

FRA Deputy Administrator Jennifer Mitchell
American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association
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Thank you, Chuck, for that introduction.

As some of you know, I only recently joined the FRA as Deputy Administrator.

While today's conference is my first speaking opportunity in my new role, I'm no stranger to short line and regional carriers.

Since joining the Biden Administration in mid-April, I've been immersing myself in DOT and FRA priorities.

I'm also quickly learning more about the unique issues and challenges that are top of mind for ASLRRA members.

These are the topics I want to speak about today to strengthen the transparent, productive partnership with each of you that Administrator Bose has prioritized and expects.

As an Administration, we're focused on: Growing the economy, creating good-paying jobs, increasing equity, and addressing climate change.

These commitments drive our actions. For example:

When it comes to equity, FRA is also completing a Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise Disparity Study to be issued in the coming months.

The results of this important study will inform Congress's direction as key members have stated their intention to authorize a DBE Program at FRA, like those in place at other US DOT modes.

When it comes to climate, you already know that freight rail is significantly more fuel efficient and environmentally friendly than truck transportation.

On Earth Day last month, we announced a rail industry Climate Challenge to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

FRA will continue to work with industry to advance clean energy technologies and we welcome your participation and involvement.

As we gear up to announce FY21 CRISI selections, release even more Notices of Funding Opportunities and move forward with implementation efforts, FRA is focused on three strategic priorities: safety, rail network development, and workforce development and engagement.

Never in FRA's history has the outlook for rail been so promising and pivotal.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is a 500% increase over recent funding levels for rail, with the CRISI Program creating the most significant opportunities for freight rail.

There is also a new \$3 billion for Grade Crossing Elimination Program for which railroads may partner with states and localities to seek funding.

My colleague Jamie Rennert will speak in greater detail about the CRISI Program later in this conference.

But, I want to emphasize how impactful CRISI funding has been for short lines since becoming eligible under the program.

In 2018, the Twin Cities & Western Railroad in Minnesota was awarded a \$2.01M CRISI grant in to replace 28 miles of jointed rail with continuously-welded rail, increasing safety and efficiency.

A 2018 CRISI grant was also awarded to the Sierra Northern Railway for track improvements including the replacement of 90,000 ties, rehabbing 10 miles of badly worn rail, and improvements to 10 grade crossings.

In 2021, the Iowa Northern Railway Company received over \$5 million in CRISI grant funding for an innovative Education and Training Program providing virtual and in-person training classes for a workforce development and safety program for any Class II and III railroad employee to meet FRA safety requirements. In

partnership with ASLRRA the grant also funded four mobile simulators for use shared among railroads participating in the training.

FRA will continue to be an avid champion for, and staunch proponent for short lines and regional carriers.

Amid this moment of optimism, I'm also mindful of the continued challenges of the COVID-pandemic and our ongoing supply chain disruptions.

The supply chain disruptions experienced over the past few years have underscored the pivotal role short lines play, as some ports rely entirely on them.

On any given day, you already move a quarter of all rail cars. With rail volumes expected to grow in the years to come, there are opportunities to fill supply chain gaps and to grow your business.

Short lines are uniquely positioned to help alleviate chokepoints over the long-term and improve the flow of goods both locally and nationally.

Like so many across DOT, this issue is very much a priority of mine, and I look forward to working with you on first and last mile service issues.

I'm also eager to learning about new opportunities to shift freight from the road to rail, both in congested urban centers and rural areas.

Increasing and ensuring safety remains FRA's top priority, and a shared responsibility.

While FRA staff will discuss specific issues of interest and concern during this conference, I want to briefly highlight a few initiatives that delivering results.

In recent years, we've seen short lines lead the way in advancing safety culture. This is in no small part due to the efforts of the Short Line Safety Institute, which FRA helped establish in 2015. SLSI's four pillars– Assessments, Education and Training, Communication, and Research- are synonymous with safety culture.

These activities have always been voluntary, confidential, and non-punitive. Through this collaboration, short lines have received valuable training and education that they wouldn't otherwise.

Other longstanding safety partnerships that are yielding positive outcomes include: the Confidential Close Call Reporting System or C3RS program, the Switching Operations Fatality Analysis or SOFA Working Group, and the Fatality Analysis of Maintenance-of-Way Employees and Signalmen or FAMES program.

Finally, I want to underscore that ASLRRA's continuing participation and active leadership in the Railroad Safety Advisory Committee is invaluable and helps ensure good outcomes.

For those interested in learning more, Rob Castiglione who leads FRA's Safety Partnership Programs is here and available to speak with you.

As I mentioned earlier, workforce development and engagement is a priority of FRA.

As we look towards the future, FRA's Office of Research, Development and Technology is currently leading a *Railroad Industry Workforce Development Survey*.

To carry it out, we contacted approximately 200 individuals at key stakeholder organizations with expertise in human resources and training. The results of the survey will be used to update our biennial *Railroad Industry Modal Profile*, last published in 2016.

That report to be issued later this year will describe the industry's top workforce challenges and opportunities and will likely become the basis for a future FRA-sponsored summit or symposium addressing recruitment, training, retention, workplace practices, and even the prospect of automation in the decades to come.

We need to build capacity to meet this moment. I am confident we will.

This is an amazing time to be involved in rail transportation. We value the contributions of ASLRRA and its members.

Please know, I look forward to meeting those whom I haven't; learning more about your wants and needs; and working cooperatively to solve problems.

I'm grateful to join you today and I'm eager to join Chuck in today's fireside chat.