

The Track Maintenance Dilemma

by Richard L. Beadles

Volume I, No. 7, April 10, 2009.

During the month of March, at least 134 Amtrak train arrivals and departures, which would have otherwise served Richmond, were cancelled due to host railroad track maintenance and construction. These cancellations represent about 13% of scheduled arrival and departures at Staples Mill Station.

Nothing is more basic in railroading than good track, unless of course it is the running of trains to serve customers. Modern track maintenance practices -- a marvel of efficiency resulting in near perfect track upon completion -- can seriously disrupt and inhibit the operation of trains in a timely manner during periods of such work.

Historically, much track maintenance was performed by small gangs, section gangs if you will, which pecked away constantly at minor defects, almost literally jumping out of the way of train traffic. While there have always been large gangs, which replaced rail and performed other major “programmed” work, the operation of trains normally took priority. But we now have such huge mechanized track maintenance forces, the size and nature of which limit operating management’s flexibility to clear for trains without loss of maintenance productivity. On the other hand, the railroad exists to serve customers. Thus the dilemma.

Why should we be concerned about this? Because current maintenance practices can present a serious impediment to the growth and development of highway-competitive rail service. When traditional heavy freight traffic is concentrated on fewer system routes and upon the tracks on such routes, more frequent track maintenance is obviously going to be necessary. Absent a substantial amount of otherwise redundant track capacity, so much out-of-service track time may be required for maintenance, particularly on single-track routes, that the development of premium freight service, as well as improved passenger service, may be seriously constrained.

Some conventional rail freight traffic can wait, but passengers and UPS-type freight customers often simply make other arrangements. Revenue is often lost; the amount varies from situation to situation, but the recent impact upon Amtrak business at Richmond was readily apparent to informed observers at Staples Mill Station.

There are no villains here. But the need for creative solutions is growing. Neither highway-competitive intermodal rail freight service, nor the Obama administration’s new vision for higher-speed passenger rail service, will prosper without some solution to this challenge. For starters, we should look at how Amtrak maintains its Northeast Corridor, the busiest and arguably the best rail route in America. Granted, Amtrak has a lot of

NEC infrastructure, but they also have a lot of maintenance and construction to do, much of it performed at night, including complex signal and interlocking work that is often accomplished without serious train delays or cancellations. We must seek solutions.

#