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March 3, 2025

SUPPORT, SB 855 Railroads – Safety Requirements Maryland Railway Safety Act of 2025

To the Honorable Pam Beidle, Chair; Antonio Hayes, Vice Chair and Members of the Senate Finance Committee

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I'm the Director for the Maryland Safety and Legislative Board of the Transportation Division of the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Worker's (SMART). Our members in Maryland are employees of CSX, Norfolk Southern Railway, Amtrak, Canton Railroad and MARC Commuter Rail (Amtrak & Alstom). We are conductors, engineers, yardmasters, switchmen, and utility persons. We are the **TRAIN UNION**.

Our mission is first and foremost to seek to ensure our members have a safe work environment.

In that vein, I ask for your support for the rail safety legislation introduced in the House as **SB855 "Railroads – Safety Requirements (Maryland Railway Safety Act of 2025)"**. This proactive rail safety legislation is intended to address several areas related to the safe operations of railroads in the State of Maryland. I will address each provision as follows.

Minimum freight crew requirement:

In 1970's, each freight train had 4 to 5 crewmembers. Through advances in technologies, that number has been reduced. Today, the reality is over 99% of America's freight trains operate with two federally certified and licensed crewmembers: A Conductor and Engineer.

Several things happened that gave rise to the pursuit of this provision of the legislation. On July 6, 2013, a freight train derailed in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec that resulted in 47 lost lives and a town nearly destroyed. That accident happened because a Montreal, Maine & Atlantic Railway crewmember, working alone, had his 72-car crude oil train roll away and crash in the middle of a town causing horrific death and devastation.

There are many tasks that must be performed by the crewmembers on a freight train every day that one person just cannot accomplish alone, and this fact played a major role in the Lac-Mégantic tragedy. The train was left standing unattended on a steep grade several miles outside the town because that was the only stretch of track that could accommodate the entire train without blocking any highway grade crossings.

The train could have been secured and left unattended on flat terrain much closer to the town after having been separated, or “cut,” to keep the crossing open, but that task cannot be accomplished safely and in compliance with operating rules with a single crew member. Also, attempting to both secure the train with hand brakes and properly test the securement cannot be accomplished as safe operating standards dictate. The securement of the train failed, and the result was that the train traversed down the steep grade into the center of town where it eventually derailed, resulting in explosions and fires killing 47 persons and causing millions of dollars in environmental damage.



Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, Canada

Following this tragic accident, Canadian regulators banned this type of one-person operations throughout Canada.

On March 4, 1996, in Weyauwega, Wisconsin the town had to be evacuated due to a train derailment containing hazardous materials. 30 cars derailed containing liquid petroleum, and sodium hydroxide. The fire spread quickly, and the fire department’s chief concern was that the train would explode.



Weyauwega, Wisconsin

Within 45 minutes they determined that the town’s 2200 residents had to be evacuated. The residents had only 5 minutes notice to immediately vacate their homes and had to leave everything they had behind.

This wasn’t an orderly evacuation. Imagine being in your home with your family and having a firefighter in front of your house with a bull horn yelling **EVACUATE NOW**. People didn’t know where to go, didn’t know when they’d return, nor could they ask questions about what was going on. The fire burnt for over two weeks.

Following this tragic derailment, the state of Wisconsin passed a minimum 2-person crew requirement.

There have been several attempts to regulate crew size at the federal level through the Federal Railroad Administration rulemaking process. In 2008 the Obama administration initiated the rulemaking process.

In 2016 the Trump administration cancelled the rulemaking process. In 2021 the Biden administration reinstituted the rulemaking process to regulate crew size and issued a final rule in April 2024.

This rail safety legislation has also been introduced in 34 states and has become law or regulation in Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, New York, Nevada, Ohio, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Freight train crews work long hours, day and night, with few set shifts, and are on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. With as little as 1 hour and 15 minutes notice, they are required to report to work for a 12-hour shift, often operating trains laden with hazardous materials. Fatigue in the freight railroad industry is our organization's number one safety concern and having a minimum of two crewmembers is the primary way we help combat fatigue. Having a minimum of two person crew is also the best way to assure compliance with the railroads complex operating rules.

Some of you will remember the 1996 head-on collision of a MARC commuter train and an Amtrak passenger train that occurred in Silver Spring, Maryland in which 11 persons were killed and 13 injured.



