10 Freight Rail Fast Facts

Finding solutions to the challenges our nation and planet face requires strong partnerships, innovative thinking and grit. No other industry knows this better than rail, which has been transforming for nearly 200 years to keep meeting America’s changing needs. Together, freight and passenger railroads help deliver economic growth, support job creation, provide crucial environmental benefits and increase our nation’s productivity and competitiveness. Here are 10 quick facts to know about North America’s freight rail network.

1. **We’ve Got the Tab:** Unlike other modes of transportation — such as highways — America’s freight railroads overwhelmingly own, build, maintain, operate and pay for their infrastructure with little government assistance. Thanks to balanced economic regulation, America’s freight railroads spent nearly $20 billion a year over the past five years on capital expenditures and maintenance expenses, including locomotives, tracks and technology. On average, freight railroads spend six times more on capital expenditures as a percentage of revenue than the average U.S. manufacturer.

2. **Safe & Getting Safer:** A commitment towards an accident-free future is in the DNA of every railroader. Railroads focus on reducing the leading causes of accidents while safeguarding their employees and the communities they serve, including pedestrians and motorists. Between 2000 and 2021, the train accident was down 33% and between 2000 and 2020, the hazmat accident rate was down 60%. The rail employee injury rate in 2020 was an all-time low.

3. **#EcoFriendly:** Railroads are a responsible way to mitigate the transportation-related causes of climate change. Railroads account for roughly 40% of U.S. long-distance freight volume (measured by ton-miles) — more than any other mode of transportation — but only 1.9% of U.S. transportation-related greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Even more impressive: U.S. freight railroads, on average, move one ton of freight nearly 500 miles on one gallon of fuel. These sustainability achievements are made possible by railroads’ commitment to innovating technologies, investing in new equipment and pioneering more efficient operations.

4. **Critical to the Economy:** America’s privately owned freight railroads are the most productive and cost-effective in the world, connecting consumers and businesses across the country and globally. Freight rail accounts for around 40% of U.S. long-distance ton-miles — more than any other mode of transportation — and hauls approximately one-third of the country’s exports.

5. **Not Your Grandpa’s Railroad:** Today’s freight rail network is something we once only dreamed of in sci-fi novels. Trains powered by 200-ton locomotives equipped with supercomputers capable of processing a billion data points per second move across the country. Inspection drones fly high over rail yards and around bridges while ground-penetrating radar and wayside sensors identify possible track defects. And with the newly implemented Positive Train Control (PTC) systems, on-board computer software can now automatically stop a train to reduce certain types of human-caused errors. Policymakers can help railroads maintain this forward momentum by providing a regulatory environment that incentivizes developing and implementing technologies that further improve rail safety and efficiency.
6. **Customer-focused**: Shippers from nearly every industrial, wholesale, retail and resource-based sector of the U.S. economy rely on freight railroads to move their raw materials and finished goods to market domestically and globally. By optimizing operations, railroads improve capacity, reliability and productivity across the rail network while delivering record performance and service levels at competitive prices. In fact, the affordability of freight rail saves rail customers (and, ultimately, American consumers) billions of dollars each year and enhances the global competitiveness of U.S. products. Average rail rates (measured by inflation-adjusted revenue per ton-mile) are 44% lower today than in 1981, meaning the average rail shipper can move much more freight for around the same price it paid 40 years ago. Railroads must be able to continue adapting to stay agile and responsive as markets evolve, the competitive landscape changes and freight demand grows an expected 30% by 2040.

7. **Partners to Passenger Rail**: Freight railroads are committed to working with passenger carriers such as Amtrak to maintain a healthy, vibrant rail network. Amtrak is an important part of America’s surface transportation system, providing an environmentally friendly way for millions of people to reach their destination each year. Of the 21,400 miles on which it operates, Amtrak owns approximately 620 miles in the Northeast. Some of the remaining miles over which Amtrak operates are owned by states or regional transportation authorities, but the vast majority are owned by freight railroads. In fact, some 70% of the train-miles operated by Amtrak are on tracks owned by freight railroads, meaning freight rail’s infrastructure investments benefit commuters and consumers.

8. **Adapting to COVID-19**: Railroads and their pandemic response teams continue to safeguard their employees and maintain the flow of goods necessary to keep America moving. Freight railroads nimbly responded to COVID-19 by following CDC guidelines, providing information to employees from trusted public health authorities and adapting operations to limit potential exposure. Railroads have also adapted to rapidly shifting markets to meet customer demand, including a marked increase in e-commerce.

9. **Part of Your Policy Solutions**: Because railroads are three to four times more fuel efficient than trucks, taking freight off highways reduces GHG emissions while alleviating highway congestion and road deterioration. Railroads are uniquely positioned to achieve policy priorities such as mitigating climate change and revitalizing public infrastructure such as highways. Policymakers at all levels of government should implement policies that incentivize freight-by-rail movements.

10. **Next Stop - The Future**: To remain best in the world, North America’s freight railroads need data-driven policies that allow innovative thinking and ongoing transformation. The bipartisan overhaul of freight rail’s economic regulation 40 years ago via the Staggers Rail Act shows the positive impact smart policies can have. Future growth requires equally sensible policy. Mandating specific practices, like staffing or train makeup, would undermine the efficiency and the benefits freight rail provides to the public. Moving forward, the industry must have operational and safety regulation that allows railroads to compete, invest back into their networks and continue delivering for our economy.