

Have Long and Heavy Trains Run Their Course?

The North American "Class One" rail carriers continue to run longer and heavier trains each year, and in recent years the trend has accelerated exponentially. They are a hallmark of "Precision Scheduled Railroading", not because they run on schedule (they are far more prone to breakdowns, slower velocities and other delays), nor because they do anything precisely, but simply because in the short run, they are understood to save the railroad money.

But the tradeoff has become more and more clear in recent years and especially in recent months. In terms of average train velocity, these behemoths are monstrosities. The slow the railroad down and provide rotten customer service. They take longer to accelerate, longer to slow and to stop, often cannot achieve maximum posted track speed, they take longer to yard and longer to build. But the big issue is that they are simply unsafe and should be outlawed. Starting with the nightmarish wreck at East Palestine, Ohio in early February (150 cars, 1.8 miles long and weighing in at 18,000 tons), long and heavy trains have been in the spotlight these last few months. Within a month another NS train of 212 cars derailed, also in Ohio. And in late March a Union Pacific ore train of 154 cars and 21,600 tons ran away down a steep mountain grade and crashed in Southern California.

While the Class One rail carriers have a keen interest in operating such long and heavy trains as a way to perceived savings on fuel costs, motive power and labor costs, these overly long and heavy trains create a dangerous and unsafe situation for a number of reasons, including that the longer and heavier the train:

- 1 - the more difficult it is and the more time it takes to slow or to stop such a train;
- 2 - the more slack action is in the train, increasing run-ins and run-outs, increasing buff and draft forces within the train, increasing the potential for break-in-twos, emergency brake applications and derailments;
- 3 - the more severe the train wreck if and when such a train does derail;
- 4 - the more difficult it is for the train crew to safely run, inspect, work, test, and otherwise get such a train over the road.
- 5 - the greater the tendency to make for longer tours-of-duty for train crews, resulting in fatigue, more time at the away-from-home terminal, and a lower quality of work and home life;



A month after the E. Palestine, OH derailment, 300 miles SE of there, 20 cars of a 212 car NS train derailed. Fortunately nothing hazardous was involved - THIS time.

- 6 - the more likely the train will experience air brake problems, including the ability to achieve and maintain adequate brake pipe pressure, especially in cold weather;
- 7 - the greater likelihood of blocked road and pedestrian crossings, creating at best an inconvenience to the public and at worst an inability to provide emergency services when needed. These blocked crossings caused by in effect "train" motorists and the public to "run the gates" to avoid being blocked for long periods, resulting in grade crossing accidents and fatalities.
- 8 - the more track capacity is used up, meaning the railroad cannot move more freight efficiently and effectively, limiting the ability of the railroad to grow and expand service.
- 9 - the more delays to Amtrak and other passenger trains as they are incompatible with running on the same tracks as these slow and cumbersome unscheduled trains, that often do not clear at sidings and do not achieve posted track speed limit's.



March 27, 55 cars and 2 engines of a 154 car, 21,600 ton iron ore train derailed descending a 2.2% grade near Kelso, CA. Preliminary reports suggest that once the dynamic brakes shut down due to a technical malfunction, the air brakes were insufficient to control the train, which then became a runaway. The crew apparently managed to jump

Somewhere in the middle of all of this mess and destruction, the *Rail Safety Act of 2023* was introduced in the U.S. Senate by six Senators, three Democrat and three Republican. Both parties hope to claim the mantle of making the rails safe for workers and communities. Among other things, the bill ostensibly sets out to limit train length and weights, supposedly to prevent these sorts of wrecks from happening, or when they do, to mitigate against the havoc they tend to wreak. But the bill does not mention a single specific limit to length or weight, but rather, leaves that up to the Department of Transportation (DOT) to decide "within a year" of the bill's passage (and who knows which corporate lackey might be in charge of the agency at that time). Who knows what limits will be decided upon by this agency, riddled as it is by rail transportation and other transport managers, and subject to intense lobbying and bullying by the industry over the course of the coming year. And whoever is in charge, and whatever length and weight they determine to be "safe", what the DOT giveth, the DOT can taketh away.

Railroad Workers United urges all rail workers to get involved in this fight. We oppose any expansion of the current length and tonnage of existing trains; and we support a reduction in length and tonnage of already existing trains, especially those hauling hazardous materials, traversing steep grades, and /or that operate in cold temperatures. The time has come for the government to protect rail workers and communities and stop the madness.