ASLRA Offices Remain Open

ASLRA’s Washington, D.C. office remains open, but following the March 16th guidance from the White House, our staff may work from home as needed. All of our staff are set up to do so, but while some actions may be delayed, such as processing of mail, all employees are available via e-mail and phone as listed on our website. Please do not hesitate to contact any member of ASLRA’s staff for assistance during these unusual times.

Additional Emergency Resources Available on ASLRA Website

More emergency resources are available on ASLRA’s website to help member companies and others prepare for and mitigate the effects of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Please check back often, as this page will be updated with helpful information on Congressional action, new guidance from organizations such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and actions taken by ASLRA on behalf of its members.

Several relevant webinars are available as recordings in ASLRA’s On-Demand Webinar library, available free to members, or as a subscription for non-members. Topics range from crisis communications and media training to filing emergency docket waivers.

Railroad Retirement Board Has Closed All Field Offices

In light of President Donald Trump’s recent national emergency declaration concerning the spread of COVID-19, the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) will close its 53 field offices to the public starting March 16 until further notice. RRB employees will continue to work both on-site and remotely.

Older individuals with underlying medical conditions make up a large percentage of the customers visiting RRB field offices. As that group is at higher risk of contracting COVID-19 and experiencing more severe health complications, the decision to close field offices was made to limit the personal contact that contributes to COVID-19’s spread.

Still, the RRB would like to remind its customers that a great deal of information, including documents, can be accessed any time through the RRB website, myRRB, and by using automated menus on the RRB’s toll free number (1-877-772-5772).
ASLRRA’s Amicus Brief Supports Withdrawal of Proposed Crew Rule

ASLRRA has filed an amicus brief supporting the May 2019 decision made by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to withdraw a proposed rulemaking that would mandate two-person train crews.

The Association’s brief, filed March 10, was a response to petitions filed in July 2019 by SMART Transportation, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, the State of Washington, the State of Nevada and the California Public Utilities Commission in the United States Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit challenging the FRA’s decision to withdraw the rulemaking.

ASLRRA’s brief talks about safety in the short line industry and explains why the FRA’s decision was reasonable. Additionally, the Association shared data provided during the rulemaking process; stressed the benefit to short lines from nationally uniform safety laws; highlighted the Indiana Rail Road Company’s single-person crew operations; and showed that the rule would have put an immediate financial burden on short line railroads without a proven safety benefit.

Those with questions about the brief or who would like more information about ASLRRA’s efforts to advocate for the short line industry against minimum crew size requirements can contact General Counsel Sarah Yurasko at syurasko@aslrra.org.

US DOT Makes Modifications to RRIF Express Program, Extends Submission Period

The U.S. Department of Transportation has modified its Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing Express Program (RRIF Express) to improve accessibility for short line and regional railroads.

One significant change offers an alternative to the requirement that applicants submit five years of audited financial statements. Instead, railroads can produce five years of non-audited financial statements along with a self-certification that they will provide the most recent two years of audited financial statements within 60 days of applying.

The DOT also resets the original 90-day application period to begin on March 16, meaning the submission period now closes on June 15. Those who have already submitted a RRIF Express application are not affected by the newly announced changes.

US DOT Announces 32 CRISI Grant Award Winners in 27 States

On March 12, U.S. Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao announced recipients of grant funding through the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) Program.
A number of ASLRRA member companies received CRISI grants. The association congratulates all its members that directly received a CRISI grant or that will otherwise benefit from this year’s allotted funds.

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) will administer the grants, which distributed $248.5 million in funding to 32 projects in 27 states.

The CRISI Program is meant to support improvements to the safety, efficiency and reliability of intercity passenger and freight rail systems. This year, rural projects received nearly 50 percent of available funding. A minimum of 25 percent of funding is required to go to rural communities.

Additionally, 15 of the 32 winning projects are in Opportunity Zones, which is a designation given to certain lower income areas to encourage revitalization through private investment.

**Railroad Retirement Board’s Question and Answer Series Compares Railroad Retirement and Social Security Benefits**

The Railroad Retirement Board compares railroad retirement and social security benefits in the [March edition](#) of its question and answer series.

Because employers and employees covered by the Railroad Retirement Act pay higher retirement taxes than those covered by the Social Security Act, railroad retirement benefits are higher than social security benefits.

In addition to explaining the differences between the two types of benefits payable at the end of fiscal year 2019, the question and answer document explains differences in age requirements and payroll taxes under the two systems.

**FMCSA Approves Request for Exemption from Certain HOS Rules for Emergency Response Contractors - Update**

In the March 11, 2020 Views and News, it was mistakenly reported that the National Railroad Construction and Maintenance Association (NRC) was granted an exemption under this action. While the Notice noted that the National Railroad Construction and Maintenance Association, Inc. (NRC) was a party to the application, FMCSA makes clear that it was granting the exemption “at this time solely to “the Companies” as defined in the exemption as R.J. Corman Railroad Services and Cranemasters, Inc.” and not to all membership organizations within the NRC.

Additionally, please note that there are restrictions in the exemption with the 14-hour window, which only extends to 17 hours, and to the 60/70 week rule, which only allows for 6 additional hours.

We apologize for any confusion the earlier publication may have caused our readers.
Wrapping Up Railroad Day with Photos, Reminders

Photographs from the March 4 Railroad Day on Capitol Hill event are now available for viewing online. Though a picture may be worth a thousand words, the images captured cannot fully convey the connections made through the 350 meetings held between railroad industry representatives and congressional offices.

In addition to in-person meetings, the online conversation was notable, with 675 mentions of the hashtag #RailDay2020 generating 2 million impressions. Several congressmen tweeted about the event, including Rail Subcommittee Chairman Dan Lipinski, and many more congressional offices re-tweeted or commented on ASLRRA posts.

