develop innovative safety solutions, and implement best practices that protect rail workers and the public.

We urge you to reject these dangerous staffing reductions and instead prioritize maintaining and strengthening FRA staffing levels. Rail safety should never be compromised, and a fully staffed FRA is essential to protecting the workers who keep America's railroads running and ensuring the security of the nation's transportation infrastructure.

Sincerely,

Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS)

American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA)

American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)

Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET)

Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees Division (BMWED)

Brotherhood of Railway Carmen (BRC)

International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM)

International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, Blacksmiths, Forgers, and Helpers (IBB)

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW)

International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers—Mechanical Division (SMART-MD)

International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers—Transportation Division (SMART-TD)

National Conference of Firemen & Oilers, SEIU (NCFO)

Transportation Communications International Union (TCU)

Transport Workers Union of America (TWU)

Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO (TTD)