Infrastructure Report Card: Rail Receives Highest Grade

KEY TAKEAWAY

Thanks in part to freight rail’s ongoing billions of dollars in annual private investments, The American Society of Civil Engineers awarded rail its highest grade in the last two Infrastructure Report Cards, which evaluate America’s overall infrastructure.

Every four years, the American Society of Civil Engineers — the nation’s oldest engineering society — provides a comprehensive infrastructure assessment of America’s infrastructure using a simple A to F school report card format. The highly-respected ASCE Infrastructure Report Card examines the condition, needs and recommendations for 17 major categories of infrastructure, including rail. For the last two report cards, rail has received the highest grade.

As the report notes, rail’s high grade is thanks in part to freight rail’s massive annual investments. Since 1980, when railroads were partially de-regulated, freight rail has privately spent about $780 billion on its networks to strengthen infrastructure, increase safety and improve service. To raise the grade higher, ASCE recommends continuing “a financial and regulatory environment that supports private rail investment and innovative financing options for future investment.”

Safety

A well-run railroad is a safe railroad. The ASCE highlighted rail’s commitment to developing and deploying technologies that improve safety and service.

“Rail technology development continues to focus on improving system efficiency and safety. Industry technological advances include identifying freight car, locomotive, cargo, and track problems before accidents, damage, or delays occur. Numerous track and infrastructure improvements have been advanced, including the use of defect detection vehicles, which detect internal flaws in rails; improved metallurgy and fastening systems, which have enhanced track stability; and research to extend rail life, reduce maintenance costs, and improve safety.”
Emissions Reduction

Freight rail’s foundation provides a solution to climate change. The top grade for rail is good news for the Biden administration’s efforts to mitigate climate change as a key policy priority. “The world must be put on a sustainable climate pathway to protect Americans and the domestic economy from harmful climate impacts and to create well-paying union jobs as part of the climate solution,” the administration said in one of its first executive orders.

That fits the very definition of freight railroads — an unexpected part of the climate solution that directly supports thousands of union jobs and can meet the increasing demands of an economy on the rebound. Railroads are a responsible, non-partisan solution to mitigating 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 1.7% 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.

Railroads are also central to climate goals because they can take freight off highways — reducing congestion, road deterioration and emissions. Analysis shows that if even just 25% of highway freight currently moving at least 750 miles went by rail instead, annual greenhouse gas emissions would fall by approximately 13.6 million tons.

The question for policymakers should be: how can we move more goods via rail to combat climate change? Exploring measures that incentivize freight-by-rail movements can serve as a tool to help the environment, not down the road (or should we say tracks) — but immediately.

Investments

As the ASCE report makes plain, one major difference between freight railroads and other modes of transportation is that railroads are not a burden on taxpayers. America’s freight railroads own, build, maintain, operate and pay for their infrastructure with little government assistance, investing well above $23 billion a year over the past five years. Freight railroads stand nearly alone as a stakeholder in not seeking large sums of federal dollars in any infrastructure bill.

And with the U.S. Department of Transportation projecting a 30% increase in freight demand by 2040, it’s more important than ever to ensure railroads can continue to maintain their critical infrastructure.

U.S. freight railroads are one of the most productive and cost-effective transportation networks in the world, hauling more freight than any other transportation mode and connecting consumers and businesses across the country. But they can — and will do — much more as the nation turns to this vital industry to arrest environmental damage and nurture economic recovery.