

FRA Should Reverse Efforts to Gut Certification Standards for Railroad Dispatch and Signal Employees

The Federal Railroad Administration should reverse its move to rescind the Certification of Dispatchers rule under 49 CFR Part 245 and the Certification of Signal Employees rule under 49 CFR Part 246. FRA adopted these regulations in May 2024, years after a congressional directive and regulatory review that concluded signalmen and dispatchers perform safety-critical work and require proper training and certification.

Under Parts 245 and 246, railroads must develop formal certification programs for dispatchers and signal employees, respectively, approved by the FRA, to ensure that signal employees and dispatchers have the training, knowledge, and skills necessary to perform their duties safely.

These certification requirements were not created overnight or arbitrarily. Nearly 20 years before their promulgation, Congress enacted Section 402 of the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008, directing FRA to study whether certification of certain crafts or classes of employees, including signalmen employees and dispatchers, was necessary to reduce the number and rate of accidents and incidents or to improve railroad safety. After years of review, the FRA concluded that both dispatchers and signal employees were among the strongest candidates for certification because of the role they play in railroad operations.

Train dispatchers control and authorize train movements across large rail territories and make decisions that directly affect the safety of railroad workers, passengers, and the public. These “rail traffic controllers” line trains, enforce speed restrictions, protect highway-rail grade crossings, protect roadway workers working on or near rail tracks, and get both passengers and cargo where they need to go safely and efficiently. In the report FRA submitted to Congress in 2015 that supported the creation of Part 245, FRA found that the vast majority of dispatcher tasks are critical to railroad safety with potentially catastrophic consequences if not performed properly. FRA reported on the complicated and demanding nature of dispatchers’ work, which requires cognitively complex tasks, rapid decision making, and balancing of demands.

Likewise, signal employees install, inspect, repair, and maintain signal systems, train control technology, hot-box detectors, and other equipment designed to prevent collisions, derailments, and equipment failures. In the same 2015 report, FRA determined that signal employees perform safety-sensitive work, as evidenced by their work on wayside signal and train control systems that are safety-critical for passenger and freight rail operations. Signal employees also perform sophisticated work involving complex positive train control systems.

Both crafts are frontline safety positions that are essential to the operation of modern railroads.

In May 2024, FRA issued final rules establishing the new certification requirements. Now, FRA proposes to reverse course: in May 2026, FRA proposed to eliminate Parts 245 and 246 because the agency believes the compliance costs for railroads outweigh the expected benefits. Railroad safety should not be judged only by short-term cost calculations. The FRA has acknowledged that many of the most important benefits are difficult to calculate, including reductions in accident cleanup costs, environmental damage, property loss, service disruptions, train delays, and broader economic harm caused by rail accidents. The cost of a single preventable dispatching mistake, signal failure, derailment, or collision can far exceed the projected cost of certification requirements. And while safety systems exist to prevent catastrophic events before they happen, these systems are fallible, and a well-trained, certified rail worker can be the difference in consistency on the railway, or catastrophe in our communities.

Instead, the proposed repeal is largely tied to broader federal deregulation efforts and cost-cutting initiatives. The FRA has acknowledged that it still has the legal authority to require certification but is choosing not to move forward based on policy and cost concerns. The push to repeal these certification rules also came after petitions from railroad industry organizations, including the Association of American Railroads, the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association, the Commuter Rail Coalition, and the American Public Transportation Association. Most of the concerns raised focused on administrative burden, compliance timelines, contractor oversight, and implementation costs — not on whether certification improves safety.

Elimination of Parts 245 and 246 will reduce oversight of safety-critical railroad employees at a time when the demands of the job only continue to grow. Dispatching territories are becoming larger, railroad systems are becoming more centralized, and signal technology is becoming more advanced and complex. These changes make strong professional training and certification standards more important, not less.

Rather than rescind these rules, FRA should support maintaining and strengthening dispatcher and signal employee certification standards while working with labor organizations and railroads to address reasonable implementation concerns. Keeping these protections in place would promote consistent national training standards, improve workforce professionalism, strengthen accountability, and help ensure the continued safe operation of the nation's freight, passenger, and commuter rail systems.

Policy Statement No. S26-10

ADOPTED 6.7.26