

NEWS RELEASE

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PSC’s Railroad Safety Program Works to Improve Safety, Reliability of Rail System

BISMARCK, ND – The North Dakota Public Service Commission (PSC) today released inspection data for the 2017-19 biennium from the agency’s Railroad Safety Program, which shows the program identified more than 5,600 defects and issued 62 violations over the time period.

“State rail inspectors are working with the railroads to identify and fix defects and violations that threaten to cause derailments and other safety concerns and threaten the efficiency of this vital transportation system,” said Commissioner Julie Fedorchak, who heads the rail portfolio. “Our inspectors have found issues with rail car wheels, break systems, axles, track joints, track gauge and geometry, and other problems that pose safety hazards and needed to be addressed.”

The program consists of two inspectors who focus on two disciplines: (1) track and (2) motor power & equipment (mechanical). These areas were selected because statistics show they contribute to the largest number and most severe accidents in North Dakota. The inspectors categorize their findings as either informational, defect, or violation. The chart below outlines the inspection data for the 2017-19 biennium.

		7/1/17 – 6/30/19
Mechanical Inspector	Cars Inspected*	18,163
	Defects	3,319
	Violations	46
Track Inspector	Units Inspected**	7,835
	Defects	2,299
	Violations	16

* Cars inspected consist of all rolling stock, not including locomotives. Each car may consist of multiple units or regulations inspected.

** One unit consists of one mile of track, a switch or turnout, and/or a single derail.

Defect: Conditions that do not meet the minimum requirements prescribed by the FRA and do not pose imminent danger but, if not addressed, could develop into a more serious problem.

Violation: A more serious problem that requires more immediate attention. Violations trigger various compliance strategies depending on the severity such as fines, reduced speeds or taking equipment out of service.

The inspectors have jurisdiction within their respective disciplines throughout North Dakota and conduct inspections on more than 3,000 miles of track, class I and short line locomotives and rolling stock. The inspectors work with railroad personnel to establish working relationships and gain cooperation and report that railroads have been very receptive to the program.

“The Railroad Safety Program has proven to be invaluable given the number of defects state inspectors continue to find,” said Commission Chairman Brian Kroshus. “Federal Inspectors are spread thin, supporting the need for additional oversight at the state level. As economic activity in North Dakota increases, particularly in the energy sector, higher volumes of hazardous material move daily on rail lines passing through communities across our state. Having additional personnel on the ground to enhance public safety is critical.”

The State Railroad Program was advanced by the Commission and approved in 2015 by the Legislature along with the authority to hire two inspectors. The program has completed its four-year pilot program and was extended an additional two years by the Legislature in 2019. The inspectors are hired by and entirely accountable to the PSC. They are trained and certified by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and work in partnership with the federal inspectors to provide stronger oversight of the state’s vast rail network. The state inspectors inspect to the federal safety standards and have the same enforcement authority and tools as the federal inspectors.

“This program has proven to be an extraordinarily effective use of this devoted rail safety money,” said Commissioner Randy Christmann.

The Railroad Safety Program is not funded with general fund dollars, but with an existing diesel fuel tax the railroads pay, a portion of which is dedicated for safety improvements.

The North Dakota Public Service Commission is a constitutionally created state agency with authority to permit, site and regulate certain business activities in the state including electric and gas utilities, telecommunications companies, power plants, electric transmission lines, pipelines, railroads, auctioneers, commercial weighing devices, pipeline safety and coal mine reclamation. For more information, contact the Public Service Commission at (701) 328-2400 or www.psc.nd.gov.

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