

# 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 the production of 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 at the same time. 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. In fact, 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 that allow for easy unloading at destination. Efficient loading and unloading means 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 more than two million carloads of construction-related materials, more than 6% of total rail carloads.
- In 2019, U.S. railroads hauled:
  - More than 802,000 carloads of crushed and broken stone.
  - More than 416,000 carloads of lumber and wood products.
  - More than 215,000 carloads of cement.
  - Nearly 94,000 carloads of concrete, gypsum and plaster products.
  - Nearly 569,000 carloads of steel and other primary metal products.
  - More than 740,000 carloads of iron ore and 240,000 carloads of scrap metal for producing new steel.