

FRA Makes Curious Request for Input, Comment on Autonomous Trains

In March, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) sent out a shocker: a request for comment and information on trains that can run all by themselves. The rail industry - which has pushed for single employee operations of trains since November 1, 2004 - has not even come close to making that goal a reality. So it comes as a surprise that the FRA would chose this moment to solicit input on the subject of zero employee crews.

In an ominous sounding press release, the agency stated: "FRA requests information and comment on the future of automation in the railroad industry. FRA is interested in hearing from industry stakeholders, the public, local and state governments, and any other interested parties on the potential benefits, costs, risks, and challenges to implementing automated railroad operations. FRA also seeks comment on how the agency can best support the railroad industry's development and implementation of new and emerging technologies in automation that could lead to safety improvements or increased efficiencies in railroad operations."

By early May as this issue of *The Highball* goes to press, nearly 800 comments were received, the vast majority of these from

railroad workers and family members, overwhelmingly opposed to the concept. Their concerns are endless and include: operations at restricted speed; the aftermath of crossing accidents and derailments; accessing trains that are disabled in remote areas; failure of the autonomous trains to recognize track abnormalities in advance; passenger apprehension; inherent inefficiencies and railroad traffic fluidity; recognition of human vs. animal strikes, vehicle from debris strikes, etc.

In 2015, the FRA was condemning the practice of single employee operations. A few short years later it is soliciting input on zero employee train operations? As PTC nears completion and the rail industry prepares for an all-out assault on the operating crafts to achieve single employee crews, is the timing here simply a ploy, one to get railroad conductors and engineers and their unions to breath a sigh of relief and "settle" for single employee train crews when the alternative could be NO employee train crews? Whatever the case, Railroad Workers United is adamantly opposed to either concept. Zero employee train operations would have all of the inherent flaws of single crew operations but be exponentially worse. We say absolutely NOT to both as inefficient, dangerous and unsafe!