Transportation Labor Urges Congress to Require Federal Oversight of Train Dispatching Software

The U.S. rail network depends on Computer-Aided Train Dispatching (CAD) systems to guide the safe movement of passenger and freight trains. CAD systems consist of software that shows where trains are, how rail routes are lined, and which rail tracks are occupied. Train Dispatchers utilize these systems to authorize safe train movements, issue and enforce speed restrictions, and protect grade crossing malfunctions. These directives from Train Dispatchers help guide the safe movement of trains operating on the network, and are critical to providing safety protection for trains, signal and track workers, and communities where trains operate.

Despite the central role Train Dispatchers and CAD systems play in keeping trains moving safely, there are no federal standards governing these systems. Software for CAD systems are developed and maintained by vendors contracted by the railroads, and are presently implemented without any oversight, testing, or regulation by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA).

Transportation labor urges Congress to pass the bipartisan Safe Tracks Act, H.R. 8410, led by Representatives Laura Gillen (D-NY) and Mike Lawler (R-NY), to require FRA oversight, review, and approval of train dispatching software. The reliability and security of these systems are of utmost concern to American train dispatchers.

FRA regulations call for rigorous inspection and testing of track conditions, locomotives, brakes, railcars, and signal systems. Other railroading technologies that prevent train collisions and incidents, such as Positive Train Control (PTC) systems, are also subject to FRA oversight, testing, and approval. Unlike PTC systems, CAD systems lack federal oversight, resulting in train dispatchers uncovering safety defects that remain unresolved for extended periods. These include near head-on collisions at a major commuter rail, near miss fatalities of roadway workers, and more.

When CAD systems malfunction, severely lag, crash, or display incorrect information, Train Dispatchers can be left "flying blind", unable to direct rail traffic or properly protect railroad workers or the public. These situations happen all too often and all across the country. Train Dispatchers represented by the American Train Dispatchers Association (ATDA) have experienced these recent defects, outages, and system failures:

- **In March 2024,** ATDA contacted the FRA concerning issues with BNSF's automated dispatching technology. When the feature was enabled, a defect was created which caused train routes to be misrepresented to the train dispatcher. While an investigation by FRA confirmed the problem reported by ATDA members, **FRA noted in its letter that, "there are no supporting regulations providing oversight to dispatch systems used by the railroad industry…".**

- **In July 2025, Canadian National Railway experienced a** CAD system outage that affected its entire 6,400-mile U.S. network, leaving dispatchers unable to track train movements across 16 states.
- **In August 2025, a system error at Norfolk Southern** allowed critical safety protections to be removed from the dispatching system by an unauthorized employee while maintenance crews were working on active track**.**
- **In November 2025, BNSF Railway experienced a widespread dispatching system outage affecting approximately 94 percent of its network across 28 states,** leaving dispatchers unable to reliably track train movements or control routing**.**
- **In January 2026, Norfolk Southern dispatchers were required to remove all safety blocks, info tags, track authorities, speed restrictions, and crossing protection blocks to update the system.** The Dispatcher then had to re-enter all items manually.
- **Ongoing issues with Norfolk Southern's dispatching system in Butler and Goshen, Indiana resulted in grade crossing protections being applied incorrectly or only partially**, potentially exposing highway users and train crews to unnecessary risk.
- **In May 2026, a CAD system on a Class I carrier erroneously lined up a northbound signal, dropping the signal in the face of an opposing southbound train.** Fortunately, the southbound train was able to stop prior to passing the signal, narrowly avoiding a catastrophic event.

Our concerns extend beyond these day-to-day examples of software failures. An April 2026 research report from J.P. Morgan's investment bank warns that operational technology systems are among the most cybersecurity-vulnerable infrastructure in the country. The report notes that roughly half of all operational technology assets are classified as "unpatchable," meaning their vulnerabilities cannot be addressed through software updates alone and require hardware replacement. It further warns that disruptions to these systems "can cascade across entire networks and sectors," and concludes that regulation is essential because market incentives alone will not drive adequate investment in resilience. FRA oversight of dispatching software, as provided for in the Safe Tracks Act, is precisely the kind of first-step regulatory framework necessary to manage cybersecurity risks to the nation's railroads.

We should no longer accept these hazards; it's time for the FRA to regulate. We call on Congress to adopt the commonsense and bipartisan Safe Tracks Act to improve the reliability of dispatching software and ensure that Train Dispatchers have the tools they need to keep the public safe.

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