

Comment with Respect to On-Time Performance of AMTRAK EP-726-0

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Response by:

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I am a user of AMTRAK NE corridor services, and occasionally of the long-haul and State sponsored trains. I have been in the railroad business most of my life, and am well aware of the trade-offs between passenger and freight service requirements, and of the history of the establishment of the national passenger service package in 1970. I am a professional transportation consultant, familiar with all aspects of the business

Central to the transfer of passenger operations was the concept of working together constructively to iron out the inevitable problems which arise when there are weather, maintenance, volume surge conditions, and equipment issues. A couple of common sense suggestions:

Class I dispatchers should actually ride a train (freight or passenger) on the head end a couple of times a year to see on the ground what is really going on in the territory they dispatch. It is sometimes hard to visualize what is happening when you are sitting in a control center hundreds or even thousands of miles from the actual track segment. AMTRAK should proactively communicate with dispatchers, and vice-versa.

Many track segments have "choke points" where for various reasons train delays are frequent; both parties (AMTRAK and the Class I management) need to make a real effort to understand the structural limitations and develop rules and procedures to ease the conflicts as much as possible. Sometimes small adjustments to schedules or choice of paths can greatly reduce delays.

But there will always be delays and there must be performance standards. They should apply to intermediate points as well as endpoints. If only endpoints are measured, it is all too often the case that the schedule is "padded" – which can actually cause delays and wastage of crews and assets. From experience, my suggestions would be as follows;

On State-sponsored trains (up to 750 miles), a reasonable standard would be 0.5 minutes per 10 mile segments, so that at worst a 37.5 minute delay could be the standard for a maximum length run.

On long-haul trains, a different measure is appropriate – AMTRAK needs to have reasonable assurance that equipment will be turned promptly due to drastic shortage of both cars and engines, so on a Chicago – NYC or Chicago – Seattle run, total allowable deviation should be no more than 3% of total running time. For example, the Southwestern is carded at 43:15, a maximum allowable late arrival would be 1:30. But the allowable should be measured at the intermediate stops of importance – Kansas City and Albuquerque, with a smaller deviation allowed for shorter segments

AMTRAK should consider enhanced bonus payments for on-time performance; the current contract payments are not adequate compensation. By the same token, there should be monetary penalties for late arrivals in excess of standard to motivate the Class I's to police dispatching and path decisions.

No penalty should be assessed where the delay is due to AMTRAK equipment failures or station delays. No penalty should be assessed for delays due to scheduled or emergency track repairs. No penalty should be assessed for delays due to weather conditions causing signal failures or track obstruction, flooding, etc.

An additional problem in some areas is the failure of independently operated commuter and regional services to perform as scheduled, the Class Is cannot be held responsible for delays caused by others.

Thank you.