U.S. Department
of Transportation

Federal Railroad Administration

Administrator

**1120 Vermont Ave., NW.
Washington, DC 20590**

MAY 13 2004

The Honorable John McCain
Chairman, Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510-6125

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This is in further response to your letter dated September 2, 2003, co-signed by Senator Ernest R. Hollings, on behalf of the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation concerning the safety of remote control locomotive (RCL) operations. You request that the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) conduct an assessment of the impact of RCL operations on safety, including a comparison of the rate of accidents, injuries, and fatalities involving RCLs with similar operations involving manned locomotives.

Additionally, you requested that the audit should assess the effects of RCL operations on the safety of highway-rail grade crossings, hazardous materials transportation, the safety of RCL in urban areas, any unique operation characteristics presented by RCLs, and assessment of the safety benefits of such operations. You requested that FRA's report should include any recommendations for legislative or regulatory changes FRA determines necessary and that FRA report back to the Committee with preliminary findings and initial accident statistics within six months, and that a detailed report be submitted within 18 months.

We have concluded the initial assessment of RCL operations. The enclosed document contains our preliminary findings and available RCL accident statistics, including a comparison of RCL accident and injury rates with accident and injury rates from conventional switching operations. The enclosed report also contains a brief history of FRA's efforts to ensure the safe implementation of RCL technology. FRA intends to issue its final report on RCL operations to your Committee within a year of the date of this report.

Based on the data we've collected since we added new RCL accident/incident reporting codes, RCL operations have been quite safe for the seven-month period from May to November 2003. RCL train accident rates have been 13.5 % lower than rates for conventional switching operations, and employee injury rates have been an impressive 57.1% lower than rates for conventional switching operations. To date, nearly all of the FRA reportable accidents or incidents concerning RCL operations have been the result of human error and not the RCL technology, and no accidents or incidents have been associated with technology malfunctions. No new technology is without its problems, but we are encouraged by the results of our FRA-AAR RCL Task Force in resolving issues associated with operation of this new equipment.

I appreciate your interest in railroad safety, and the FRA looks forward to continuing to work with you and the Committee on transportation issues. An identical letter has been sent to Senator Ernest R. Hollings.

Sincerely,

Allan Rutter
Administrator

Enclosure