June 3, 2020

ASLRRA Analyzing INVEST in America Act, Looks Forward to Working With Congress as Bill Progresses

Today, Chair of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Peter DeFazio (D-OR), released the text of the Investing in a New Vision for the Environment and Surface Transportation in America (INVEST in America) Act, which will be marked up in Committee on June 17th. In a release provided today, DeFazio outlines priorities that the bill addresses - tackling the massive backlog of roads, bridges, and rail infrastructure in need of repair and replacement projects, and building resilient infrastructure that will withstand the impacts of climate change and extreme weather, and improving access to Federal funding to help communities around the country undertake transformative projects that are smarter, safer, and made to last.

“With the FAST Act expiring at the end of September, we are pleased that the Committee has taken the step of releasing a five year surface transportation reauthorization bill. We look forward to working with both the House and the Senate as the process moves forward and hopefully culminates in the enactment of a long-term, bipartisan bill,” said Chuck Baker, President of the American Short Line and Regional Rail Association, which represents the nation’s 600 small business railroads and their suppliers. “There will be many policies considered in this bill that are crucially important to the ability of the short line freight railroad industry to meet the evolving needs of our customers, enabling thousands of important agricultural, energy, and industrial shippers in small-town and rural America to remain connected to the national and global economies.”

The bill includes a $60B rail title, which is largely focused on passenger rail activities, but does address a range of issues of importance to short line railroads. ASLRA’s Congressional Affairs Team and Legislative Policy Committee will be actively engaged in reviewing and analyzing the bill and looks forward to engaging with Congress to improve the legislation as it evolves.

Official press releases, summaries, fact sheets, and bill text are all available at https://transportation.house.gov/.

ASLRA’s 2020 Convention is Going Virtual

ASLRA’s annual Connections Convention will be held entirely online this year, from Oct. 5 to 9, due to ongoing health and safety concerns stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“As much as we all long to get together in-person to network, negotiate, learn, and share stories, ASLRA must put the safety of our members first, and we believe that this is the most responsible decision and in everyone’s best interest,” said ASLRA President Chuck Baker in an email. “However, while virtual can’t entirely replicate in-person, we do fully intend to deliver exceptional content and
an educational experience that will ensure attendees are informed, enlightened, and up-to-date on all things short line.”

Registration costs $250 for members and $500 for non-members, significantly less than an in-person meeting, and without the additional expense of travel and lodging. Those who already registered for this year’s convention, which was initially scheduled for early May, have received a specific communication from a staff member regarding their registration.

More information can be found here. Registration will be opening soon.

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ASLRRA Railroad Members with U.S. Headquarters to Receive Free Cloth Mask Shipments

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) announced a plan last week to send approximately 15.5 million cloth facial coverings to those in the transportation workforce, including 2.2 million allocated to freight rail companies.

ASLRRA, working in conjunction with the Association of American Railroads (AAR), was able to procure a minimum of 500 cloth masks for each of its members headquartered in the U.S. The masks are being provided for free.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) originally purchased the face coverings for agencies such as the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Once it became evident that FEMA would have a surplus of face coverings, the agency approached the DOT for distribution.

Mask shipments should begin in two to three weeks. Those with questions can contact ASLRRA’s Vice President of Safety and Compliance JR Gelnar at jrgelnar@aslrra.org.

Updated Resources for Reopening Businesses During the COVID-19 Pandemic Now Available on ASLRRA Site

New online resources have been posted for businesses looking to reopen safely as COVID-19 restrictions start to ease in states across the U.S.

ASLRRA’s COVID-19 resource page features a section titled “Reopening Businesses and Resuming Operations,” and new information has recently been added to the site. Links to the right of the page include sample materials for railroads and workplaces, such as office guidelines and a COVID-19
employee-screening questionnaire. There are also sample posters and signs that can be displayed in the workplace, as well as tips for employers to use such materials effectively.

ASLRA will also host a webinar on June 16 discussing safe ways to reopen workplaces and return to work. Paula Pitrak, a labor and employment attorney at Fletcher & Sippel, will lead the discussion. Please follow the link above to register.

**CDC Website Features More Information for Reopening Office Buildings**

Those seeking more guidance on how to safely return to offices during the COVID-19 pandemic can now find COVID-19 employer information for office buildings from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website. The information provided helps office building employers, building owners and manager and building operations specialists take steps toward ensuring a safe and healthy workplace.

The website’s progressive tips start with assessing whether the building is ready for occupancy. Next steps include performing a thorough hazard assessment to identify areas and situations that could increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission and developing a combination of hazard controls, based on the CDC’s hierarchy of controls, to reduce transmission of the virus in the workplace.

