

“Train Wreck(s)” and Transport Safety

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How often have we heard the words “TRAIN WRECK” employed to describe something the user envisions as a pending disaster, one that has no connection whatsoever with rail? Do you ever hear “plane crash” or “truck wreck” used in similar context? It is ironic that what is demonstrably a very safe mode of transportation is so frequently, but perhaps unconsciously, negatively characterized.

Similarly, there seems to be a disproportionate media fascination with rail safety incidents. Recently the Richmond Times-Dispatch devoted 28 column-inches of space, including a large photograph, to an Illinois freight train accident in which one person died. The very next day, the same paper devoted only 3 column-inches of space to an Oklahoma highway accident, involving a tractor-trailer, in which ten people died.

Make no mistake about it, every mode of transportation confronts safety issues. The people closest to the wheels and turbines - whether rail, truck, aviation, or marine - are very concerned all the time about potential failures, both mechanical as well as human. Those closest to the edge of risk are not inclined to boast. They know the risks.

Having said that, rail freight (and passenger also) has a very good safety record, and one that has been consistently improving over a long period of years. For that reason it is regrettable to see so many calls for an inevitable, although perhaps unintended, shift of potentially hazardous cargo from rail, where the public is better insulated from risk, to highway transport, where the public finds itself right in the middle of the mix.

At the present time freight railroads are responding to federal dictates relative to the routing, and re-routing, of potentially hazardous cargo to avoid certain high-risk urban areas, as well as some other sensitive locations. However, we are unaware of a corresponding federal effort to deal with highway transport of the same types of cargo.

One thing most people would probably agree upon in this. Any anxiety experienced by a worry-prone citizen while watching a freight train rumble through town pales in comparison to the sheer terror one feels when one's auto is tailed by a snorting forty-to-fifty-ton rig loaded with who-knows-what, at 75 miles-per-hour, less than a car length behind the auto's rear bumper, and perhaps just over the shoulders of the driver's children in the back seat.

A reinvigorated and coordinated federal and state campaign to improve the safety of highway transport of cargo, of all types, coupled with a corresponding increase in public funding for the elimination of rail-highway grade crossings - the most dangerous

aspect of U. S. railroad operation – would strike a better balance and, most likely, produce more positive results.

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