

Federal Railroad Administrator Joseph C. Szabo
Prepared Remarks
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Well thank you Rich for the introduction and good morning, everyone.

On behalf of President Obama and Secretary LaHood, let me thank the New England Railroad Club and the Massachusetts Department of Transportation for organizing this conference.

And let me thank everyone here today for your commitment to highway-rail grade crossing safety – which is a crucial part of our efforts to build a safer, more reliable, and more efficient rail network.

At last night's dinner, I talked about the need for a long-term funding strategy that safely positions rail for its growing role in moving people and freight; about the remarkable public and private investments at work transforming American rail today; and the emerging national consensus that rail is the transportation mode of opportunity.

Since 2009, this Administration has invested more than \$3 billion in rail projects here in the Northeast to improve the speed, frequency, and reliability of service. And last year, we launched what we call NEC FUTURE – a planning effort that will yield a long-term investment rail plan to guide our development efforts for the Northeast Corridor.

But today, I'd like to talk about our job ensuring our rail network continues to grow safely.

We continue to collaborate with carriers and State DOTs on safety initiatives that target highway-rail grade crossing safety.

At yesterday's roundtable discussion, you learned more about an R-16 initiative with the Strategic Highway Research Program to speed up agreements between railroads and states on highway-rail grade crossing projects.

And later this morning, you will hear from the Staff Director of our Highway-Rail Grade Crossing and Trespass Division, Ron Ries, about new safety statistics.

You'll also hear from FRA General Engineers Frank Frey and Brian Gilleran.

Frank has a presentation on high-speed rail development and grade crossing safety, and Brian will speak about the development of pedestrian-only crossing signals.

As I said last night, by virtually every measure, 2012 was the safest year in railroad industry history – a milestone achieved through yearly reductions in accidents and incidents over a five-year period.

But, we must always do better. Our goal – always – is to lead the way on continuous safety improvement.

And while I am indeed proud of the industry's safety record – and of FRA's role in helping bring about positive changes – there is one notable exception: That's injuries and deaths due to trespassing on railroad rights-of-way – today's number one cause of railroad-related fatalities.

These preventable incidents – in addition to collisions at highway-rail grade crossings – represent roughly 95% of all railroad-related fatalities.

And this really reinforces the need for the comprehensive safety approach we're advancing by implementing the Rail Safety Improvement Act – or as we say, RSIA.

RSIA is set to expire this year – as is our other core authorization: the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act.

So, in order to build on the progress made to date building a rail network that is safer, more reliable, and more efficient, our Fiscal Year 2014 budget – released last week – lays out a comprehensive vision for enhancing our nation's rail system.

At its core is a holistic strategy addressing safety issues, passenger and freight service improvements, and planning.

Our budget requests \$6.6 billion to invest in rail safety and passenger and freight rail programs.

And this includes \$6.4 billion to establish a National High Performance Rail System program, one that enhances the performance of freight and passenger rail – and represents the first of a five-year, \$40 billion reauthorization.

Our new approach better reflects our on-the-ground experience; and is better suited to the complex realities of a rail system that carries a mix of passenger and freight trains on mostly private track.

Moving forward, full RSIA implementation remains our top priority.

RSIA mandates FRA execute roughly 40 rail safety rulemakings, reports, and other projects.

To date, we have completed 13 of the 22 RSIA-mandated rules, and have issued notices for proposed rulemakings on 5 more.

Many of these rules focus directly on the most challenging safety areas: from hazardous materials to human factors, track, and of course highway-rail grade crossing and trespassing.

We continue to work with the industry to implement Positive Train Control in a safe, efficient, and reliable manner, and have invested more than \$6 million in PTC test projects. And last May, we announced changes to PTC regulations that save millions of dollars, give carriers additional flexibility, and ensure a high level of safety.

As PTC implementation moves forward, we continue to take a hard look at the human factors behind accidents and incidents.

This effort includes leading an evolution in railroad safety culture by advancing System Safety programs for commuter, intercity, and emerging high-speed operations, and Risk Reduction programs for freights.

These programs present a significant opportunity for the industry to take proactive measures to prevent accidents, and to undertake an honest yet non-punitive assessment of human factors to truly understand root causation.

Our Risk Reduction Program Division continues to work with several railroads on Confidential Close Call Reporting System pilot projects, with the goal of implementing the program nationally.

And we've seen remarkable results: a 70% reduction in accidents and a 90% reduction in discipline, resulting in significant savings to the carrier.

FRA has issued regulations for conductor certification, and standards for passenger train employee hours of service.

And to enhance grade crossing safety, FRA has issued a final rule that requires railroads to establish emergency notification systems at every highway-rail grade crossing, which will enable the public to more easily report malfunctioning signals or any other unsafe conditions.

To further improve grade crossing safety, we are requiring some states to issue State Action Plans.

Furthermore, we've issued Model State Laws addressing two areas of grade crossing safety: highway users' sight distances at passive crossings; and motorists' violations of grade crossing warning devices.

That's in addition to our guidance on pedestrian safety at or near stations.

