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What is precision scheduled railroading?

Definitions vary, but the practice has reshaped the rail industry over the past two decades.

By **Amber Gaudet**

May 21, 2024



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Union Pacific trackmen work at the Union Pacific Railroad rail yard on Thursday, March 28, 2024, in

Juan Figueroa/Staff Photographer. Some have blamed for a stagnating safety record and traffic delays. [Show More](#)

"Precision scheduled railroading" isn't a household phrase, but even people with

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It's especially noticeable in a place like Texas, where rail lines spiderweb the state, carrying goods from East Texas interchange points like Palestine south to the port city of Houston and the border town of Laredo.

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Some rail companies want to distance themselves from the practice, which has come under scrutiny from federal regulators and shippers, particularly after the 2023 train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio. Others say it's misunderstood and embrace it as a model that cuts costs and increases profits. But all seven of the largest railroads in the U.S. have said they are running longer trains in the name of increased efficiency.

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While rail executives, regulators and industry critics argue the semantics of the

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maintained by fewer employees. The focus is on maximizing efficiency and profit, and [it has been working](#).

But critics, including unions and the leader of the Federal Railroad Administration, point to downsides. Longer trains can halt emergency response vehicles at crossings as critical minutes tick by. With much larger loads, the heavier trains run slower, meaning crossings are blocked for longer. Children have even taken to [climbing through trains](#) stopped on the tracks to get to school.

Longer trains also present more operational complexities, a cause for alarm amid the widespread job cuts across the rail industry over the past decade. Staff levels at Class I railroads - the largest - declined about 28% between 2011 and 2021.

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Regulators have expressed concerns about the cuts, saying proper staffing is critical to maintaining safety across the rail network. [Customers, too, have blamed the practice](#) for poor service and late deliveries.

Railroads and industry lobbyists have opposed efforts to strengthen federal oversight of the industry, such as the Railway Safety Act, which was introduced last year but has since stalled in Congress. Groups like the Association of American Railroads have denied claims by regulators that safety has stagnated. In response to a [final rule issued by the FRA](#) requiring two-person train crews in most instances,

mitigate the impacts of longer trains by building overpasses or underpasses at crossings, a move railroads generally support.

Amber Gaudet

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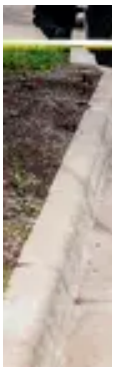
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