

Carl Belke
President, Keystone State Railroad Association
Testimony before the
Pennsylvania State Senate Transportation Committee
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My testimony today is in my capacity as the current president of the Keystone State Railroad Association, composed of 30 railroads and 25 rail industry suppliers in the Commonwealth. KSRRA includes all major freight carriers and short lines, non-operating railroad owners, and associate members who operate or do business in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Our member railroads collectively employ more than 13,000 Pennsylvanians while operating 5,000 miles of track. Railroad jobs are among the best family sustaining jobs available today. In 2020, the average salary for a frontline Class I railroad employee was \$126,000.

As a very brief introduction, I have been involved directly in the railroad industry for five decades, in a significant variety of positions for Class I and Class III railroads. Most recently, I led a team of great employees at the Western New York and Pennsylvania Railroad, a Class III short line operating in western Pennsylvania.

Now to the matter at hand. First off, let me begin by expressing that railroaders, both here in Pennsylvania and across our Nation, understand that their job starts and ends with safety, for the communities and customers we serve and for our own employees. We work very hard to be safe and to avoid events that negatively

impact the lives of those that reside along our lines. For small railroads like those that I have been associated with, these are the same communities we live in.

It is important for all of us to remember a not-too-distant past in Pennsylvania railroading. Pennsylvania was the epicenter of the rail freight service and infrastructure melt-down in the 1960's and 1970's, as represented by the Penn Central bankruptcy of 1970 and the phenomenon of the "standing derailment," when a stationary freight car would collapse the rotten track structure below it.

The improvements of our industry, both in Pennsylvania and across the country, since those bleak days are truly amazing. Over the last fifty years, our industry has dramatically improved our safety performance, with very positive results for everyone whose lives are supported by safe and efficient rail service ... meaning all of us. The facts support this statement:

- 99.9% of all hazmat shipments reach their destination without incident. Since 2012, the hazmat accident rate has declined by 55%, and over the last ten years less than 1% of all train accidents have resulted in a hazmat release.
- Since 2000, train accident and hazardous materials, or "hazmats" as we refer to them, accident rates are down 31 percent and 64 percent, respectively, while the rail employee injury rate in 2020 was an all-time low.
- The American Society of Civil Engineers awarded America's rail network the highest grade for any transportation infrastructure in its most recent Infrastructure Report Card, a B.
- Closer to home, according to a review by the Association of American Railroads of Federal Railroad Administration records over the period of

2012 to 2022, here in Pennsylvania there were four railroad incidents that involved a release of a hazmat. This was significantly less than 0.003% (three tenths of one percent) of all rail hazmat shipments over that time period in the Commonwealth.

How did we reach these improvements? Through a comprehensive, multifaceted approach. Intense training, coaching and reinforcement of safety throughout the rail industry is part of it. Applying new technologies that are proven effective is another. Examples include improved defect detection, information analysis and communications. Here is a very specific example: the “AskRail” app that gives first responders immediate, secure and accurate information on railcars that are involved in an accident. Reinvesting billions into railroad infrastructure is another way we have become safer, by improving our tracks, bridges, signals and equipment.

Another part of the tremendous improvement in rail safety is our continued learning from prior incidents. The importance of this cannot be underestimated. Much like with commercial aviation, and with a similar marked improvement in safety, we look at every derailment, injury and accident and ask, “why did this happen, and what can we do to avoid it from happening again?”

This last point brings me back to the focus of this hearing. It is, and should be, entirely true that our work to improve safety never ends, and this is especially true as it relates to any incident involving the transportation of hazmats. After any rail incident that involves hazmats, there are mobilized government and railroad experts whose mission is to understand what happened and how it can be avoided in the future.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of this work. Understanding what failed, systematically considering what can be done to avoid similar failures, then implementing the best all-around solutions is exactly how the rail freight industry reached the high level of safe operations we all benefit from today.

This hearing today is an important opportunity to raise these very relevant considerations, and I appreciate you giving me the time today to do so.

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