

What Railroads Haul: Food & Farm Products

The U.S. [agricultural sector](#) is the most efficient in the world, and railroads' scale helps make that possible. For example, one railcar can hold enough wheat to make more than 250,000 loaves of bread; one railcar of corn is enough for the lifetime feeding requirements of 37,000 chickens.

America's farmers are huge exporters — in a typical year, grain exports are equivalent to around 30% of U.S. grain production. That couldn't happen without railroads, which connect our nation's primary crop-producing areas with ports hundreds or thousands of miles away. According to the USDA, railroads account for well over a third of U.S. grain export movements.

Combined, around 3.3 million carloads of farm, food and related products are shipped in a typical year by America's railroads, equal to around 13% of total U.S. rail carloads.

Grain, Fresh Fruits & Vegetables: According to the USDA, railroads account for around 25% of U.S. grain movements. In a typical year, railroads also ship some 65,000 carloads of fresh fruits and vegetables, thanks to refrigerated rail cars (also known as "reefers") that allow the transportation of perishable food products. Refrigeration technology has evolved over the years; today, cryogenic refrigeration equipment on railcars is common.

Food Products: Railroads transport some 1.6 million carloads of food products in a typical year, including around 400,000 carloads of grain mill products (such as corn syrup, flour, animal feed, pet food and more); 260,000 carloads of processed soybeans, mainly soybean meal and soybean oil; 350,000 carloads of beverages and extracts; 140,000 carloads of canned and preserved foods; 75,000 carloads of meat and poultry products; and 375,000 carloads of other miscellaneous food products.

Agricultural Chemicals: Railroads move around 175,000 carloads of fertilizers and other agricultural chemicals in a typical year, as well as a couple hundred thousand carloads of minerals used as raw materials for fertilizer production, including potash, crude sulfur, and phosphate rock.

Ethanol: Most ethanol produced in the United States comes from corn; railroads shipped more than 377,000 carloads of ethanol in 2018, equivalent to 67% of U.S. ethanol production.

Key Takeaways

- Without railroads, it would be impossible to keep the shelves in our grocery stores full.
- In a typical year, railroads haul around 1.6 million carloads of grain and other farm products; 1.6 million carloads of food products; and several hundred thousand carloads of fertilizers and the raw materials that go into making them.
- Combined, around 3.3 million carloads of farm, food and related products are shipped in a typical year by America's railroads, equal to around 13% of total U.S. rail carloads.

