

**Remarks by FRA Deputy Administrator Heath Hall
Before the Standing Committee on Rail Transportation
Oakland, California
Tuesday, September 19, 2017**

- Good morning and thank you very much for that kind introduction.
- On behalf of Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao, I'd like to thank all of you for your continued work to advance our nation's rail system.
- This meeting is so important because it brings together representatives from across our industry – passenger and freight, states, consultants, and other rail leaders to discuss policy, safety, operations, and investment issues.
- I'm proud to be here today with many other distinguished staff from FRA to join that conversation.
- Will all the FRA employees stand to be recognized?
- Together, we are looking forward to building upon the great work you are all doing every day to ensure the safety of our world-class rail system.
- I am honored to have been appointed to this position. I truly believe in the importance of rail to America and our economy.
- When I was a kid growing up in Southwest Mississippi, my friends and I would watch the trains daily as they ran on the track and delivered goods to our manufacturing plants.
- Trains meant jobs where I grew up. It was our lifeblood.
- However, one day the trains stopped coming. Manufacturing plants closed and thousands of people were without jobs.
- My small town, who had more millionaires per capita than anywhere in the country, became one of the poorest counties in America.
- That town, like many other rural towns across this great country, is still working on rebounding. Rail is an important part of that restoration.
 1. 45 percent of our freight is delivered by rail.
 2. We have more than 144,000 miles of track and more than 800 railroads.

- You may not know this, but this isn't my first time with FRA. A little more than two decades ago, I walked through the doors of FRA as a young intern, eager to change the world.
- What I learned during that summer internship hasn't changed more than 20 years later – FRA is committed to safety, innovation, and good sound policy.
- The Department of Transportation is committed to those principles and facilitating the investment needed to grow rail. Secretary Chao has been very clear about that since she was sworn in.
- Grade crossings are just one issue that shows the importance of safety, innovation, and investment. It is critical that we tackle this issue. The data speaks for itself:
 1. Two people will be killed by a train today. It will occur again tomorrow and the next day if we do not place an emphasis on it.
 2. Combined, railroad crossing and trespasser deaths have accounted for more than 95 percent of all rail-related deaths over the past ten years.
- I have looked at the data for the last ten years and it is stagnant so we must get in front of this issue now.
- We know who these victims are; this is an important tool in our tool box:
 1. 75% of the victims are male.
 2. 59% of the drivers are between the ages of 20-49.
 3. And, collisions fluctuate by season, with the highest accident rates occurring in December, January and February.
- Let's market to these people.
- Many factors have kept the number stagnant: whether it's because people are in hurry, they are driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or handheld devices are distracting them from their surroundings, it is a serious problem.
- But I'm not telling you something you don't already know.
- We, as Americans has been challenged before:
 1. In the 1980s, we were challenged to "just say no" as it related to drugs.
 2. In the 1990s, we were challenged to bring attention to drunk driving; an organization that started with one mother whose son lost his life to a drunk driver.

3. Let's challenge ourselves once more to make the next decade the safest in the rail history.

- This issue affected me in May of last year – my former crisis public relations firm was called out to a grade crossing train accident where a father and his two young kids were killed.
- It was an emotional moment for me, the law enforcement, and first responders who were there on the scene. Because the driver wasn't paying attention, a woman is without her husband, her son, and her daughter.
- It was at that moment that I decided that I was going to lend my voice in reversing this trend.
- We must and can do more.
- That is where innovation and investment come into play. You will hear later from our R&D team about work they are doing to leverage technology to improve safety at grade crossings.
- And just a few weeks ago, Secretary Chao awarded more \$78 million dollars in competitive grants that will enhance safety at more than 100 rail crossings, repair nearly 250 miles of track and improve more than 70 rail bridges.
- Secretary Chao understands the importance of investing in rail. That is why in this first round of grants more than 50 percent went to rail.
- The Administration is looking forward to rolling out comprehensive principles on the investment in infrastructure very soon.
- So, this week, as you come together under one roof, I challenge you to continue to look to the future and what you can do to ensure the important role rail plays in that future.
- It has truly been an honor to speak here today. I wish I could stay for the full week, but I look forward to meeting with you all in the weeks and months ahead to advance safety and strategic investments in our rail infrastructure.

###