

The Carriers' Resistance to Basic Safety Applications Runs Deep

The dust had yet to settle following the wreck of Amtrak train #501 in DuPont, WA on December 18th, 2017, when another tragic – and easily avoidable – passenger train would wreck in Pine Ridge, SC, resulting in the deaths of two Amtrak crew members and injuries to scores of passengers. Once again, RWU maintains that this was a needless tragedy. For those who read the editorial in the pages of this newsletter in the Winter 2018 issue, you know that train wrecks – like those of Amtrak #501 and #91 – are usually the result of a highly complex web of contributing factors, some of which can be years in the making, a result of unsafe and irresponsible corporate practices, policies and procedures.

While this includes the case of Amtrak #91, a specific issue stands out; i.e., the failure of the rail carriers – CSX included – to implement a simple practice that was recommended a decade earlier by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). Coming on the heels of a catastrophic wreck in Granite, SC., just 50 miles from the site of the Amtrak #91 disaster, the Board's recommendation urged that switch point indicators be placed in advance of all mainline facing point switches in Non-Signaled "dark" territory to warn approaching train crews if and when a switch was not lined properly for their movement. In typical fashion, because such a signal system would cost money, the rail industry balked and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) stood silent. In lieu of such technological fix, the NTSB offered a far cheaper option, one readily available. This simple, immediate and low cost new rule would require that anytime a train crew or other employee handles a mainline track switch in Non-Signaled territory, then the movement that immediately follows must approach that switch prepared to stop until the crew has verified that the switch is lined for their movement. Unfortunately, to this inexpensive and readily avoidable common-sense fix, the rail carriers balked once again, while the FRA remained mute. Had this modest approach been heeded by the industry and/or mandated by the FRA, then this rule would no doubt have applied to the "signal suspension" that was in place on the night of February 3rd, 2018 when Amtrak #91 ran head-on into a parked CSX train on a siding. As such, the Amtrak crew would have been required to approach the switch prepared to stop. As a result, there would have been no train wreck. But the rail carriers saw such a simple rule as too burdensome to their operations.

This reactionary attitude and disregard for the safety of rail workers and trackside communities is nothing new of course. Not only did the rail industry oppose universal application of notable safety appliances such as the Janney coupler and the automatic air brake in the 19th century, but as recently as the 1990s the industry was dead-set in opposition to safety devices and procedures such as universal application of the two-way EOT device! Hard to believe but the common EOT used on most every mainline freight train in the U.S. today was largely unavailable for the decade after the caboose was removed from service. It would take numerous wrecks, millions of dollars in damage, and dozens of lives of rail workers and trackside residents, before the outcry would force the FRA to mandate that every freight train must not depart its originating terminal without an armed 2-way EOT bringing up the rear, so if necessary, the brakes could be applied from the rear of the train.

From the time the caboose came off in the 1980s until 1996, the carriers resisted the call for such a simple common-sense safety device, citing the burden of such an expense.

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Ironically, the rail carriers intransigence and unwillingness to implement reasonable and affordable policies, procedures and technologies – all known to save lives – contributed greatly to the outrage following the Chatsworth, CA wreck in 2008 that would result in the Positive Train Control (PTC) mandate. It is quite likely that had the carriers and the FRA taken limited actions and adhered to the NTSB recommendations issued following train wrecks over the course of the preceding decades, that the Chatsworth wreck and the PTC mandate may have never even happened! So, when you hear the carriers complain about the exorbitant cost of PTC, they have only themselves to blame, given their unwillingness to implement even the most modest changes and expenditures to achieve safer train operations, ignoring any and all proposals.

In conclusion, it is worthy to note that despite the billions spent on PTC over the last decade, the rail carriers have continued to rake in uninterrupted record profits and reduce their operating ratios to all-time lows. So, the next time you hear a railroad executive balk at NTSB recommendations as "too expensive" or "unnecessary" or a "hindrance to train operations" while the FRA turns a blind eye, don't believe a word they say. Rather, recall this past decade – the PTC mandate, the spate of catastrophic train wrecks and the record profits – as a reminder that, when it comes to making for safer train operations, the rail carriers have forfeited all moral authority to speak on the question.



Lead locomotive in the aftermath of the NS wreck at Granite, SC in 2006 that killed nine. The NTSB recommendations for switch point indicators in dark territory went unheeded by the rail carriers and the FRA, as did a more modest proposal for restricted speed to avoid such collisions. In both cases, the railroads complained of the exorbitant expense of such installations or operations.