

Positive train control: Oh, what a mess

Five years ago, if I'd told you what would transpire, you wouldn't have believed me

Events of the past several months have taught me one thing: You can never exaggerate the impact of a railroad disaster in the courts of government policy and public opinion. There's a reason why people refer to something they don't like that goes terribly wrong as a "train wreck." Google "train wreck" and the Affordable Care Act and see what I mean.

Well, at this point, positive train control is something of a train wreck all its own. Everything that could go wrong with its implementation seems to have done so. Now the deadline for having PTC in place on some 63,000 miles of railroad is less than two years away. There is no way that deadline of Dec. 31, 2015, set seven years earlier, will be met by any of the four biggest Class I railroads (save for possibly BNSF Railway), or cash-strapped commuter agencies. The government itself is as much or more to blame for the failure to meet the deadline as are the railroads. But in the courts of government policy and public opinion, there is no sympathy whatsoever for the fix the railroads are in.

Let's back up and review what happened. PTC was mandated by the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008, enacted just days after an inattentive Metrolink engineer let his commuter train pass a red signal and collide head-on with a Union Pacific freight, taking 25

lives. In 2008, seven years must have seemed a generous amount of time to give the railroads to install the collision-avoidance system. But doing so required the entire railroad industry to agree on the technologies to be used, some of which hadn't even been invented then. Radio spectrum had to be bought (even now, some railroads can't find it at any price). Radios and communications systems had to be designed and built by the tens of thousands. Then all of the hardware has to be installed at trackside, in locomotives, and in

the back offices. Finally everything has to be tested for reliability, so that trains can seamlessly go about their business, including moves from one railroad to another.

This \$13 billion mandate (unfunded by the government, naturally) is massive beyond all understanding. And it didn't take long for the logjams to appear. The Federal Railroad Administration did not have the expertise in

enough abundance to write the rules for installing PTC and then to review the specific implementation plans of each railroad in a timely manner. The railroads were in no better position. Scarcer than a wise man in Washington, D.C., is an unemployed signal engineer.

In August 2012, the FRA told Congress that because of a host of problems, a majority of railroads would be unable to meet the 2015 deadline. At best, FRA said, partial deployment would be achieved.

GOVERNMENT CAUSED THIS PROBLEM, AND GOVERNMENT SHOULD FIX IT. EXCEPT THAT GOVERNMENT WON'T.



A priority BNSF Railway intermodal train at Waterman, Ill., passes wayside signals at the end of a siding on Nov. 10, 2005. Howard Anderson

champion of the PTC legislation, and Deborah Hersman, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board, publicly objected to any push-back of the PTC deadline. So did the editorial writers of major newspapers such as the New York Times. Smug in their ignorance of what is actually happening, these pundits and politicians will swiftly move public opinion against any official who dares delay the deadline. And the railroads? All they want is to install PTC ASAP, and damn the cost. Will the government please get out of the way? I

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