

Train Horn Rule - History and Timeline

Historically, railroads have sounded horns in advance of grade crossings to warn of oncoming trains. Nearly every state enacted laws requiring that horns be sounded. Some states, however, permitted exceptions in local communities, allowing them to create whistle bans (i.e. local laws which prohibit the use of train horns or whistles at crossings).

In the late 1980's, FRA observed a significant increase in nighttime train-vehicle collisions at certain gated highway-rail grade crossings on the Florida East Coast Railway (FEC) at which nighttime whistle bans had been established in accordance with State statute. Florida's law permitted the establishment of whistle bans during the hours of 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. at crossings that were located on railroads that operated only within the state of Florida that were equipped with flashing lights and gates. The study compared the number of collisions before and after the implementation of the Florida Whistle Ban. The results identified a 195% increase in train-vehicle collisions during the ban hours at hornless gated grade crossings. There was not a similar increase in collisions during the time period that horns were sounded. After considering many possible factors that could have contributed in the increase in the number of collisions, FRA concluded that the whistle ban was the primary factor contributing to the increase in grade crossing collisions and subsequently issued Emergency Order 15, which overturned Florida's ban and required trains to resume sounding their horns. The rate of nighttime collisions at the whistle ban crossings returned to the level that existed prior to the establishment of the whistle bans. [\[i\]](#)

The study of Florida's whistle bans raised concerns about the impact of whistle bans on crossing collisions nationwide. A national study concluded that the lack of a train horn increased the risk of a collision by 66.8% at crossings that were equipped with flashing lights and gates. [\[ii\]](#) These studies prompted Congress to take further action by directing FRA to issue a federal regulation requiring trains to sound locomotive horns at all public highway-rail grade crossings. It also gave FRA the ability to determine exceptions to that requirement by allowing communities to establish quiet zones to mitigate the use of horns without compromising safety.

“The Final Rule on the Use of Locomotive Horns at Highway-Rail Grade Crossings,^{[\[iii\]](#)} effective June 24, 2005, established national regulations prescribing how and when train horns must be sounded when approaching public highway-rail grade crossings. This rule also established a process by which public authorities would be able to establish quiet zones.

[i] Florida Whistle Ban Study,
<http://www.fra.dot.gov/downloads/FromOldSite/pdforphan/floridaban.pdf>

[ii] Analysis Of The Safety Impact Of Train Horn Bans At Highway-Rail Grade Crossings: An Update Using 1997-2001 Data;
http://www.fra.dot.gov/downloads/Safety/train_horn_rule/national_report_f9-15.pdf.