‘Crashworthiness’ in context

FRA panel votes to change safety standards for US passenger railroading

New alternate crash standards under review could mean that German, Swiss, Japanese, and other international transit cars may be coming to a commuter line near you. In June, members of the Federal Railroad Administration’s Railroad Safety Advisory Committee unanimously endorsed new crash standards for Tier II and III high-speed passenger equipment, as well as alternate standards for lower-speed Tier I commuter-type trains.

The safety committee has been working on alternate standards since 2009. The rules would leave car manufacturers relatively free to decide the materials, construction, and design of their products, so long as passengers remain safe during a wreck.

Committee members’ proposed rules need to pass scrutiny from the Office of Management and Budget as well as the FRA before the agency makes a draft version available for public comment. Depending on the level of scrutiny required by law, a draft of the rules could be available as soon as August or as late as 2014.

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In 2012, the Denton County Transportation Authority became the first railroad in the U.S. using an FRA waiver to run passenger trains that, at the same time, qualified under the traditional or alternate standards. Before 2011, the authority ran vintage Budd-built RDCs borrowed from the nearby Dallas Area Rapid Transit system to begin startup service. When the authority sought new vehicles to support continued growth, officials looked to avoid cutting service by finding cars that were legal to operate alongside the Budds and freight trains.

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