Safe Travels

THE AMERICAN SHORT LINE AND REGIONAL RAILROAD ASSOCIATION HELPS LAUNCH THE SHORT LINE SAFETY INSTITUTE

BY TIM O’CONNOR

Short line railroads connect rural America to the country’s major transportation networks. So when an accident severs those connections it causes both safety concerns and brings the movement of goods to a halt. The United States has not had a death due to the release of hazardous materials by rail since 2009, according to U.S. Department of Transportation figures, but the freight industry has seen several serious derailments in recent years. Any time you move hazardous materials, there is always potential for injuries, as was seen when an unattended freight train carrying crude oil derailed in Lac-Mégantic, Quebec in July 2013. The incident was a wakeup call to the industry, especially short line railroads.

Congressmen and industry leaders soon called for better measures to address safety issues on America’s railways. One of those measures was the creation of the Short Line Safety Institute (SLSI) in 2013, a combined effort between the American Short Line Regional Railroads Association (ASLR-
RRA) and the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), a part of the U.S. Department of Transportation. The FRA put forth $250,000 to pilot a program that would enhance safety culture throughout the nation’s short line railroads. “They recognized our limited resources as small businesses, and the short line necessity to the network,” says Linda Darr, president of the ASLRRA and a member of the SLSI board of directors.

Although ASLRRA initiated the pilot, the congressional intent is that the services of the Short Line Institute are made available to any short line, particularly those transporting hazardous materials.

Darr believes the ASLRRA’s relationship with the SLSI ensures both groups maintain a strong connection and stay aligned on safety issues. “We can provide regulatory and communications expertise as well as opportunities to interact with our members,” she adds. ASLRRA has 460 short line railroad members.

**Filling a Safety Gap**

The big seven railroads – Canadian National, Canadian Pacific, CSX, Norfolk Southern, Union Pacific, BNSF and Kansas City Southern – have invested in safety culture for decades, but short line railroads often have only a few employees, many of whom already have dual duties. Short lines also have slimmer budgets than their larger brethren, and typically lack the money to invest in sophisticated safety training. “When you’re dealing with small business and you have people who are wearing many hats – sometimes that small railroad could have five to 10 employees total – it’s hard to imagine being able to staff a safety committee, and to develop innovative training materials,” Darr says.

“One thing the Safety Institute is trying to do is catch them [the railroads] up on the latest ways of doing things and the latest ways of communicating with employees,” SLSI Executive Director Ron Hynes says.

The thought that safety must be placed above everything else is a total mindset shift for some companies, but one Darr believes is necessary. “We need to cement the notion that safety is prioritized above all else throughout our freight network to make sure our industry has the potential to grow and thrive.”

SLSI’s process begins with a safety culture assessment. Employees complete confidential surveys and interviews are conducted throughout the organization.

That confidentiality allows employees and management to be candid about what they see in their everyday jobs. It ensures buy-in at all levels of the organization and facilitates open and honest communication.

At the end of the assessment, SLSI holds an interactive post-engagement meeting with company management where opportunities are discussed, and strategies are shared that the company may choose to undertake. “You start these discussions that otherwise might never take place,” Hynes says.

In assessing each company’s safety culture, SLSI uses a framework of 10 core elements of safety devised in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The word-of-mouth to date on the impact of an in-person assessment has been very positive. The SLSI has been completing on average two safety culture assessments per month, and interest is coming from some of the largest players in the short line arena.

To reach other Class II and III railroads, the organization provides a number of educational resources through its website, www.shortlinesafety.org. Railroads looking to enhance their safety culture can use the SLSI website to
learn how to form a safety committee or watch training webinars. Currently, the SLSI is completing a four course webinar series on hazardous materials movement, and will soon tackle drug and alcohol training courses.

In the future, the SLSI website will provide research reports, safety statistics and a variety of e-learning opportunities.

**Building on Safety**

As more safety culture assessments are completed, the SLSI will gain an ever-clearer picture of the short line industry’s needs and opportunities to fill them, as well as the bright spots and strong programming that can be shared as industry best practices. Assessment results can be used to guide research that leads to actionable ideas that improve safety. “These building blocks and opportunities form the basis for the curriculum for the program going forward and provide a roadmap for education and training development,” Hynes says.

SLSI continues to refine its initiatives. Hynes says the organization’s next step is to develop a follow up tool that measures the impact of changes a company has made six months after completing the safety culture assessment. The tool is expected to assist management in evaluating how their safety culture is taking hold, and extent to which new initiatives have been implemented.

“It takes maintenance and effort to be sure that safety culture is positive and improving. The work of building a strong safety culture is never done,” Hynes says.

For more information on scheduling a safety culture assessment, contact Mike Long at (904) 710-1173 or mtlong@shortlinesafety.org. Follow us on Twitter @shortlinesafety and like us on facebook.com/shortlinesafety.
Short Line Safety Institute
An Introductory Brief

Background
Safety culture has been identified as a top priority for the short line and regional railroad industry. To address that priority, the Short Line Safety Institute (SLSI) was launched in 2015, and is engaged in conducting on-site assessments of safety culture, and providing safety education for managers and employees of short line and regional railroads. The mission of the Institute is for the short line and regional railroad industry to perform at an increasingly high level of safety.

Safety Culture Definition
The Institute is defining safety culture as the shared values, actions, and behaviors that demonstrate a commitment to safety over competing goals and demands.

10 Core Elements
The Institute has adopted the following 10 Core Elements of a Strong Safety Culture:

1. Leadership Is Clearly Committed to Safety
2. The Railroad Practices Continuous Learning
3. Decisions Demonstrate that Safety Is Prioritized Over Competing Demands
4. Reporting Systems and Accountability Are Clearly Defined
5. There Is a Safety Conscious Work Environment
6. Employees Feel Personally Responsible for Safety
7. There Is Open and Effective Communication Across the Railroad
8. Mutual Trust Is Fostered between Employees and the Railroad
9. The Railroad Is Fair and Consistent in Responding to Safety Concerns
10. Training and Resources Are Available to Support Safety

Safety Culture Assessment Process
The assessment process consists of multiple activities designed to assess the level of safety culture at an individual railroad:

- Pre-Visit Engagement
- Assessment Site-Visit Activities
- Post-Visit Engagement

The Institute is sponsored by the US Federal Railroad Administration, Office of Research, Development & Technology. For further information, contact any of the below listed SLSI Representatives:
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