

# What Railroads Haul: Construction Materials

America's freight railroads are crucial to the construction that spurs economic development and enhances our quality of life — from houses to highways, skyscrapers, apartment buildings, factories and office parks. Railroads will continue to carry the things we need to build the world of tomorrow.

Along with construction-related materials such as crushed stone and lumber, railroads haul large amounts of raw materials that go into producing many construction materials.

Different construction materials are carried in different types of railcars:

**Lumber** is typically transported in centerbeam flatcars, which can be loaded and unloaded with forklifts from both sides simultaneously. Lumber is often placed in containers for shipment overseas as well. Most lumber in the U.S. is used for housing, so there is a close correlation between rail carloads of lumber and housing starts. One freight rail car carries enough framing lumber to build five and a half homes.

**Bulk shipments of dry cement** were among the first commodities to be hauled in covered hoppers. Because of their sturdiness and ease of use, they're still the railcar of choice for cement transport today. Typically shipped in free-flowing, dry form, around 110 tons of cement can be piped directly into a hopper car. The cars have outlets on the bottom, allowing easy unloading at the destination. Efficient loading and unloading mean the equipment can be turned more quickly, lowering costs for both railroads and shippers.

**Crushed stone** is usually used in residential and nonresidential construction applications (e.g., as a base material in highway construction or as the major ingredient in asphalt), but it's also used in many other environmental, utility and agricultural applications and as ballast for railroads. Typically moved in open hoppers and gondolas, crushed stone is found and consumed in large amounts in every state. The average length of haul for a crushed stone rail movement is only about 200 miles, one of the lowest among major commodities carried by rail.

## Key Takeaways

In a typical year, U.S. freight railroads transport around three million carloads of construction-related materials, approximately 10% of total rail carloads. In 2021, U.S. railroads hauled:

- Approximately 750,000 carloads of crushed and broken stone.
- Approximately 420,000 carloads of lumber and wood products.
- More than 210,000 carloads of cement.
- More than 95,000 carloads of concrete, gypsum and plaster products.
- More than 560,000 carloads of steel and other primary metal products.
- Nearly 700,000 carloads of iron ore and approximately 250,000 carloads of scrap metal for producing new steel.