Freight Rail Employee Safety

Key Takeaway: Always prioritizing safety, freight railroads have significantly reduced accidents and employee injuries. They create a safety culture, protect employees who report concerns and aim to further enhance safety through reporting programs.

The safety of employees and the communities along train routes is a top priority for freight rail companies. Since 2000, for all railroads, on-duty fatalities declined 71% since 2000 and reached an all-time low in 2023. For Class I railroad employees, the rate of injuries and fatalities has dropped by 63% since 2000 reaching an all-time low in 2023.

From the moment a trainee starts work, railroads emphasize the pivotal role each employee plays in ensuring personal safety, safeguarding colleagues and protecting surrounding communities. Integral to daily operations, safety protocols are deeply ingrained, fostering a culture where employees are consistently encouraged to report safety concerns.

This proactive approach enables preemptive measures to be implemented, averting potential accidents. The industry relies on a foundation of training, technology and established programs to continually enhance safety for rail employees. Cutting-edge training centers equipped with simulators and virtual reality provide a secure environment for honing real-life skills, while peer-to-peer safety initiatives foster a collaborative approach. Various technologies are also deployed to enhance job performance, promoting both safety and efficiency.

Safer than most other industries.

Railroads are safe and continue to get safer. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reviews workplace injuries annually across different sectors. Year after year, railroads consistently outperform other transportation modes (including trucks, water transportation, and airlines) and most other major industries (including agriculture, mining, manufacturing, and construction). In fact, the Class I railroad employee injury rate per hour worked is lower than the rate for grocery and department stores. (Chart)

Reporting is an important accident prevention tool.

Good faith reporting and accountability are critical pieces of railroad safety culture. This, combined with extensive training and the industry's highly skilled frontline employees, helped make and keep railroading an exceptionally safe place to work. Employee confidential reporting is an important tool to help prevent accidents. Recognizing the value, all Class I railroads have longstanding programs that provide a protected avenue for reporting close calls or other incidents without fear of negative consequences.

Federal statute (49 USC §20109) prohibits retaliation against any employee of a railroad carrier with the intent to discourage "reporting, in good faith, a hazardous safety or security condition." Federal regulations mirror this in 49 CFR 225.33, which outlines that railroads must have internal policies prohibiting retaliation for the lawful reporting of accidents, incidents, injuries, or illnesses and prescribing disciplinary action against any employee or supervisor found to have done so.

Close Call Reporting: Railroads remain committed to joining FRA's C3RS program and have participated in several FRA Railroad Safety Advisory Committee (RSAC) meetings to find a path forward that prioritizes the safety, confidentiality, transparency and accountability necessary for 3RS to operate properly. While this process has not moved as quickly as we would prefer, railroads remain ready and willing to continue discussion at the FRA-led RSAC to find a resolution.

Rigorous training prepares employees for real-world situations.

Many railroads use a combination of field training, on-the-job training and distance learning to create their professional workforce, with some railroads owning dedicated technical training centers. Simulators range from locomotive and power-operated switches to grade crossing simulators. For example, engineers can virtually learn train handling procedures on different track parts.

They can also experience how the Positive Train Control (PTC) system initiates by constantly assessing many variables to guarantee the train has the necessary time and space to come to a stop safely where necessary to do so along the route. PTC is a set of technologies that prevent the most serious human-error accidents like train-to-train collisions and over-speed derailments. Today, PTC is fully implemented and in operation on 100% of Class I PTC route-miles network-wide.

RCL helps prevent miscommunication.

Remote control locomotives allow employees in rail yards to control and operate locomotives with hand-held transmitters, which helps reduce incidents where an engineer operating a locomotive could inadvertently injure another worker in the yard due to miscommunication.

Drones help keep employees out of harms way.

Drones play a pivotal role in railroad infrastructure maintenance, conducting comprehensive inspections of bridges and capturing video and imagery of challenging, inaccessible areas within the structures. Post-weather events, railroads deploy drones extensively to assess and identify issues such as washouts, downed trees, and misaligned tracks resulting from adverse weather conditions. Moreover, drones are instrumental in examining sections of track impacted by severe weather, providing valuable insights into potential damage and facilitating prompt response and maintenance.