**RRB Starts Making CARES Act Recovery Payments to Unemployed Rail Workers**

The Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) has begun making recovery payments of $1,200 per two-week registration period, authorized under the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, to unemployed railroad workers.

The RRB started making payments May 28, beginning with individuals who filed claims beginning on or after April 1. Once retroactive payments are made, the RRB will begin paying new benefit claims the following day.

Funding for these additional payments through the CARES Act was $425 million. If funding runs out before the end of the last eligible registration period, on Aug. 13, the additional payment will not apply.

The CARES Act also authorized extended benefit payments to rail workers receiving unemployment insurance benefits between July 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020. The RRB started making these payments on May 11, and will move to new claims after making all retroactive payments.

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**A Dozen Projects Receive FRA’s Partnership Program Grants**

On May 27 the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) announced the recipients of Federal-State Partnership for State of Good Repair Program (Partnership Program) grants. Over $302 million in grant funds will go to 12 railroad infrastructure projects in nine states across the country.

According to the FRA’s press release, the Partnership Program provides funds for projects “to repair, replace, or rehabilitate publicly- or Amtrak-owned or -controlled railroad assets, to reduce the state of good repair backlog and improve intercity passenger rail performance.”
The 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act allotted $396 million for fiscal year 2019 Partnership Program projects, but only about $302 million was awarded. The approximately $93 million balance will be made available by the FRA later with a Notice of Funding Opportunity for FY 2020 Partnership Program funds.

FMCSA Final Rule Revises Hours of Service Regulations for CDL Drivers

A Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) final rule revises hours of service (HOS) regulations to allow more flexibility for drivers subject to such rules.

Among other changes, the FMCSA is expanding the driving window during adverse driving conditions by up to two more hours, requires a 30-minute break after eight hours of driving time instead of on-duty time and allows for an on-duty/not-driving period to count as a required break.

The final rule, which is effective Sept. 29, could be beneficial to ASLRRRA members whose employees include commercial driver’s license (CDL) drivers, as it provides more flexibility.

RRB’s May Q&A Describes Agency’s Customer Service Performance

The Railroad Retirement Board (RRB) discusses its annual customer service report in the most recent edition of its question and answer series. The RRB’s Customer Service Plan outlines the agency’s approach toward quality, customer-driven service. The recent Q&A explains how well the RRB met its customer service performance goals in fiscal year 2019. This includes measures of overall timeliness, application processing and handling of claims.

House Passes Bill Allowing Flexibility with PPP Loans

On May 28 the House approved a bipartisan bill to give small businesses more time to use Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans and allows them to spend less of their loans on payroll.

The House bill, known as the Paycheck Protection Program Flexibility Act, would give businesses 24 weeks to use the loans, and spend 60 percent instead of 75 percent on worker payroll while still remaining eligible for loan forgiveness.

The bill now moves to the Senate, which has indicated it is in favor of extending the spending deadline but is not as supportive of the worker payroll percentage reduction.
Newly Introduced Bill Increases Grade Crossing Improvement Funding Under CRISI Grant Program

Senator Edward Markey (D-Mass.) recently introduced the Warren Cowles Grade Crossing Safety Act, a bill to increase to $250 million funding for grade crossing improvement projects under the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) grant program.

The bill was named for Warren Cowles, who was killed in 2017 when struck by an Amtrak train at a grade crossing in Massachusetts.

ASLRRA New Members

ASLRRA Welcomes Returning Railroad Member

ASLRRA is pleased to welcome back to its membership rolls New Castle Industrial Railroad. NCIR, based in New Castle, Pa., operates over 17 miles of track, connecting with CSX, Norfolk Southern and Buffalo & Pittsburgh railroads. The family-owned and operated railroad hauls aggregates, steel scrap, frac sand and LPG. Space is available for shippers to store and stage railcars. Our primary contact is Vice President Deven Berkley.

ASLRRA Announcements

Union Pacific’s Online Magazine Features ASLRRA’s COVID-19 Resource Page

Union Pacific’s online magazine, Track Record, featured ASLRRA’s COVID-19 online resource page in the railroad’s shipper’s resource guide.

The information can be found under the “Shipping by Rail” heading, and includes a link to ASLRRA’s main COVID-19 page as well as individual links to specific topics such as “Legislative Response,” and “State-by-State Resources.”

Union Pacific also provides links to industry-specific resources, U.S. ports and more.

ASLRRA’s Preferred Providers Include Leading Payment Processor Elavon

Elavon is a leading payment processor providing short line railroads and suppliers with innovative payment solutions to enhance their businesses. Elavon’s simple, cost effective payment processing program is backed by the highest standard of customer service, and ASLRRA members receive preferred partner pricing.

