



Federal Railroad Administration Track Safety Standards Fact Sheet

Background on Federal Track Safety Standards

Railroads are safer today than at any time in our history; however, FRA continues to strive for an accident-free operating environment. There are approximately 160,000 miles of track in the U.S. which require vigilant inspection, maintenance, repair and replacement by railroads in order to keep freight and passenger trains moving safely. Generally, track conditions today are safer than at any other point in our history. In 1978, there were 4,780 track-caused accidents compared to 669 in 2011—an 86 percent reduction.

The wide range of conditions associated with, and inherent in, track infrastructure can lead to derailments if not effectively managed. Although the number of track-caused accidents has decreased over time, the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) continues to encourage railroads to achieve further reductions.

Role of the FRA

The primary duty of FRA's federal track safety inspectors, along with certified State inspectors, is to strategically monitor, inspect, and assess track conditions to determine whether a railroad is complying with federal safety standards. The FRA's federal track safety standards generally focus on four main areas:

- Track Structure: Rails, crossties, special track work (turnouts, bridge lift assemblies), tie plates, and rail fastening systems
- Track Geometry: Track gage, alignment, elevation, curvature, and track surface
- Road Bed: Ballast, drainage and vegetation (vegetation cannot obstruct signs and signals or impede wayside duties)
- Track Inspection: Frequency and quality of a railroad's inspection, special inspections, and recordkeeping

Track Inspection/Speed Requirements

Under FRA regulations, each railroad has primary responsibility to ensure its track meets or exceeds the federal safety standards. This includes railroad inspectors performing track inspections at specified minimum frequencies based on the class of track, the type of track, the annual gross tonnage operated over the track, and whether it carries passenger trains.

According to FRA Regulations:

- Track speed is determined by the class of track.
- Railroads can change the class of track (and thus increase or decrease the track speed) whenever it deems appropriate and without prior notification to, or approval by, the FRA.

- FRA's interest is in ensuring the railroad maintains the track to the appropriate federal safety standards for that class of track.
- Railroads are required to maintain accurate records of regular and special or ad hoc track inspections.
- FRA inspectors monitor a railroad's safety performance hundreds of times per year to determine compliance and assess the potential risks or hazards.
- A railroad is subject to FRA enforcement actions, or possibly liable for civil penalties, if it fails to comply with the track safety standards, or if it operates trains in excess of the designated track speed.

For more information on Federal Track Safety Standards, including maximum allowable track speeds and specific requirements, see [49 CFR Part 213](#).

For more information on the FRA Automated Track Inspection Program, visit <http://atip.fra.dot.gov/>

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