

Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers
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March 06 2003

Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission
PO Box 47250
1300 Evergreen Park Drive, SW
Olympia Wash. 98504-7250

RE: Docket # TR-021465

Hello,

I am writing on behalf of our organization of Locomotive Engineers about our safety concerns related to the proposed use of remote control locomotive operations in the state of Washington. It has been our concern that locomotives would be operated over public crossings without an engineer aboard to control or try to prevent an accident and that years of experience already is being bypassed and railroads are rushing into this new type of operation which creates a significant risk to the public safety and employee safety as well.

Originally I believe the RCL design was for hump yard operation at isolated controlled access locations not in busy metropolitan locations with people and animals and automobiles in the mix. When dealing with crossing accidents sometimes split seconds can make a difference and the design of the remote equipment is subject to delay and sometimes faulty or undesired operation and if this is in a busy terminal area the collateral damage can be significant. The railroads have already had many accidents with this type of operation but they are willing to risk public safety and employee safety for profit and or bonus anytime.

The current situation is complicated by the Federal railroad administration dual mandate. The same one that the FAA had before the Valujet crash in the Florida everglades. This dual mandate expects the FRA to promote the railroads as well as regulate safety. Top railroad management has promised service growth for the little shipper with RCL operation. The railroads used this excuse many times over the years and we have seen them drop customers and service even when their employees have earned service awards anytime local management is over budget.

The recent tank car explosion at the BNSF Tacoma yard is a case where a potential is there for an even greater disaster. Frequently the standard switch crew of two crewmen are standing close together and if a poison gas is released and both crewmen are overcome there would no longer be an engineer to call for help or provide warning of a poison gas or hazardous gas release. The citizens of our towns would see either the clouds or flames or gas and have little or no warning. In the remote control guide lines the Remote control operator must have a microphone on his or her portable radio, well I have relayed radio signals for many portable radios with my more powerful locomotive radio many times. Radio failure is common. Batteries on portable radios drop out frequently. The small portables have frequently been unable to signal a Yardmaster in a Tower when the portable was right in front of it. Smoke signals may become a new method of communication on the railroad.

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COMMISSION

In my twenty four years of railroad service I have sadly seen a lot of equipment neglected and run until the paint fell off. When budgets are over their normal level minus a ten percent cut the service crews will be furloughed whether things are fixed or not. I do not want to see our citizens exposed to even more risk and a lower level of safety applied to a railroad system which is already stretched thin. There have already been reports that locomotives have run away off the end of tracks at the UP yard at Hinkle Oregon with the locomotives on their sides. There has been a long list of accidents but railroad management has forgotten what it already learned that when you mix people with trains, the people lose.

Steel locomotives feel nothing and the laws of physics, speed distance and tonnage are absolute. So I ask your commission to restrict the use of remote control operation for the benefit and safety of Washington citizens. If we can explain or assist your members of the commission please let us know. I have asked for time to speak at your hearing to explain our concerns. I have seen too many accidents over my short railroad career and I do not want to see more again. Unsuspecting citizens should ask why they would be exposed to more risk? What benefit is traded for more risk? Railroad business is a deadly serious business, please leave the remote control to toys. The security of our railroad can be reduced to someone walking in the locomotive cab door and taking control of an unmanned locomotive. By time a switch crew arrived at the locomotive significant damage could be done. I have found many transient people aboard my locomotives and with our current concern for safety against terrorist acts to reduce the safety by removing engineers from locomotives seems to fly in the face of safety. Please restrict the use of unmanned remote locomotive operations and protect the safety and security of Washington's citizens.

Sincerely,

Dan Potoshnik Secretary BLE 892

cc: BLE WSLB

cc: BLE 892 division officers