

Docket EP -726

On-Time Performance under the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act

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I take Amtrak all over the country, and while I absolutely love it for many reasons, almost every long trip I take is delayed by freight traffic. I have taken trains on the following long-distance Amtrak routes: California Zephyr, Capitol Limited, Cardinal, Coast Starlight, Crescent, Lake Shore Limited, Silver Service/Palmetto, and the Southwest Chief. The situation seems to be worst in the West and Southwest, best on the East Coast, but every route is affected. The only Amtrak trips I take that aren't routinely impacted by freight traffic are the short Northeast Corridor ones, and even then, it does happen, just not as often. When the long-distance trains are more than a few minutes late, it is virtually always because of freight train issues.

In some cases the problem seems to be that freight companies haven't invested in the needed infrastructure to accommodate trains traveling at different speeds and/or in different directions; I suspect the reason it's worst in the West and Southwest is that things are just so far apart, so where you have many miles of single track in between places for trains to pass each other, there is no option for the freight trains to yield. The freight railroad can then shrug and tell Amtrak there's nothing for it, everyone just has to wait, but there is a solution, it's just an expensive one--more sections of double track, more places for trains to pass one another. In some cases the track even exists, it's just disused because no one wants to spend the money to maintain it.

Another issue I realize is slightly outside the scope of this docket: The worst consequence of late Amtrak trains, for me, is that it can lead to missed connections to other trains and/or the lateness can quickly propagate across the entire Amtrak system when one train is held to await the passengers of a different train that's running late. This would be far less of a problem if there were just more Amtrak trains! When each route is served by only one train a day in each direction, making connections is vital. If I could just get bumped by a few hours to the next connection instead of waiting overnight, I wouldn't care that much, and I suspect most passengers feel the same.

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