

Learning from mistakes

A decade after it started, FRA's Confidential Close Call program wins praise



Passengers wait for a Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority train at Philadelphia's 30th Street Station in September 2016. SEPTA, Amtrak, and NJ Transit serve the station and participate in a special safety error reporting system. TRAINS: Steve Sweeney

Ten years after launching a pilot program, Federal Railroad Administration officials say the Confidential Close Call Reporting System, or C3RS, has been an overwhelming success.

In years past, if a railroader made a mistake when no one was looking — such as forgetting a speed restriction and proceeding above track speed — they could either keep it to themselves or admit to it and be punished. But in 2007, the FRA decided to take a page from other industries and established a pilot program where railroaders could self-report a minor incident without fear of punishment so that they and others could learn from it.

“Near misses and close calls are a great opportunity for railroads and railroaders to learn from their mistakes,” says Rob Castiglione, staff director of the FRA’s Human Performance Division. “The protection from punishment is a huge incentive to self report incidents.”

Castiglione says that for every major derailment or incident that results in injury or major damage, there are usually dozens or even hundreds of similar close calls that are never reported. Close call reporting systems

have been used in the airline industry and since the 1970s, the Aviation Safety Reporting System has received more than 1.2 million anonymous reports. In order to ensure that the identity of the reporting party is never revealed, all reports are processed by a third party. In the case of the aviation and railroad industries, that independent organization is NASA, the space agency.

Employees can submit close call reports

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to NASA either online or via traditional mail. Two different rail analysts at NASA read the report within three days of its arrival and collect data about the incident. The analysts will call the employee for an interview about the incident before writing a report that is sent to a peer review team back at the railroad. The peer review team

includes representatives of railroad management and labor that go through the report to find ways to prevent the incident from happening again. The original report filed by the employee is destroyed and no identifying information about the employees or trains involved is kept on file or shared with the railroad.

Some incidents are not eligible for the close call reporting program, including any situation resulting in substantial damage or injury or any time drugs or alcohol may have been a contributing factor.

The five-year pilot program began in 2007 with four different railroads. After the FRA deemed it a success, the Confidential Close Call Reporting System was expanded nationwide and today eight railroads have signed on: NJ Transit, Amtrak, Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority, Metra, Metro-North, Long Island Rail Road, and Strasburg Rail Road.

The Strasburg Rail Road joined the program in 2013 and locomotive shop supervisor Erich Armpriester says that since then employees have filed about 40 reports from both the operating and mechanical

departments. “We’re having a lot of success with it, and I think it’s been a really good thing for us,” Armpriester says.

Craig Lefever, vice president and general manager of the Strasburg, says while labor and management may butt heads at larger railroads, that isn’t the case at the Pennsylvania-based short line. However, being able to confidentially report mistakes helps foster an environment of trust on both sides because everyone has the same goal in mind: keeping the railroad safe. “The program really focuses on corrective measures and not punishment,” Lefever says.

Labor unions have also rallied around the program, says John Risch, national legislative director for the SMART Transportation Division. He says it’s unfortunate that more freight railroads have not signed on to the program but that his union will continue to urge them to. “We believe that the Confidential Close Call Reporting System can lead to a drastic improvement in rail safety nationwide,” he says.

Castiglione says the FRA is actively promoting the program and hopes that more railroads sign on in the years to come. From 2007 through June 2015, the program received more than 5,100 reports. Many of those reports resulted in small safety improvements that Castiglione says add up over time. For example, one railroad improved the visibility of its speed restriction boards while another added an extra clip in the locomotive cab so engineers can better see their paperwork.

The FRA eventually hopes to start publishing the redacted incident reports so that others in the industry can learn from past mistakes and errors.

Castiglione says after watching the program for the last five years, he is now an ardent believer. “I was a skeptic at first because in the railroad industry when you mess up you get punished, but this program gives us a great tool to learn from mistakes,” he says.



Strasburg Rail Road’s former Norfolk & Western 4-8-0 No. 475 hooks on to local freight in 2015. The railroad participates in the national safety project. D. Collin Reinhart