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Amtrak On-Time Performance Criteria

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Over the last 25 years I have ridden Amtrak well over 40,000 miles, up and down both coasts from San Diego to Vancouver, BC and from Tampa to Boston as well as to the Gulf coast at New Orleans from Washington, D.C. With the exception of the Adirondack, Vermonter, Eathan Allan Express and The City of New Orleans, I have ridden almost every mile of track in the Amtrak system as well as hundreds of miles of track not in the system due to Amtrak detours (e.g. Sacramento to Klamath Falls via the Feather River Canyon in 1998).

Since most of my travel is business related, a reasonable expectation of reasonable on-time performance at all my destinations is a critical to making connections and doing my business. Even when traveling for other reasons, relative on-time connections are critical even if there's no place in particular you have to be when you arrive, especially when one's train is inordinately late. Several years back, perhaps 2007, I took Train 21 from Fort Worth at 15:40 expecting we would arrive in Austin before midnight so I could catch the city bus home. After waiting for hours north of the station, we finally arrived at 1 AM to find that UP had stacked the tracks with several northbound freights south of station and couldn't seem to remember that there was a siding at the station long enough to hold the Texas Eagle. Because there was no bus service after-midnight, I walked the 9 miles home suitcase in tow.

In all my travels on Amtrak over the years, overwhelmingly, my experience has been that Amtrak is usually late, often very late, sometimes because of Amtrak problems, but more often than not because the host railway has difficulty dispatching traffic on its system. BNSF takes pride in servicing Amtrak and does the best job in getting passenger trains through on time, while UP seems to have the most problems.

Given the enormous amount of "recovery time" (schedule padding) on Amtrak routes, it seems reasonable to expect trains to arrive at any given station along any given route within 15 minutes of the posted arrival time, not just at the end point stations, but at every station in between. Surely one train a day each way on most of Amtrak's system can be accommodated to this standard without compromising freight service or incurring host railway costs in excess of the fees Amtrak awards for on-time performance. BNSF says they make money getting passengers through on time and that this is a selling point with their freight customers.