



September 4, 2012

Legislation

Senators seek review of rail safety procedures following accidents. Following a number of high-profile rail accidents, Senators Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ), Chair of the Commerce Subcommittee on Surface Transportation; John D. (Jay) Rockefeller (D-WV), Chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee; and Dick Durbin (D-IL), requested a Government Accountability Office (GAO) evaluation of rail safety procedures – specifically how the Federal Railroad Administration and other stakeholders cooperate to ensure the safe movement of people and freight.

In the August 29th letter, Senator Lautenberg explained, “Our railways strengthen the economy by moving goods and people across the country, and we cannot overlook the critical role that safety plays in keeping our rail system moving. The 2008 law that I authored took important steps to address rail safety, but recent accidents have shown the need to continue examining safety and reducing the risk of accidents and fatalities.”

Senator Rockefeller stated, “We have the most extensive rail system in the world that is integral to the national economy and mobility of people and freight. By and large the rail system is safe, but recent incidents show that our rail system can still be deadly when things go wrong. We need a thorough review to identify gaps that may exist in our safety programs and policy and to reduce the risk of accidents. In 2008, we worked to ensure rail safety in the Rail Safety Improvement Act and I urge the GAO to evaluate the federal government’s ongoing compliance.”

“Following a recent derailment and bridge collapse in Northbrook, Illinois and another high profile derailment in Maryland, a full review of the nation’s railroads is necessary,” Durbin said. “An investigation into how railroads, the Federal Railroad Administration and state and local agencies work together to ensure the safety of rail passengers and freight will help us better oversee rail safety and help identify any gaps in our nation’s large and growing rail system.”

Administration

Obama Administration finalizes 54.5 mpg fuel efficiency standards. On August 28th, the Obama Administration finalized standards that will increase fuel economy to the equivalent of 54.5 mpg for cars and light-duty trucks by Model Year 2025.

“These fuel standards represent the single most important step we’ve ever taken to reduce our

dependence on foreign oil,” said President Obama. “This historic agreement builds on the progress we’ve already made to save families money at the pump and cut our oil consumption. By the middle of the next decade our cars will get nearly 55 miles per gallon, almost double what they get today. It’ll strengthen our nation’s energy security, it’s good for middle class families and it will help create an economy built to last.”

The standards issued by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) built upon the Administration’s standards for cars and light trucks for Model Years 2011-2016, which raised average fuel efficiency by 2016 to the equivalent of 35.5 mpg.

Secretary LaHood announces creation of Freight Policy Council. On August 23rd, U.S.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood announced the establishment of the Freight Policy Council which will focus on improving the condition and performance of the national freight network to better ensure the ability of the United States to compete in today’s global economy. The council will develop a national, intermodal plan for improving the efficiency of freight movement and will work with states to encourage development of a forward looking state freight strategy.

“Our freight system is the lifeblood of the American economy, moving goods quickly and efficiently to benefit both businesses and consumers across the country,” said Secretary LaHood. “With the launch of the Freight Policy Council, we have an opportunity to make not only our freight system, but all modes of transportation, stronger and better connected.”

The recent transportation bill, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century, or MAP-21, signed by President Obama last month, established a national freight policy and called for the creation of a National Freight Strategic Plan. DOT’s Freight Policy Council will implement the key freight provisions of the legislation.

The Council will be chaired by Deputy Transportation Secretary John Porcari, and will include DOT leadership from highways, rail, ports and airports and economic and policy experts from across the Administration. The freight and logistics industries, consumers and other stakeholders will also play an advisory role, and states will be asked to offer proposals for improving the freight system in their region.

GOP Convention

GOP platform suggests ending Amtrak subsidy, high speed rail funding. During last week’s Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida, Republicans approved a party platform that calls for no longer providing federal funding for Amtrak as well as high speed rail projects. The platform also suggests that highway projects should receive priority over public transit and bicycle paths.

The platform refers to Amtrak as “an extremely expensive railroad” and argues, “It is long past time for the federal government to get out of the way and allow private ventures to provide passenger service to the Northeast Corridor. The same holds true with regard to high-speed and intercity rail across the country.”