Silver Spring, Maryland

Following a lengthy investigation, the FRA found that a one-person crew in the locomotive contributed to signal violations associated with the collision and issued an Emergency Order and subsequent safety regulations requiring communications between the operating cab and the train crew stationed in the passenger cars. As a result, commuter passenger trains today routinely have a crew of three qualified people on the crew who must work as a team with constant communication between the crew members and qualifications for emergency response and first responder training.

The SMART-TD Maryland Safety and Legislative Board contracted a reputable consulting firm to gauge the level of support by the public for such minimum crew legislation. We wanted to see where the public stood in relation to the Governor, since the General Assembly was on opposite ends. The survey covered several demographic groupings with results separated based on gender, age, education, political self-identification, and geographic region. I'll just point out that the overall results of the survey are that the level of public support by Marylanders for this legislation is 88%. This survey is a part of the previous record on this legislation.

There is an increase in the transportation of hazardous and volatile materials on the railroads as well as significantly longer trains operating over the unique and widely varying geographical terrain existing in our state. This coupled with the possibility of decreasing train crew size, creates a significant localized safety hazard to the employees, the public, the communities, and the environment.

Adequate personnel are critical to insuring railroad operational safety, security, and in the event of a hazardous material incident, support of first responder activities. This legislation regulating minimum railroad crew staffing is a proactive effort to protect and promote worker health and safety, and the security and welfare of the residents of the state by reducing the risk exposure to local communities and protecting environmentally sensitive lands and waterways.

The recent freight train derailment that occurred in East Palestine, Ohio where a freight train carrying hazardous materials derailed, caught fire, and caused the evacuation of the community stands as a reminder of the current potential for disaster.



East Palestine, Ohio

To allow these monstrous freight trains carrying many hazardous materials to operate through the State with one, or no crew members would be reckless.

Following this tragic accident, the state of Ohio passed a minimum 2-person crew requirement.

I am sure you have been approached by the railroads who are opposed to this legislation. I want to address some of their arguments against this legislation. Their first argument is that this legislation is preempted by federal law. We do not argue that there are many provisions in federal law covering a wide range of issues that are preempted from state regulation; however, crew member requirements on freight trains are not one of them.

Attached are three letters from the MD Attorney General's office wherein the first letter they reference this legislation and write "*appears to neither violate, nor is preempted by, federal law as it relates to crew member requirements for trains used in connection with the movement of freight in the State.*" In the follow up letter, which was requested by the railroad's representatives, the AG's office wrote "*if a sufficient legislative record is established to demonstrate that the minimum crew size requirements under the bill are primarily related to safety and will not interfere with rail transportation, a court is unlikely to find that the requirement is preempted under the ICCTA. On the other hand, without such evidence, a court may conclude that the minimum crew size requirement regulates rail transportation and operation in the State, which may be preempted under the ICCTA,*" thereby leaving the door open for interpretation. The 3rd letter was just recently issued on February 13, 2023 wherein they Attorney General's office again reiterated in their view "*For the foregoing reasons..... the holding in the Indiana R.R. II case does not alter the analysis and conclusion regarding the possibility of either 3RA preemption or FRSA authorization for state rail crew size as addressed in the Feldman Letter.*"

The AG's first opinion is reinforced by the Seventh District Court's decision rendered in *Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway Co. v. Doyle* which examined the Wisconsin law that required a minimum of two persons on freight trains. The court ruled that Wisconsin was "free to require two- person crews on over-the-road operations." This finding by the 7th District Court rendered in 1999 has not been challenged by the railroads.

They also attempt to use Section 711 of the Regional Rail Reorganization Act of 1973 (3R Act) stating that "Congress expressly intended to preempt state minimum crew laws." Again, we agree that in 1973 Congress did intend to preempt 17 states and the District of Columbia from regulating minimum crew laws. However, this decision was rendered at a time when there were 4 or 5 crew members on each freight train, and it was not for the purpose of denying States the ability to provide for the safety of their towns, communities, and citizens.

Congress was attempting to protect the Midwest and Northeast regions from financial collapse related to "a disappearance" of rail service as seven Class I railroads were in bankruptcy. As a result, they created the federally government owed Consolidated Rail Corporation known as Conrail.

They did afford the provisions of the preemption to the other railroads operating in the 17 states and the District of Columbia due to the potential for unfair competition in the states they all served. Their main concern in creating this provision was their fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers. In 1998, Conrail was absolved through the purchase of their assets by CSX and Norfolk Southern Railway and is no longer a potential liability to the taxpayers.

