Freight Railroads Are Safe Workplaces

KEY TAKEAWAY

Freight rail companies prioritize safety, with a significant reduction in accidents and employee injuries. They emphasize 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, the mainline accident rate for Class I railroads is down 48%, and the employee injury rate has dropped 59% per Class I employee.

From the day a trainee first reports on the job, railroads instill the message that every employee has a role in keeping themselves, their colleagues, and communities safe. Safety protocols are ingrained in daily operations, and employees are continuously empowered to report safety concerns so proactive steps can be taken to prevent future accidents.

Training, technology, and time-tested programs and protocols are the cornerstones of the industry’s approach to continuous safety improvement for rail employees.

State-of-the-art training centers with simulators and virtual reality allow employees to practice real-life skills in a safe and controlled environment, peer-to-peer safety programs develop a collaborative approach to safety, and various technologies help employees do their jobs more safely and efficiently.

- Training is extensive for all rail employees and is especially rigorous for the conductors and engineers operating freight trains. Nothing is more important to railroads than safeguarding the communities trains travel through and the employees that operate those trains.

- From high-flying drones to ground-penetrating radar, railroaders use a wide array of technologies to do their jobs with greater safety, accuracy and productivity than ever before.

- Positive Train Control 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.
All Class I railroads have policies and procedures that prohibit retaliation.

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.

Based on preliminary FRA data, Class I railroads are on pace for 2023 to be a new record low for employee casualties.

When it comes to worker safety, the data tells an unequivocal story. Railroads are safe and continue to get safer. Over the last ten years, the Class I railroads have averaged just over one employee injury, illness or fatality (referred to as a casualty in FRA databases) per 100 full-time equivalent employees.

Railroading is safer than most other industries.

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.

Reporting is an important accident prevention tool.

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.
The railroads are proactively exploring an additional avenue for protected anonymous reporting through the Confidential Close Call Reporting System (C3RS) program. On March 2nd, AAR President and CEO Ian Jefferies sent a letter to Secretary Buttigieg affirming the industry’s commitment to join the C3RS program and outlining areas for improvement to the program. That letter concludes, “Class I railroads remain committed to appropriate confidential close-call reporting as an essential tool in their safety toolbox.”

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.