

Senator Maria Cantwell

Q&A Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Hearing on Positive Train Control

Witness: Mr. Richard Anderson, President and CEO, Amtrak

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CANTWELL: Thank you Senator Nelson, thank you for your indulgence. Thank you Mr. Chairman, for both you and the Ranking Member, organizing this hearing. Clearly the discussion of Positive Train control and implementation has become an all-too-live debate in the state of Washington, with the horrific crash that killed 3 people and injured 80 in the State of Washington. So, the discussion we are having right now is about how do we move forward in that same vein. I know, as it relates to Washington State, that Amtrak uses in Washington owned by BSNF will be compliant by the end of this year. Is that right Mr. Anderson?

ANDERSON: Yes Senator, it will.

CANTWELL: So it will only be those separately run tracks that in the question on their compliance, is that correct?

ANDERSON: That is a correct statement.

CANTWELL: So on the line where the accident occurred, it's a question about whether they'll be compliant?

ANDERSON: They will be PTC compliant before the deadline.

CANTWELL: OK. So if I could ask, because as this discussion continues with the committee about those sites that are going to be compliant and non-compliant and where we are going to run, if I could just show a picture... This is the warning sign. It's like a highway I guess, in the sense that your exit is coming up, and in this case, slow down to 30 miles per hour. They see that sign at 2 miles, at 1 mile, at a half mile and as the curve starts, right? But I think in this case – well, we don't know all the NTSB investigations – but instead of going 30 [mph], they didn't have the situational awareness to – they didn't observe this, and hit that curve, on its maiden route, at speeds we think over 50 miles per hour. So this is going to continue to be a real live discussion in other places. Now, just to clarify, in this situation under Positive Train Control, if they blew by this signal at more than 30 miles per hour, the train would be automatically slowed down or stopped, is that correct?

ANDERSON: Correct.

CANTWELL: So that implementation, you wouldn't need the situational awareness in that instance, but it is still something that you would want to have implemented with your engineers, is that correct?

ANDERSON: Correct, and actually, we need to go further than the PTC regulation and establish a standard of 100%. If you're a passenger and you get on a train in America, you need to be PTC compliant or PTC equivalent. I just don't think that there is any other way to deal with the risk of single-human error. I walked that track the night after the accident, and you see the curve and you see the signs, and it really makes such a compelling case for PTC, because we could have avoided it.

CANTWELL: Well I think that's what the Ranking Member was just saying, that yes we should have mandated something in 2015, that now we're going to discuss what's going to happen when it's not in place by the end of the year, for certain tracks and services, right?

ANDERSON: Correct.

CANTWELL: And so I'm understanding your House testimony, that you doubted that Amtrak would operate on any rail line that wasn't PTC functioning by the end of the year.

ANDERSON: Yes, that hasn't been very popular.

CANTWELL: And so does the Committee have a list of that? Of where those areas are?

ANDERSON: We can give you a list of those, but we do have [the list], and they touch on, my estimate is 300 to 700 miles of track we operate on.

CANTWELL: And so just for the riding public on rail services, not knowing where PTC exists and doesn't exist, what is Amtrak going to do to increase the situational awareness training that is important for those lines that don't have PTC, or is Amtrak just going to take a hard and fast line – no more commuter rail transportation after December 31st without PTC?

ANDERSON: Look, that's the sort of Sisiphan problem, which is on the one hand we support – Amtrak assets and trains and T&E crews and maintenance – we support probably half a billion trips a year. So it's an essential part of what we do. On the other hand, it's not very comforting being the President of Amtrak and running trains on dark railroads. So I think the first thing is we have to, and after 501, we immediately improved our oversight and hands-on engagement of our road foreman and our crew briefing rooms. We revamped our operating procedures for commissioning new routes. It takes my approval now, to go through the gating process under our SMS for a new route. We have reduced headcount in the headquarters, and we are going to redeploy those resources to the field for more road foremen and assistant road foremen and in our transportation organization. We've put in new rules for operating on signal-suspended railroads, and we are implementing, well in advance of the FRA deadlines, a rail safety SMS program. But we still remain exposed and even after PTC – now PTC will be on the Defiance Bypass and all of The Cascades – but even after that, and I can share with you, it's a great question, the places where we, even after the deadline, if you assumed every railroad complied with the rule. We are still going to have significant sections of passenger rail operations without PTC, and I think that is a level of risk that we shouldn't be prepared to take as a railroad. And my board at Amtrak has taken that position.

CANTWELL: Well thank you, Mr. Chairman, I know my time has expired. But this was certainly a very costly incident to the Pacific Northwest, and our sympathies are with the families who have lost loved ones. The issue is that we need to make sure that the traveling public is safe and that both situational awareness and technologies are at the best available, or the assessment that you're just making is implemented. Thank you.

ANDERSON: And we are deeply sorry to the communities in Washington, and we have admitted all liability, and we are generously settling those claims in covering all the costs for the state of Washington.