On the issue of preemption, the critical question in any preemption analysis is always whether Congress intended that a federal regulation supersedes state law. In the case of *Louisiana Public Service Commission v. FCC* the court wrote:

"Pre-emption occurs when Congress, in enacting a federal statute, expresses a clear intent to preempt state law, when there is outright or actual conflict between federal and state law, where compliance with both federal and state law is in effect physically impossible . . . or where the state law stands as an obstacle to the accomplishment and execution of the full objectives of Congress.

Moreover, the Supreme Court has also made it clear that "[p]re-emption may result not only from action taken by Congress itself; a federal agency acting within the scope of its congressionally delegated authority may preempt state regulation."

So, the key to the argument that Section 711 of the 3R Act was intended to "expresses a clear intent to preempt state law" would be based on the record as to why Congress passed a federal statute and to what it applies. We take no exception to the fact that Congress had a clear intent to preempt state law within the 17 states that Conrail operated in. What we do take exception to is that that law is still applicable.

The record clearly shows that Congress was attempting to protect the Midwest and Northeast regions (17 States) from financial collapse related to "a disappearance" of rail service as seven Class I railroads were in bankruptcy. They were not passing a law to preempt crew size throughout the United States. They limited the laws reach to these 17 States to level the playing field against Conrail, the taxpayer owned railroad.

Congress placed Conrail back into the hands of the private sector through the sale of their assets. However, the obvious advantage the railroads operating in this limited 17 state area had over the rest of the railroads in the country, where the preemption did not apply, still existed. In response, Congress passed into law Section 408 of the Rail Safety Improvement Act that required the Department of Transportation (DOT) to complete a study regarding the impacts of repealing Section 711 of the 3R Act.

The DOT delegated this duty to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), the agency that Congress gave the jurisdiction over railroad safety to when they established it. The FRA completed the study and reported back to the Congress that ***"the goal of protecting the Midwest and Northeast regions from financial collapse related to a disappearance of rail service has been met. The rationale behind the preemption provision in the 3R Act of ensuring viable freight rail service no longer exists. Repealing Section 711 would restore the status quo that existed prior to its enactment and create a level playing field among rail carriers nationwide." They concluded with "For the above stated reasons.....the purpose for which Section 711 was enacted was met a number of years ago and Section 711 should be repealed."***

This report was issued by the FRA, the federal agency assigned by Congress with the responsibilities of overseeing safety in the rail industry. The effect of their report is that all railroads are on a level playing field nationwide.

The issue of preemption related to the states that were not within the 17-state limit has been settled. The U.S. Seventh District Court found in the *Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway Company v. Doyle* that the state of Wisconsin was “**free to require two-person crews on over-the-road operations.**” This settled law will govern the country until the FRA decides to affirmatively regulate such operations as minimum crew size, which they have not done.

The railroads claim that requiring a minimum of two persons on their freight trains will be a major inconvenience and break the bank. We find this argument hypocritical. On one hand they argue to maintain the outdated special treatment contained in Section 711, which gives them an unfair advantage over the 2/3 of the United States where the exemption didn’t apply and then argue they would be at a disadvantage if the same situation existed between Maryland and other states where they operate. In addition, the delay argument has no merit as crew changes already must occur over the routes and there is no additional cost for a second crew member if they board the freight train at the last regular crew change point before entering Maryland or at the border. So, no operational delay would be required.

We as an organization are cognizant of the fact the railroads are in business to make money for their owners and stockholders, we want them to secure more business and be as profitable as possible. After all, our members’ jobs depend on their success. But when it comes down to the wellbeing, health, and safety of the members we represent and the safety of the public, we will always side with safety.

Another argument we have heard is that this is a collective bargaining issue and legislators should not be injected into the fray between labor and management. To the contrary, we believe this issue falls under the purview of employee and public safety, which places it under the jurisdiction of the legislative department within our organization. Our legislative department will not relinquish our responsibilities to provide for the safety and wellbeing of our members to collective bargaining. There is no amount of money or benefits worth any harm that may come to our members or the public if a tragic accident should occur because of insufficient manpower.

In 2008 Congress passed the Rail Safety Improvement Act, which we have been in support of, that required Positive Train Control’s (PTC) implementation nationwide by 2015. The railroads had repeatedly requested delays in implementing this supplemental safety technology with full implementation just being completed in December 2020. The railroads now try to present this technology as their replacement for the second crew member.

