



Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives

Bill Shuster
Chairman

Washington, DC 20515

Peter A. DeFazio
Ranking Member

November 7, 2017

Mathew M. Sturges, Staff Director

Katherine W. Dedrick, Democratic Staff Director

The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St. NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

On August 2, 2017, a CSX train consisting of five locomotives and 178 rail cars of mixed freight, including flammable and hazardous liquid, derailed in Hyndman, Pennsylvania. Although available data indicate that the average freight train has about 70 cars, it has become more and more common in the industry for trains to have more. Unit trains, for example, carry one commodity – such as coal or crude oil – to a single destination and may consist of 80 to 120 cars or more.

Indeed, recent press reports indicate that some railroads are now operating trains with close to 200 or more cars that are more than two miles long. We have concerns that longer trains can create unusually long delays at grade crossings and may pose safety risks to train crews and the public. For example, a freight train that blocks a grade crossing for a significant period of time could keep emergency response vehicles that need to cross the tracks from reaching the people that need them in time. There are also concerns that longer trains could lead to loss of radio communications among crewmembers and may also cause service delays at rail sidings and yards.

We request that the U.S. Government Accountability Office study the safety and other impacts of longer trains. Specifically:

- What are railroads' financial and operational advantages and disadvantages to operating longer trains?
- In what ways, if at all, do longer trains pose safety and other types of challenges to railroad workers, railroad shippers, and local communities?
- How, if at all, does the Department of Transportation oversee and ensure the safety of longer trains?

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- Do States and localities have authority to take action should longer trains block crossings and public safety becomes a concern? What remedies, if any, are available for States and localities to take such action?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



PETER DeFAZIO
Ranking Member



MICHAEL E. CAPUANO
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Railroads,
Pipelines, and Hazardous
Materials