After a day of meetings, many congressional offices were represented at the evening reception at Union Station, which afforded participants additional opportunities to network with policymakers.

ASLRRA would like to remind this year’s Railroad Day participants to complete the Railroad Day survey. Sending a thank you to those in Congress who participated in meetings is also encouraged, as it not only shows appreciation for lawmakers’ time but also helps maintain open lines of communication and develop a stronger relationship with legislators.

ASLRRA Announcements

Find New Locomotive Interchange Inspection Forms on ASLRRA’s Website

ASLRRA’s locomotive interchange inspection forms, developed by its Mechanical Committee with input from Class I’s, can now be found on the Association’s website, under “Safety and Compliance”, “Compliance Templates”.

Over the past several months, the forms have been provided to and utilized by interchanging railroads, reducing inconsistencies, simplifying the process and providing a timelier interchange.

Please note that the documents are only accessible to members, and members must be logged in to see the information. Please contact JR Gelnar at jrgelnar@aslrra.org with any questions.

ASLRRA Welcomes Five New Supplier Members

Ardenna, a Hampton, Va.-based division of Bihrlie Applied Research Inc., specializes in artificial intelligence (AI)-based technologies that enable automated inspections of transportation and energy infrastructure. Rail-Inspector, its automated defect detection solution for the rail industry, is a cloud-based software solution that automatically processes aerial track imagery to identify and analyze dozens of track components and generate actionable results quickly, consistently and safety. Vice President-Corporate Development Brian Wachter is our primary contact.
Icomera US Inc., based in Bethesda, Md., is a leading provider of connectivity platforms for rail transportation vehicles. Its award-winning solutions deliver reliable, high-speed and seamless connectivity to more than 40,000 trains, buses and ferries through cellular, Wi-Fi, TraXside and satellite connections. The onboard solution supports safety and operations applications (video surveillance, train health monitoring, edge analytics) and passenger experience applications (Wi-Fi access, entertainment media, and real-time passenger information). Our primary contact is Director of Sales-Rail Jonathan White.

J&A Industries, LLC, based in Grandview, Mo., has served the railroad signal systems industry since 1986 as a premier product manufacturer and service support provider. Its products include mast ladder platforms, patented rail proximity sensor products, shifted load detection and high wide detector systems and custom-designed rail tools. General Manager Mark Biehl is our primary contact. ASLRRA is pleased to welcome J&A back to our Association.

LJA Railroad Services, based in Houston, Texas, offers proven experience and expertise in the development of rail facilities, including rail yards and intermodal terminals, rail-served industrial facilities, transload facilities, structures, new rail corridors, maintenance, fueling, waste management, security, office, crew welfare, signals, and other systems. Its team is experienced in coordinating civil, track, and signal design with cutovers and construction staging in constrained areas with 24-hour freight operations under live track conditions. It is backed by its parent, LJA Engineering, Inc., a full-service engineering and consulting services firm. Vice President David Harris is our primary contact.

Maintenance of Way Equipment Services, based in Rosenberg, Texas, is a source globally for parts, maintenance-of-way equipment, and rolling stock. Their mission is to bring a wide network of suppliers and buyers to the table, and offer the most equipment options in the industry. Our primary contact is Britni Avila, who leads marketing.
ASLRRA Webinars

ASLRRA’s On-Demand Webinars Explore Legal Issues

Legal topics can be complicated, especially as they relate to business operations. ASLRRA has hosted several webinars dealing with legal issues, and recordings of those webinars can be found in the Association’s on-demand webinar library. Some titles include:

- Not in My Backyard: Responding / Reacting to NIMBYism in the Community (2016),
- Crossings: The Necessary Evil We Must Contend With (2019)

Those who may have missed these webinars can still view them. All are available as recordings in ASLRRA’s On-Demand Webinar library, and ASLRRA members can access the recordings for free. Non-members can have unlimited on-demand webinar access with the purchase of a 90-day or one-year subscription.

In addition to on-demand webinars, ASLRRA is always working to provide its members with top-notch education, bringing industry and subject-matter experts right to your desk. Find out about our upcoming live webinars below, and use the links to learn more or register.

Upcoming Webinars

**Hot off the Press: What’s New at the STB?** - March 26, 2020

ASLRRA General Counsel Sarah Yurasko and Baker & Miller Associate Attorney Crystal Zorbaugh will explore the structure of the Surface Transportation Board (STB), provide information on the board’s key players, discuss recent developments impacting the industry, and preview the most pressing issues before the board in the coming months.

**Insights into the RRIF Express Loan Application Process** - April 8, 2020

Experts from The Seneca Group and Bowers & Company, CPAs will offer insights and guidance on the RRIF Express loan application process. This session will also cover the audited financial statement requirement, including an overview of the process, what’s needed and how to prepare, and how to factor this into your timeline.
Employer Training Resources: Registered Apprenticeships - April 22, 2020 (Note New Date)

SPRING President Michele Malski and FASTPORT Executive Director of Military Engagement and Apprenticeships Dave Harrison will explain the benefits of establishing a federally registered apprenticeship program and how to start one.

Click here for more ASLRRRA events.

Industry Events

Women in Transportation Event Postponed Until 2021

The Virginia Tech Transportation Institute has postponed its Women in Transportation 2020: Connections Through Transportation event for a year, until March 2021. The decision was made due to concerns regarding the spread of COVID-19.

Those with questions or comments can connect via email at wts@vtti.vt.edu.

Click here for a listing of industry events. Cancellations due to COVID-19 restrictions will be noted as information becomes available.

Views & News is published by American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association. Please contact Amy Krouse, editor, with questions or comments.