On January 20, 2023, MARC had to cancel forty-one trains because of connectivity issues with PTC. While this was an inconvenience to thousands of Maryland commuters, fortunately no one was hurt because the trains were able to be canceled. Imagine this happening to a freight train loaded with hazardous material operating through Baltimore with one person.

Positive Train Control, or hot box detectors, or Deadman’s pedal or the myriads of other supplemental safety apparatus will not prevent every accident in the railroad industry. They merely complement each other in making the industry safer, as does two persons on each crew. A single crew member cannot perform all the tasks required of them and maintain the highest level of safety and respond to any emergency they may encounter.

15-year BNSF conductor Mike Rankin shared his harrowing story of how two freight rail crewmembers worked together to save someone’s life — a feat that would have been impossible had just one person been operating their train the fateful night of December 23, 2004.

When the train Conductor Rankin and his colleague were operating hit a car that bypassed crossing gates, all three passengers in the vehicle were ejected. Two died instantly. The third, barely alive, needed immediate medical attention. An ambulance was on the way, but Rankin soon realized the ambulance was on the wrong side of the tracks. The only solution was to separate the train at the crossing, so the ambulance could drive through — a maneuver that requires two people to execute.

"There's no way a single crew member could have secured the train, briefed emergency personnel, uncoupled train cars and moved the front of the train forward all on his or her own," Conductor Rankin said. "I've seen enough to know that those who want one-crew train operations are not fully grasping the risks, emergencies, and close calls that my fellow conductors and engineers see on the rails regularly. Conductors and engineers don't just operate trains. In emergency situations, our presence and teamwork can mean the difference between life and death."

Another instance occurred when an engineer fell ill on their train in route to Cumberland, MD. They had to stop the train as the engineer was in severe pain and losing consciousness. The conductor summoned an ambulance via cell phone and was able to guide them to the rural location of the train since there was no physical address for GPS to work from. They transported the engineer to the nearest hospital where he underwent immediate surgery for acute appendicitis.

The Doctor told the engineer he was close to having his appendix burst which may have resulted in his death had he not received the prompt attention to his condition. As you can imagine, he was extremely grateful for the conductor's presence and quick- thinking action.

The merits of the 2-person minimum crew provision of this legislation have been thoroughly debated over the last several years. Each time, receiving a favorable report by the respective committees it went before. This provision has been passed by this committee 6 times and has passed the General Assembly 2 times, each time with overwhelming support. Unfortunately, it was vetoed each time by then Governor Hogan.

The arguments noted in the governor's veto letter were the same arguments offered in committees and on the House and Senate floor prior to passage. The public saw through those arguments as reflected in the survey; our members saw through those arguments as reflected in their ratification votes, and the General Assembly saw through those arguments and passed the legislation on multiple occasions with a bi- partisan overwhelming vote.

Reporting requirements for transporting hazardous materials:

This provision would require the commissioner of labor and industry to establish and maintain a database regarding the transportation of hazardous materials and waste by rail in the state. The information may not be provided to the public, but the commissioner shall make the information available to the Maryland Department of Emergency Management.

In addition, this provision establishing reporting requirements could result in informing the appropriate local authorities and first responders in real time of the hazardous materials that are included in a train consist as it travels through their communities.

Despite both the FAST Act and the Infrastructure and Jobs Act of 2021 requiring Class I railroads transporting hazmat to generate accurate, real-time information about the train's contents for distribution to first responders in the event of an emergency, the Class I's still have not fully complied.

The AskRail app, used since 2014, the Association of American Railroads (AAR), the Operation Respond Institute, and others have voluntarily maintained an app-based system, which satisfies some—but not all—of the real-time information requirements in the FAST Act.

Two issues identified with AskRail are that not all first responders are aware of the program, and functionality suffers in areas with poor wireless data connectivity. Many times, cell phone and internet service is unavailable throughout the rural areas of the state where freight trains traverse, which makes the app useless in real time.

Ohio first responders, without advanced notice, arrived on scene, were exposed to and inhaled the highly dangerous hazardous materials vinyl chloride and butyl acrylic. Inhalation of these chemicals has been linked to permanent lung damage and cancer.