Advantages of choosing Elavon include a full range of payment types; latest payment technology; data security; customer service access and dedicated account manager available any time; and convenient, easily accessible reporting from any web browser.
Visit our Member Discount Program page to learn more and start saving today. Members interested in becoming preferred providers with ASLRRA’s Member Discount Program can contact Senior Vice President of Education and Business Services Sabrina Waiss at swaiss@aslrra.org.

Military, Railroad Partnerships Continue After Military Appreciation Month Ends

In 1999 Congress designated May as National Military Appreciation Month to recognize the service and sacrifice of all members of the U.S. military. Although National Military Appreciation Month recently concluded, ASLRRA is proud to share the story of an ASLRRA member who is partnering with the U.S. military.

ASLRRA member Lake State Railway Company (LSRC) is the serving rail carrier for Camp Grayling in Grayling, Mich., and has been working with the Michigan National Guard over the past few years to improve rail service.

Camp Grayling is a military training facility that holds exercises to help members of different military branches, as well as foreign allies, prepare for potential military responses in locations around the world. Each year LSRC assists with Operation Northern Strike, an annual training event that involves the delivery of military equipment arriving by rail, mostly in unit trains, which comprise 60 to 90 rail cars, and some in multiple car blocks. Because the timing of deliveries and staying on schedule is key, LSRC often provides on-demand switching service to facilitate unloading and reloading the unit trains.

In addition to its work at Camp Grayling, LSRC employs 15 current and former military members from nearly all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces. They work in almost every company division, from track, locomotive and rail car maintenance to management, bringing with them valuable discipline and work ethic cultivated during their years of military experience.

Like LSRC, ASLRRA is thankful for the service of our nation’s military members, and their continued commitment to serving the country by working to support our local, national and global supply chain. ASLRRA also thanks its members for their efforts to recruit, hire and retain current and former soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines.

ASLRRA Out and About

Young Professionals Committee Members Meet, Socialize Online with Zoom

Instead of going out and about during the COVID-19 pandemic, members of ASLRRA’s Young Professionals Committee held a virtual social hour on May 20.

The Zoom meeting included committee leadership and several members, as well as a brief appearance by one of the group’s favorite mentors. Participants used the time to catch up on committee action and discuss how to move ahead during the pandemic. They also took the opportunity to chat and spread some good cheer during these trying times.
ASLRRA Webinars

Access ‘How Short Lines are Adapting Workplaces and Serving Customers’ Through the On-Demand Library

ASLRRA President Chuck Baker recently led a virtual panel discussion on COVID-19 and short line operations with several industry leaders including JR Gelnar of ASLRRA, Mike Lundell of Genesee & Wyoming Railroad Services, Inc., Daniel Hamilton of the Indiana Rail Road Company and Travis Herod of Watco Companies.

The dialogue covered a range of topics, from the approach railroads have taken to transporting operating and engineering crews, locomotive sanitation, policies and procedures, to reopening administration offices and more.

While the event itself has passed, those who are still interested in viewing ASLRRA’s virtual discussion can view a recording of the event online through ASLRRA’s On-Demand Webinars library. Access is free to ASLRRA members and available by subscription to non-members.

Upcoming Webinars

FRA and NARN Partnership to Build, Maintain & Use GIS Data - June 10, 2020

The North American Rail Network (NARN) is a geographic information systems database hosted by the FRA and containing mainline railroad track centerlines throughout the U.S., Canada and Mexico. The FRA’s Raquel Wright and other systems specialists will discuss the significance of the NARN and its potential uses by railroads and will explain how short line railroads might partner with the FRA to share and maintain data.

Effect of COVID-19 on Industry and Trends - June 11, 2020 (NOTE: New Date)

Joseph Bryan, vice president of freight and logistics advisory services at ASLRRA member WSP USA will explore the lasting effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the railroad industry, looking at the acceleration of existing trends as well as new developments.

Returning to the Workplace Safely - June 16, 2020

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and various other federal and state agencies have issued expansive guidance related to COVID-19. Paula Pitrak, a labor and employment attorney at Fletcher & Sippel, will lead a discussion on safe ways to reopen workplaces and return to work.
Click here for more ASLRRRA events.

Industry Events

Apply Now for the League of Railway Women’s 2020 Scholarships

The League of Railway Women (LRW) is accepting applications to its 2020 scholarships, the Connie Sumara Memorial Scholarship and the new Future of Railroading Scholarship.

The Connie Sumara Memorial Scholarship is awarded to a woman pursuing a graduate or undergraduate degree who is looking to further her career in the rail industry. Applicants must be currently employed by a railroad or rail-related business for at least 12 months.

The Future of Railroading Scholarship, introduced this year, will be awarded to a graduate or undergraduate student who is interested in supporting the rail industry.

Applications for both scholarships are due July 10. Follow the individual links above for more information or to download an application.

Click here for a listing of industry events. Changes 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.