

Crew Size

Historically, the number of crew members on a train—particularly the persons in the cab of a locomotive—has been decided by railroads based on the needs of the shipment and according to collective bargaining agreements with rail employee unions.

As technology has advanced, we've seen freight railroads and labor unions agree to reduce crew sizes from five to three to two while still improving railroad safety performance. Policymakers should avoid regressive crew size mandates that undermine collective bargaining and the ability of railroads to modernize and compete.

Background

There are no data showing two-person crews are safer than one-person crews. In 2009, the U.S. Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) found no “factual evidence” that two-person crews were safer and, in 2016, noted there is no “reliable or conclusive statistical data” to support a two-person crew mandate. This lack of safety justification led the FRA in 2019 to rescind a proposed crew size mandate, arguing the rule would, “impede the future of rail innovation and automation.”

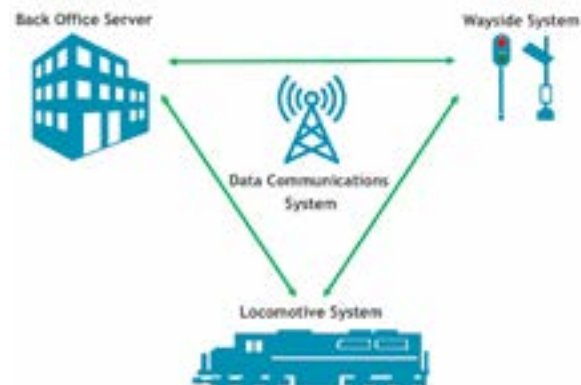
Railroads across the world, including those operating in Germany, Australia, France and the United Kingdom, operate predominantly with single-person crews. Not to mention operations with one person in the locomotive cab are common on Amtrak and other major U.S. passenger railroads like Metra in Chicago and the MARC in Maryland, as well as several short line and regional railroads. The Indiana Rail Road has safely operated with one-person crews for nearly 20 years.

Why It Matters

As the transportation sector rapidly changes, and other modes embrace automation, policymakers must reject mandates that keep railroads in the past. Failing to recognize the reality and value of technological advancement in the rail sector will hinder the long-term viability of railroads and divert traffic from trains to trucks.

The collective bargaining process between railroads and labor unions maintains safety while ensuring railroads can modernize their workforces and optimize performance. Positive Train Control (PTC) technology, which is designed to prevent certain human error incidents, has also changed the way railroads work, making certain in-cab responsibilities redundant. For example: Class I railroads plan to redeploy some conductors from in-cab to ground-based positions, as most of a conductor's work is ground-based. A roving conductor can more efficiently respond to service needs along the network, and the changed role may enable more predictable schedules for employees.

Positive Train Control (PTC) is a safety system that tracks the speed and movement of trains and can automatically stop a train to prevent specific human-error accidents.



In Brief

Crew size mandates lack a safety justification, undermine decades of meaningful collective bargaining, and jeopardize railroads' ability to compete in a rapidly changing transportation space.