Blocked railroad crossings:

This provision prohibits railroads from blocking at grade rail crossings for more than 5 minutes while the train is standing unless it is in the process of boarding and discharging passengers. One of the purposes of course is to prevent railroads from blocking emergency vehicles from getting to their destinations promptly. There is also a very dangerous situation that has been occurring in neighborhoods throughout the country. Freight trains have been blocking crossings for extended periods of time. Schoolchildren have been filmed climbing through, under, and over these trains to get to school on time. These trains could move at any time having very serious consequences for these children.



Hammond, Indiana

Limiting train length:

This provision provides that a railroad company may not operate a train that is a freight train or a work train that exceeds 8,500 feet in length on any part of a main track or a branch line. This also relates to the issue of blocking railroad crossings for extended periods of time. As you can imagine, a train that is 16,000 feet in length takes twice the time of an 8500-foot train to clear a crossing. In addition, the inertia forces between freight cars would be more severe for the engineer who is trying to handle the train in a safe manner.

Per the 2024 report by the National Academy of Sciences on train length, “Over the past two decades, freight railroads have been operating increasingly longer manifest trains. These trains haul different types of rail cars of varying weight and sizes. The number and mix of cars can add to the extreme forces that moving trains experience, which can stress equipment and create handling challenges for train crews, increasing the potential for derailments if not closely managed, the report says. There is no threshold at which a manifest train becomes a “long train” and subject to greater safety concerns. Rather, as the length of the train increases, it becomes more important to manage in-train forces by placing additional locomotives in the train and assembling trains correctly. Also, since manifest trains carry a mix of cargo, rail cars of different types are picked up and dropped off enroute, so a train’s handling demands can change over the course of a single trip.”

In the words of Debra Miller, chair of the committee that wrote the report “Freight railroads have provided such a dependable way to move goods and materials across the U.S. for so long that it’s easy to overlook them, but railroad operations have changed a great deal over the past few decades, as have the technologies used and our understanding of the best safety management practices. So, the time is right for Congress, regulatory bodies, and the industry itself to take a closer look at railroad practices and regulations to ensure the safest operations going forward.” Find below a chart compiled by the Congressional Research Service showing the correlation between train length and increased derailments:

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Avg. train length (cars)*	71.8	72.5	71.9	73.2	73.5	74.8	77.1	81.8	81.7	81.1
% of derailments involving 125+ car trains	6%	7%	9%	10%	9%	12%	13%	16%	16%	12%
% of derailments involving 150+ car trains	1%	2%	2%	3%	4%	5%	6%	8%	7%	6%

Requirements regarding wayside detector systems:

Wheel or axle failure is a relatively common cause of derailments. According to a study published in the Journal of Transportation Engineering, from 2005 to 2016, defects in rail car wheels and axles were the 2nd leading cause of mainline derailments. According to the National Transportation Safety Board's preliminary findings, a wheel bearing on one of the East Palestine train's freight cars overheated, which led to the failure of one of the car's axles. This caused the derailment in East Palestine.

Wayside defect detector systems would be required at certain intervals and to be in working order and capable of notifying the train crew when any event is detected that should initiate an alert. The tragic accident in East Palestine, Ohio could have been avoided had wayside detectors in proper working order with proper limits set for actuation been in place. These state-of-the-art systems can detect if a freight train has dragging equipment, or wheel bearings overheating, or a number of other indicators that could cause a derailment. Once detected, they should be able to notify the train crew who can take immediate action to remedy the situation.



East Palestine, Ohio

Allowing authorized representatives to conduct safety inspections:

This provision would authorize up to 2 designated railroad union representatives to enter railroad property for the purpose of conducting inspections of unsafe conditions as reported to them by their members that may violate federal or state laws, affect public safety, or result in injury or death to a railroad employee.

The State's railroad inspection division has one railroad inspector for over 2,000 miles of trackage throughout the state. With this limited number of railroad inspectors responsible for the thousands of miles of trackage in the state, this legislation would just allow the supplementing of the inspection workforce when there is an urgent need for inspection. It would also prohibit the railroads from claiming the representatives are trespassing.

Every provision contained in this legislation is intended to make railroad operations in this state safer for the employees, the environment, and the communities these trains operate through. The railroads position that these provisions are burdensome on the industry and their profits should not out way making safety a first priority as all their corporate statements espouse.

WE THEREFORE URGE A FAVORABLE REPORT ON SB855

Sincerely,

David Sr

David Pendleton Sr., Chairperson/Director
Maryland Safety & Legislative Board, LO-023

SMART Transportation Division

