

Earthquake, Wind and Flood

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Once it was generally accepted that trains would run in bad weather, even if nothing else did. Not any more. Amtrak trains serving Richmond, for example, are often the first passenger-handling mode of transportation to shut down and the last to be restored. The reasons for this are many, varied, and complex. Safety is, of course, always the first concern of rail operating officers. No one wants to see a passenger train swallowed up by a washout, but the duration of this year's service outages is increasingly raising questions about the reliability of rail passenger services, especially when most needed for both evacuation and return of evacuees, e.g. college students. This needs to be addressed comprehensively by public policy-makers who are increasingly investing in rail infrastructure on private rail lines on the premise that it will be there when needed by the public. Obviously, the ultimate decision-makers have to be the railroads themselves.

Let's be quick to state that this is not intended to be an attack upon the private rail operators. Amtrak itself, and the public sector, have much to do with the situation described above. Ours is a changed world since the days, fifty years ago, when the then-robust, and often-arrogant, U. S. Postal Service used rail and aggressively fined private railroads for delay in handling the mail. That, in and of itself, was a strong inducement to rail operators to make sure that mail-handling passenger trains were first in line to go through when a weather-compromised rail line was once again ready to receive trains.

Another important, but largely unrecognized, contributor is urban sprawl. Think about it, some rail bridges and culverts date back 100 years. Northern Virginia is a prime example, on the former Southern (now NS) and RF&P (now CSX). Nobody in 1906-07, when RF&P (and Washington Southern) was double-tracked, could possibly have anticipated the storm-water run-off volumes originating on hundreds of square miles of paved-over land that was once field and forest. We saw it start in Arlington, then Alexandria, and now Fairfax, and beyond. Although there was some recent highway flooding, it did not cripple the road network as the recent rains did both NS and CSX.

There is also the matter of intercity service design. Then we had some trains that originated and terminated in Washington, which was accessible via two routes south of Alexandria. Although it is still possible to move trains between Richmond and DC via the alternative route, such route has been downgraded to the point that it is no longer practical to do so. It is great to have a one-seat ride from Lynchburg and Newport News to Boston; but it ceases to be when the Northeast Corridor is flooded out at Trenton and our train is stranded in the North, or being used by Amtrak for its purposes elsewhere.

Richmond's Main Street Station has seen no service at all on about sixteen (16) days thus far this year due to snow storms, a hurricane, and flooding. Maintenance-driven service reductions of 50% or more have occurred on about 28 additional days. Yet passenger counts at MSS are up almost 20% to date. What if Main St. Sta. and other Virginia stations had more reliable service? The public is speaking!
