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Do railroad job cuts pose safety concerns?

Railroad employment has declined over the past few decades as trains have gotten longer. Should Texans be worried?

By **Amber Gaudet**

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Train cars sit at the Union Pacific Railroad rail yard on Thursday, March 28, 2024, in Palestine. Less than 100 railroad workers remain in Palestine as train companies have slashed workers to maintain profit margins and instituted efficiency measures such as Precision Scheduled Railroading, a controversial industry trend that some have blamed for a stagnating safety record and traffic delays.

Juan Figueroa/Staff Photographer

As the transportation industry has changed since the railroad boom of the late 19th century, reliance on trains as the primary means of moving goods and people has declined. As the rail industry has contracted, so has its workforce.

Staff levels at Class I railroads, the largest, declined about 28% between 2011 and 2021. At the same time, trains have gotten longer, often stretching on for 2-3 miles. Regulators and union leaders have said the combination is a concerning one in terms of safety.



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Longer trains present more operational complexities, regulators have warned. An industry trend, precision scheduled railroading, has emphasized cost-cutting measures including job cuts and running longer trains. At the same time, mechanical

department employees (workers responsible for maintenance and inspections) at Class I freight railroads have been cut 41% since 2015, the Transportation Trades Department told the Federal Railroad Administration in a [February letter](#).

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The letter followed a BNSF Railway furlough of 362 mechanical department workers and urged the agency to address what they characterized as unsafe industry practices.

The head of the Federal Railroad Administration sent a letter to another of the largest railroads, Union Pacific, in February following its furloughs of maintenance workers. It accused the company of "prioritiz[ing] cost-cutting measures over ensuring safe operations, jeopardizing the well-being of both UP's workers and the public."

Union Pacific is also [embroiled in a legal battle with Anderson County and the East Texas town of Palestine](#) over an attempt to eliminate jobs in the town despite a contract to keep them there.

The company declined an interview request from *The Dallas Morning News* about the lawsuit and wider job cuts.

"We're very concerned about the slashing of the workforce," U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told *The Dallas Morning News* in April. "I think common sense would tell you that the wholesale stripping away of workers from the railroad sector that's taken place over the last 10, 20 years has correlated with stagnant and in some cases, worsening safety results."

There are other reasons for railroad workforce reductions, according to Allan Rutter, freight practice leader at the Texas A&M Transportation Institute. Advancing technology has shifted some manual work to automation, like using cameras and sensors to detect track issues and monitor cars. The freight industry has been in a slump - compounded by a shift in energy policy - that makes efforts to reduce costs more urgent.

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Railroad companies have defended cuts as part of regular demand fluctuations and denied any relationship between staffing levels and safety. Zak Andersen, BNSF vice president of communications, said the February furloughs were primarily of "back shop" employees who did major repairs rather than those responsible for minor repairs and inspections. BNSF also [eliminated several hundred management positions in March](#).

Railroad executives and lobbyists say the railroad is safer than ever. In a March email to *The News*, Union Pacific said they aim to be "the industry's best in safety," pointing to a reduction in injuries last year and nearly \$2 billion earmarked for infrastructure replacement.

"Last year, there were zero work-related fatalities, a 15% reduction in serious injuries for employees and a 6% reduction in serious derailments, compared to 2022," the statement read in part. "While safety will always be our first priority, we are committed to enhancing service and delivering what we sold to our customers. Rail is essential to the Texas and U.S. economy and as we continue to modernize, we constantly review operations."

A March statement by the Association of American Railroads cited a "safety-centered approach" that has driven "the train accident rate down 27% since 2000 and 6% since 2022" and led to a decline in employee fatalities and injuries.

Union groups have accused the industry of manipulating the data to compare recent safety trends to those from an industry low point and citing the absolute number of derailments rather than rates, given the trend of running fewer but longer trains.

The Association of American Railroads calls the claims "patently false" and emphasizes that railroads follow federal reporting requirements for safety data.

"The safety data tells an unequivocal story of a safe industry. This unfounded claim of data manipulation reflects a fundamental misunderstanding about 1. FRA reporting data and 2. Suggests railroads are out of compliance with federal statute," the group said in an email.

A trio of [FRA reports finalized Wednesday](#) found air brake systems on longer trains performed largely as expected in controlled environments, but "identified negative impacts on safety and performance." Those included that "the likelihood of unintended brake releases was higher with longer trains and that increased train lengths led to slightly slower brake response times."

More testing is needed to identify potential safety gaps in operating long trains in "non-ideal" conditions, the FRA concluded.

The FRA also [finalized two final rules Monday](#) requiring railroads to develop certification and training programs for train dispatchers and signal employees

The railroad industry has pushed back against attempts to regulate safety. Four railroads, including Union Pacific and BNSF, [asked federal appeals courts](#) to throw out an April 2024 Federal Railroad Administration rule requiring two-person train crews in most circumstances.

The Association of American Railroads said there was a "lack of evidence connecting crew size to rail safety." The group has also [opposed provisions of the congressional Rail Safety Act](#) like broader manual inspections and expanded hazmat transportation requirements. The bill is stalled in Congress.

Amber Gaudet

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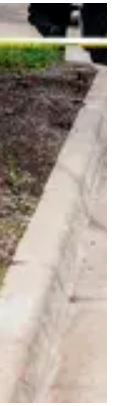
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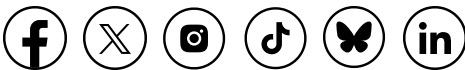
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