

Freight Railroads & First Responders

Key Takeaway: With extensive training programs, collaborations with government partners, and the development of the AskRail app, railroads ensure that emergency responders have the necessary resources and information to handle hazmat incidents effectively.

Nothing is more important to freight railroads than protecting their employees and the communities they serve. As the safest way to move goods over land, including hazardous materials, railroads are committed to making a safe network even safer. Each year railroads train tens of thousands of first responders. Railroads also worked with multiple industry partners in 2014 to develop the [AskRail™ app](#), which helps emergency responders effectively and safely respond to incidents by providing immediate information about railcars carrying hazmat.

Along with maintaining 24/7 hazmat safety teams and emergency response experts strategically located throughout the rail network and providing 24-hour emergency hotlines for first responders and the public, railroads work in lockstep with industry and government partners. Some of these partners include the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Railroads work with partners and the government to annually train tens of thousands of emergency responders.

Programs are tailored to meet the specific needs and availability of responders, covering a range of topics from general rail operations to specialized response courses. Railroads engage with local firehouses across the country, conducting hazmat training and emergency simulations through initiatives such as the TRANSCAER Safety Train—a mobile classroom. For those unable to attend in-person training, railroads also offer free online self-study courses, providing accessible options for continued education.

In Pueblo, CO, at the newly reimagined Security & Emergency Response Center (SERTC), first responders receive immersive, realistic hazmat training through full-scale scenarios. SERTC's onsite resident courses range from 24 to 80 hours, led by the skillful instructors of Team SERTC, drawing on their years of experience in fire service, hazmat response and contracting, emergency medical response, railroads and industrial environments.

Today, more than 2.3 million first responders have access to AskRail.

In partnership with the International Association of Fire Chiefs, freight railroads created the free AskRail app, which provides first responders with timely data about what type of hazmat a railcar is carrying so they can make an informed decision about how to respond to a rail emergency safely.

A recent critical risk assessment to evaluate how AskRail performed highlighted the need for a more centralized, universal approach to provide AskRail data directly to both professional and volunteer firefighters. In addition to greatly expanding the availability of AskRail, this new approach enhances continuity of access and information; ensures the reliability of communications streams and streamlines communications to allow for more efficient response.

Freight railroads work with local fire, health, education and emergency response teams to create and assess emergency response plans.

To enhance first responders' readiness for potential rail hazmat incidents, railroads share an inventory of emergency response resources along crude oil routes, including equipment locations and contacts. Collaborating with government agencies, they developed the Rail Corridor Risk Management System (RCRMS), a sophisticated tool for selecting safer routes based on factors like hazmat volume and emergency response capability.

Railroads regularly engage with on-the-ground first responders, provide rigorous employee training, and share confidential commodity flow information with emergency agencies. State Emergency Response Commissions are notified about routes of trains carrying one million or more gallons of Bakken crude oil.

Freight railroads are prepared to respond to emergencies.

Railroads collaborate with dedicated police forces and deploy full-time personnel, environmental, industrial hygiene, hazmat, and medical consultants strategically across their extensive freight rail network. These professionals, available 24/7, focus on hazmat safety and emergency response. Railroads also position emergency response equipment along routes, maintain a supportive police force, and offer 24-hour emergency hotlines for first responders and the public.

When a hazardous substance incident occurs, railroads follow strict regulations and work closely with government agencies and safety experts to immediately contain the situation, protect the health and safety of citizens and the environment, remediate any impacts and carefully return to service.