

Remarks Prepared for Acting Administrator Heath Hall
FRA 2017 Grade Crossing Research Needs Workshop
Opening Session
St. Louis, MO
Tuesday, August 15, 2017

- Good morning. Thank you, Ron for the kind introduction
- On behalf of U.S. Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, I'm very proud to welcome so many dedicated transportation safety professionals to St. Louis.
- Over a dozen FRA staff are present today, including about 10 of our 14 regional crossing managers from the Office of Railroad Safety, as well as experts from the Office of Research and Development.
- I want to ask all FRA employees to please stand.
- These folks are here to help you. Please see any of them during this conference if you have any questions about FRA or our highway-rail crossing safety programs.
- A little more than two decades ago, I walked through the doors of the Federal Railroad Administration as a very young intern ready to change the world. I was assigned to the filing room so there was not much I could do from there.
- However, what I learned that summer is that FRA stands for what is right. Innovation. Safety. Good Policy.
- As we begin this workshop, let's take a moment to think about what rail means to America.
- The fact is railroads are a vital part of our intermodal transportation network, and the economy.
- I grew up in Southwest Mississippi where trains meant jobs-- and when the trains stopped the economy did as well.
- We went from having more millionaires per capita than anywhere in the United States to becoming one of the poorest counties in the country.
- My mission at FRA is simple. To try and figure out how to improve our economy through our robust rail system.
- As most of you know, safety continues to be the Department of Transportation's—and FRA's highest priority.

- In fact, more than 60% of our manpower and operating budget are directed towards safety.
- There is nothing more important than keeping our industry safe and it should always be first and foremost in our minds. I know it is for everyone in this room.
- This stagnation is due to several factors including variation in the amount of motor vehicle and rail traffic.
- Other factors may include changes to driver culture like the prevalence of handheld electronic devices and the nation's opioid crisis.
- Distraction and alcohol or drug use are also possibly contributing to driver impairment at grade crossings.
- As we brainstorm ideas on how to improve grade crossing safety, I encourage you to be mindful about these challenges.
- All of you-- railroads, labor unions, States, localities, Operation Lifesaver, and academia-- have contributed to the progress that's been made! So too have our modal counterparts at FHWA, FTA, FMCSA and NHTSA.
- Without question, ensuring safety at more than 212,000 highway-rail crossings is a daunting challenge.
- It requires educating hundreds of millions of drivers to exercise caution near railroad tracks.
- It demands States and railroads fulfill their responsibilities for monitoring and addressing high risk crossings.
- It compels FRA and its modal partners to remain vigilant in addressing the numerous factors underlying the approximately 2000 incidents each year.
- Grade crossings safety is complex precisely because it is the nexus of multiple transportation modes.
- I applaud your sustained commitment to preventing and reducing grade crossing collisions, but we must redouble our efforts to improve safety. We should never ask ourselves "did we do enough?"
- That is exactly why we are gathered here this week-- to ask tough questions, share ideas and challenge assumptions. To explore new and innovative approaches for addressing longstanding challenges.
- This workshop brings together national and international experts to identify and prioritize specific research needs. Your ideas are very important to us!

- This workshop provides yet another incredible opportunity to build upon those accomplishments. To exchange ideas and network with peers from across the nation and around the world.
- Over the next few days at the five general sessions, and especially in the breakout sessions tomorrow, we want to hear your views and learn from your experiences with engineering, technology, human factors, community outreach, public education, enforcement, and hazard management.
- Doing so will set the foundation for future cooperation and collaboration.
- In the 1980's, we challenged ourselves to bring public awareness to drug use "in just say no" campaigns. As a result- lives are being saved.
- In the 1990's, we challenged ourselves to bring public awareness to drunk driving. As a result- lives are being saved.
- My challenge to you is to make the next decade the safest ever by embracing innovation that leads to new technologies, greater knowledge, and increased public awareness to reduce and eliminate preventable injuries and deaths.
- This is something that we must do; and that we can do together.
- Along with that, I feel as though I must highlight another challenge mentioned earlier. Maybe you learned about it on TV, heard it on the radio, or perhaps you know someone personally who is struggling with addiction to prescription drugs.
- Against this context, back in May, we released research containing an in-depth analysis of grade crossing accidents.
- Among the findings:
 - Male drivers are involved in nearly 75 percent of all grade crossing accidents.
 - 59 percent of drivers involved are 20-49 years old, and the overall *average* age is 42.
 - However, time of day and day of the week affect these numbers. There are 3 times as many collisions on weekend nights than weekday nights, and on Friday and Saturday nights the average driver age is 35.
 - There is also link between the amount of daylight hours. Driving into a rising or setting sun is associated with higher accident numbers.
 - And crossing collisions fluctuate by season, with the highest accident rates in December, January, and February.

- The point is we know these people. They are our neighbors. Perhaps their children go to school with ours. Let's drive our joint mission of safety to them.
- As we look forward today, it's worth noting that FRA hosted our first highway-rail grade crossing research needs workshop in April 1995; a second one in 2003; and another in 2009 during which 113 research topics were generated.
- Just as FRA has done previously; we will thoroughly document your ideas about needed grade crossing research and share them with everyone at the closing session on Thursday.
- More importantly, FRA will publish a report detailing these proceedings.
- I also want to reiterate that Secretary Chao is supportive of your efforts. Just a week ago, the DOT announced the recipients of FY 2017 FAST LANE Small Project Grant recipients.
- The proposed awards will enhance safety at over 100 rail crossings, repair nearly 250 miles of track and improve over 70 rail bridges, allowing communities in Maine, Mississippi, Florida, Georgia, and Texas access to the national freight rail network.
- In total, the \$78.88 million in proposed FASTLANE awards will lead to approximately \$217 million in total investment in infrastructure.

###