We continue to work with our safety partner, Operation Lifesaver, on the three E's – education, enforcement, and engineering – that have helped reduce collisions at crossings 85 percent since 1978.

And moving forward, we believe data collection and analysis can take us to the root causes of highway-rail grade crossing issues, enabling us to develop more effective partnerships with other DOT agencies.

We're working very hard to fully develop our railroad GIS system, and are updating data on a weekly basis. And we've made this data available through multiple sources, including the National Transportation Atlas Database.

The challenge now is to fully harness this data to strategically empower our ongoing efforts.

Along these lines, FRA is now developing a web mapping application that allows users to input information and geo-locate grade crossings.

We're also very excited about a mobile app we're developing that will enable iPhone and iPad users to locate and study grade crossings; view the National Grade Crossing Inventory and Collision Records; and contact the FRA with questions or concerns.

But let me return to what I said earlier: how grade crossings issues are at the core of our efforts to build a rail network that is safer, more reliable, and more efficient.

Our goal of eliminating these preventable accidents at grade crossings underscores the need for sustained investment in our rail network, as we've proposed in our 2014 budget.

Railroad safety and railroad performance are fundamentally linked. In many ways, the call for a high-performance rail network is also a call for superior grade crossing safety.

Let's consider some of the grade crossing improvements that have occurred to date through our High-Speed and Intercity Passenger Rail program.

In Illinois, a fundamental part of the state's effort to raise speeds throughout the majority of the Chicago-St. Louis corridor to 110 MPH is the upgrading of 235 grade crossings.

All public crossings will receive four-quad gates – with intrusion detection linked to the installation of Positive Train Control.

And from the very beginning with our grant funding program, we placed a premium on crafting agreements with states and host freight railroads ensuring that – in the case of shared right of way – would enhance both the freight and passenger network.

One way it clearly has – as part of a broader community mitigation strategy to eliminate any negative impacts of rail's growing role – is through advancing the creation of sealed corridors.

We're seeing this along the Keystone Corridor – between Harrisburg and Philadelphia – where a project underway will successfully eliminate the last remaining public at-grade crossings.

We're seeing this, too, in North Carolina, which recently kicked off its Piedmont Corridor Improvement program to strengthen freight and passenger service between Raleigh and Charlotte.

Grade separation projects are central to this effort.

So in the process of enabling more roundtrips and faster speeds for passenger trains, infrastructure and design improvements will allow for 50 crossings to close between Raleigh and Charlotte.

Remaining grade crossings are also receiving significant upgrades.

Twenty-three grade crossings are being enhanced here in Massachusetts through a Knowledge Corridor project.

In New York, along the Hudson line – where projects are expanding track and station capacity in the Albany area – upgrades to 16 grade crossings will include a combination of new lights, gates, and bells.

In Connecticut – as part of projects installing over 25 miles of double track on the New Haven-Springfield line – the State is ensuring that all public grade crossings have active warning devices with either 4-quad gates or two gates with non-traversable medians installed. As well, the state seeks to close at least 4 crossings on the line.

There's also the Downeaster-MBTA Track Improvement Project, which is installing three miles of double track, 5 miles of new mainline rail, and making upgrades to three grade crossings.

And in Vermont – where a completed project has strengthened 190 miles of track – 52 grade crossing warning devices have been upgraded. In fact, 8 crossings that previously had either no gates or active warning devices at all are now equipped with lights, gates, and bells.

All of these efforts are building on the Northeast's long-standing commitment to rail.

And as I said last night, the North East Corridor is in many ways a reminder that world-class economies do not develop by accident – or evolve by resting on one's laurels.

What they called the first stone of the B&O Railroad was laid in 1828. And long before Logan, or JFK, or Reagan National airports were built – and long before Interstate 95 came into being – rail was shaping this region's economy, as it continues to shape it today.

The Northeast Corridor is the busiest railroad in America.

It carries over 2,200 daily trains operated by Amtrak and nine commuter rail authorities, and serves 250 million passengers a year. Additionally, an estimated 30 million tons of freight are moved along the Northeast Corridor each year by more than 60 daily freight trains. And the I-95 Corridor Coalition – which recognizes the capacity constraints of the region’s highway network – has recommended the region increase the ton miles carried by freight rail 20%.

Meanwhile, since Amtrak’s Acela service was introduced in 2000, intercity rail has come to gradually dominate the region’s air-rail market.

The ridership growth over the past 15 years in the Northeast is simply amazing.

And yet much of this growth is occurring on infrastructure – such as major bridges and tunnels – that was built on our behalf more than a century ago.

The time has come for our generation to recapture this visionary spirit – to fully commit to addressing the NEC’s capacity constraints, and to ensure that future travelers and businesses gain access to a rail network that is unquestionably safe, efficient, and reliable.

Establishing a rail account inside a Transportation Trust Fund –similar to those accounts for highways, transit, and aviation – will keep us on course, and enable us to build the rail network American needs and that the people deserve.

And most importantly, it will fully empower the talent, the commitment, and the energy of everyone here today in this room.

The President’s budget will make this a reality.

Thank you very much.