Transportation Labor Sounds the Alarm on Industry Efforts to Weaken Rail Safety at Grade Crossings and Signal Systems

Across America's vast rail network, there are thousands of signal systems and grade crossings that work together to guide train movements, prevent trains from entering the same section of track as another train, and alert drivers and pedestrians when trains are approaching. Signal systems effectively serve as traffic lights for railroads and help prevent train collisions and incidents by conveying the location of trains at all times. Grade crossings are where trains and rail workers interact with vehicles, pedestrians, bicyclists, school buses, emergency responders, and others. This critical infrastructure allows trains to operate safely and reliably, and prevents derailments or collisions. If or when these systems fail, it could mean disaster for rail workers and communities that host railroad tracks.

Signal workers, represented by the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen (BRS), are the rail workers who are entrusted with maintaining the signal systems and more than 200,000 grade crossings across the national rail network. Signal workers install, maintain, and repair vital signal systems, including warning devices at highway-rail grade crossings, so that trains, passengers, and train crews can move safely and efficiently through our rail system. Signalmen are also charged with keeping defect detectors, switch machines, interlockings, and other rail components in proper working order. Their years of experience in the field have granted them deep expertise in the terrains and territories they maintain.

In order to ensure that signal systems are working properly, signalmen conduct a variety of inspections and tests that are required by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). Currently, the FRA requires regular monthly, quarterly, and annual in-person inspections of signal systems to ensure that their electronic components, hardware, and microprocessor systems are functioning as intended. **The FRA should maintain and Congress should codify the current federal safety standards for grade crossings and signal systems.**

Amid the Administration's deregulatory agenda, the rail industry has been pushing for sweeping changes to longstanding and commonsense federal regulations that govern signal systems and other safety-critical equipment. In 2025, the Association for American Railroads (AAR), the trade association representing the Class 1 freight railroad companies, released a wish list aimed at repealing or weakening more than 80 federal regulations across the railroad industry. Rather than raising the bar on safety, the industry is seeking to reduce human inspections, replace federally-required testing with unregulated technologies, and skirt existing safety regulations by expanding the use of waivers.

Currently, the FRA requires ground testing when an energy bus, which provides power to signal systems, is placed into service, and every 3 months thereafter. In its deregulatory wishlist, AAR

claims that the 180,000 annual ground tests conducted by signalmen "serve no safety purposes." The FRA should not take this assertion as proof. Proof is derived by objective data which is independently validated on defects, activation failures, and near misses, which AAR and their Class 1 members have continuously failed to disclose.

Let us be clear: there is currently no technology that is capable of replacing the trained judgment and field expertise of signalmen. According to AAR, "railroads have installed more than 45,000 microprocessor-based systems that allow for continuous ground monitoring and other advanced designs that are not susceptible to unsafe conditions caused by grounds." These microprocessor-based devices that the industry proposes as a substitute for human visual inspections are notoriously unreliable and frequently produce errors, malfunctioning alerts, and false readings. The union representing the nation's dedicated signal workforce, the BRS, is working with its membership to document these errors.

In all, AAR proposes to weaken or eliminate six types of required monthly signal inspections that would effectively reduce the presence of signal personnel at crossings from monthly visits to once every 90 days. The fact remains that continuous remote ground monitoring systems and other technologies cannot make judgement calls that trained signal inspectors make on a daily basis. These inspectors have proven, hands-on experience and expertise in being a critical safeguard against system failure for a safety-critical piece of infrastructure.

Grade crossings are where rail infrastructure meets the general public. A missed defect can lead to catastrophic consequences. With more than 200,000 crossings across the national rail network and thousands of collisions annually, the FRA should not be relaxing the inspection and maintenance framework that keeps crossing warning systems reliable.

The fact remains that the FRA's agency mission is defined by safety and should therefore be driven by tasks that support this mission. The FRA must not repeal longstanding safeguards based on rail carrier assertions, especially when the affected systems protect train crews, rail-workers, passengers, motorists, and pedestrians at thousands of crossings every day.

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