

Surface Transportation Board
395 E street southwest
Washington DC 20423

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RE:EP 770 urgent issues in freight rail service

April 22, 2022

Dear Chairman Oberman,

As a BNSF engineer with 20 years of service, I would like to talk over the issue of bad service, and fatigue and the railroad's implementation of precision scheduled railroading also known as PSR. These policies and procedures have left the railroads understaffed, unsafe and unreliable. The Class I railroads are putting profits ahead of safety and giving nothing but lip service to its employees, customers and the general public. I served as a site safety union representative for my local terminal for 2 years. Many of the obstacles I dealt with was lack of funding and indifference to safety

The Class I railroads have not taken safety seriously, even when I hired out in 2002. One would think with the wonderful advances in technology that railroads would be in a better position to correct many of the safety issues we have dealt with, especially train lineups. Instead, it has gotten much worse. On issue of fatigue, the only part of safety they have spent money on is a handful of videos about the levels of sleep and deprivation and to mitigate their effects. When I hired out, our extra board had what was called a 7/3 rest cycle board. You were subject to call for 7 days and had 3 days off. This was not perfect but it did allow time off not being subject to call and you could look ahead and plan your schedule. The BNSF then abruptly canceled this agreement when the Rail Improvement and Security Act (RISA) was signed into law. To this day, there has not been any meaningful talks with employees to help figure out how to help with fatigue. With rail traffic fluctuating over the last decade, the class I's have hired conductors, then had them furloughed or forced them to move around because they could not hold the terminal they originally hired out. Sometimes it is many months. These types of situations create undue burdens especially on these employees' families who have to either move to chase work or families stay home and the employee chases work. Just hoping to find some sort of stability in their lives. There are many situations where an employee will have 5 consecutive starts and thinking that they will get that "6th start" to get their federally mandated 48 hours off that the BNSF will intentionally hold that train until the employee has 24 hours, 1 minute rest to intentionally restart their "starts" to deprive them of days off due the carriers cutting manpower so deeply only to please the stockholders and managers trying stay within their already cut to the bare bone budgets. There is no way that cutting employees will fix the fatigue issue. I urge the STB to require Class I railroads to make better and more predictable lineups and require more manpower to address the fatigue problems that gotten much worse over the last 3 to 4 years.

Locomotive Shortage

Class I railroads pushing the PSR (Precision Railroad) are storing locomotives across the nation due to the thought of "less is better". Trains have doubled in length, while barely adding the correct amount of horsepower to safely pull these trains. As the trains get longer, I mean 10,000 feet or longer, it is more difficult to handle and repair mechanical breakdowns and blocking crossings the emergency personnel need to access. Automated dispatching programs have made train dispatching much more inefficient creating unnecessary delays, longer on duty times and increased fatigue. Also, railroads are pushing engineers to use TO, (Trip Optimizer) as it makes the train speeds slower, and they claim it cuts fuel costs. We are told via paperwork to isolate locomotives and use the least number of engines to pull the train. We are not allowed to turn on more engines without asking for permission, which is usually denied. If we start thinking for ourselves and turn on engines without asking, we are disciplined for it for insubordination. Train speeds are routinely 15 to 25 mph less than the posted track speed causing unnecessary delays, longer on duty times. Lack of available locomotives has caused much longer delays of moving freight nationwide. On BNSF, trains will sit over a week in a major classification yard waiting on power. When the yard gets full, they will take a train to a siding or smaller yard along the mainline, park the train and take the power back to the major classification yard as the power is so desperately needed on another train. This has been ongoing for over 6 months now. There are hundreds of locomotives stored across the BNSF system. If you want to see for yourself, look at YouTube and type in BNSF locomotive storage. Also, class I railroads have cut mechanical personnel to the bare bones creating longer times to repair over worked locomotives. This is all because of PSR or equivalent operating system. Because of these actions we have no idea when we will go to work since BNSF does not even know when the power will arrive to pull the trains that have been sitting for up to a week. This has caused increased fatigue for its employees, hurt customers as they are waiting weeks for their cargo, but the worst part is the Class I's are part of the supply chain shortage problem that is totally unnecessary. I urge the STB to force the Class I railroads get locomotives back in service, implement real fatigue measures that actually work for the safety of its employees and move the cargo in a safe, and timely manner for the good of the nation.

This does not have to be this way. The days are gone when the visionary leaders of the railroads cared about the future of the company, its employees and the good of the nation. Now, Class I railroad management will do anything to cut a dollar and make sure it goes to wall street. Precision Railroad is just another plan of corporate greed at the expense of hard-working employees, shippers and America. I hope something positive will be done about it. This nation needs it.

Sincerely,
Mark Vorce
Locomotive Engineer