



Surface Transportation Board  
Washington, D.C. 20423-0001

July 23, 2024

Ms. Katie Farmer  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
BNSF Railway Company  
2650 Lou Menk Drive  
Fort Worth, Texas 76131

Dear Ms. Farmer,

As you are aware, over the past few years, BNSF has struggled to live up to its responsibilities with respect to its handling of grain shipments associated with the nation's Fall harvest. With this year's harvest quickly approaching, I, along with many of your agricultural stakeholders, continue to have grave concerns about BNSF's ability to adequately serve the anticipated demand, particularly that moving through the Pacific Northwest (PNW) corridor. Accordingly, I am writing to request information about BNSF's preparedness for the upcoming harvest season.

In the wake of the widespread rail service issues that plagued the harvest of 2022, last August, during the National Grain Car Council's annual meeting, I specifically asked each of the Class I representatives in attendance if their railroad was fully prepared for the impending 2023 harvest. Given the critical importance of the PNW, and the fact that BNSF handles the majority of the grain traffic to the gateway, I was very interested in the response from your representative. I was told that BNSF was indeed ready to handle the harvest; that it had the appropriate manpower, winterized locomotives, and the capacity to handle demand. However, right out of the gate, BNSF stumbled and quickly fell behind in its PNW service commitments. Throughout the peak period of harvest, service challenges persisted to a low point where BNSF trains were turning trains at an alarming 1.7 turns per month and grain shippers were being forced to discharge partially loaded vessels from their terminals. Though BNSF was finally able to recover by early Spring, the damage was already done.

This is all the more troubling when coupled with the fact that the U.S. agricultural community is competing with other countries in the soybean and corn export markets. Over the past several years, Brazil has gained a significantly larger footprint in both markets by dramatically increasing its crop production and driving down international prices. The result to the United States has been a steady erosion of international market share. The forecast ahead is no less concerning. Many agriculture shippers in the Upper Midwest believe that BNSF's inconsistent service, coupled with steady rate increases and now a higher-than-tariff value for shuttle trains, will further weaken their cost basis and make their grain less competitive on the export market.

If the United States is to effectively compete in the world market and regain market share, its agriculture sector must have a reliable and highly resilient freight rail network. A lack of crews and inadequate power are not acceptable excuses. Neither are recycled excuses associated with weather. I have been told time and again that railroading is an outdoor sport. For nearly two hundred years, the sport of railroading has experienced the full brunt of winter. Its challenges are not all that new, and yet the operational excuses are as old as the industry itself. And while the railroads certainly cannot control the weather, with the billions of dollars invested each year in your network, BNSF should be able to ensure an appropriate level of operational resiliency to overcome harsh weather conditions.

I also am deeply concerned with the recent incidents in Mexico, involving Ferromex (FXE), that have caused significant disruptions to your network resulting in the embargoing and permitting of grain shuttles. As I have told you and members of your organization, I am committed to working with you and other federal agencies to get to the bottom of these disruptions and avoid them in the future. We simply cannot allow circumstances in Mexico to upend significant portions of BNSF's network in the United States. At the same time, while I am aware the cause of these incidents was clearly out of BNSF's hands, I believe the uncertainty of future disruptions should prompt BNSF to plan contingencies and possible alternatives to FXE if they persist and become more frequent. Again, given your vital importance to U.S. agricultural exports, we can ill afford to again have BNSF lose access to more than 120 locomotives and have grain shipments embargoed and delayed during this year's Fall harvest.

With all of this in mind, please provide a written response, by August 13, 2024, regarding BNSF's preparedness for the 2024 Fall harvest, addressing the following issues:

Expected demand – Please discuss your expectations for anticipated overall demand for the upcoming Fall harvest. In addition, comment specifically on the anticipated demand to the PNW gateways, BNSF's capacity along its Northern Transcon route, and BNSF's ability to meet any potential surges in demand.

Employee resources – Please discuss whether BNSF's current train and engine employee headcount is sufficient to meet the anticipated overall Fall harvest demand. Provide details related to BNSF's hiring plans for the remainder of 2024, particularly as it relates to the PNW region and along your Northern Transcon route. Details related to furloughs and hiring freezes should be included.

Locomotive availability – Please provide information concerning BNSF's locomotive fleet, including the number of active and stored locomotives, the number of locomotives dedicated to the Northern Transcon route and, of that number, the amount weatherized for winter.

Winter Plan – Please provide a comprehensive overview of BNSF's Winter plan.

Mexico – Please describe the initiatives taken by BNSF to avoid further disruptions in Mexico including, if any, contingency plans should the service disruptions continue.

I look forward to receiving your response and thank you for your attention to these matters.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Robert E. Primus". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "P".

Robert E. Primus  
Chairman