Freight Rail & Blocked Crossings

**Key Takeaway:** Railroads deploy operational strategies, invest in infrastructure and technology and work closely with local government partners to manage and mitigate the impact of rail crossings on communities to reduce the number of crossings, improve safety and ensure efficient operations.

With more than 200,000 grade crossings nationwide, railroads work closely with community leaders, government partners, first responders and the public to manage and mitigate the impact of grade crossings on communities. Each grade crossing is unique, and railroad operational teams deploy various strategies, depending on the circumstances, to keep rail and vehicle traffic safely moving through these intersections.

From adapting operations near busy intersections to supporting related infrastructure investments, the industry is dedicated to making meaningful, lasting progress in addressing chronically blocked crossings. As rail and vehicle traffic continues to grow, the railroad industry will continue working to serve customers safely and efficiently while minimizing the impact of operations on surrounding communities.

**Why do trains block crossings?**

Railroads block crossings during their regular operations as trains travel between terminals. Although railroads work hard to minimize the duration of these interruptions, delays can arise due to various factors, including unforeseen events within the network such as weather-related track obstructions, signal malfunctions, equipment breakdowns, or mandated mechanical inspections.

Additionally, switching activities, which involve moving rail cars between tracks or facilities to handle customer goods, can contribute to delays. Trains may also slow down near crossings while entering or leaving yards, or they may be held up due to the presence of passenger or other freight rail traffic. Furthermore, disruptions caused by vandalism to rail signals or tracks, trespassers on the rail tracks, or emergency response operations near the tracks can require trains to come to a stop.

**What are railroads doing about it?**

Railroads recognize that the most effective long-term solution to mitigate the impact of grade crossings is to reduce their number across the rail network. That is why they work with local road authorities, private property owners, and governmental agencies like the DOT to consolidate, upgrade, or close crossings. Since 2005, the total number of public crossings has decreased by 10%, reflecting ongoing efforts to improve safety and reduce disruptions.
As urban and suburban areas grow, railroads work closely with local planners to strategically plan infrastructure, aiming to reduce community interaction with rail operations while maintaining safe and efficient freight movement. They collaborate with governments to improve alternate roadway access, investing heavily in crossing maintenance, siding upgrades, and technological advancements. Railroads also prioritize public safety through educational campaigns and technology integration to enhance infrastructure management.

**Every crossing has a 24/7 emergency phone number and an identification number to communicate directly with the railroad.**

Using this caller information, railroads coordinate with communities to identify workable short- and long-term solutions to mitigate crossing impacts. Some railroads also provide real-time information about a currently blocked crossing and an estimated time for when it may be resolved.

**The freight rail industry embraces technology that enhances safety and efficiency.**

Railroads are partnering with technology companies to develop digital signs that let the public know when a train is blocking a crossing so they can choose another route in advance. "Estimated Wait Time" signs are already in use in some areas, and that information also helps emergency response dispatchers direct resources around the blocked crossing.

**Railroads work with non-profit organizations to increase grade crossing safety.**

The railroads have partnered with the non-profit organization Operation Lifesaver to sponsor programs in more than 40 states to educate communities about safety around rail-highway grade crossings. Operation Lifesaver works with the U.S. Department of Transportation each year to raise awareness, including during Rail Safety Week.