

Norfolk Southern derailment forces partial suspension of Amtrak service

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A Norfolk Southern freight train was partly derailed on Saturday, forcing Amtrak to suspend service between Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia for the weekend. The derailment occurred on the Northeast Corridor, which, in addition to serving as a pathway for freight, is the busiest passenger rail line in the United States.

Norfolk Southern is a Class I railroad that operates 19,300 miles of track in 22 states and the District of Columbia. It is a major transporter of coal from Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. In a filing with the United States Securities and Exchange Commission, the company reported railway operating revenue of \$11.1 billion for 2021.

The derailment occurred at 2 a.m. on Saturday in Perryman, Maryland, which is about 20 miles north of Baltimore. The Norfolk Southern train was hauling 130 cars, and 20 of them derailed, spilling coal onto almost a mile of track also used by Amtrak. The county and local police were not immediately informed of the accident, spokespeople told the *Baltimore Sun*. No one was injured in the accident, and Norfolk Southern is investigating its cause.

Because of the derailment, Amtrak suspended all service between Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia for Saturday and Sunday. It also operated a modified schedule with limited Acela Express service between New York and Philadelphia. At least 20 trains on the Northeast Corridor were canceled or postponed. Amtrak also canceled the Palmetto service between Savannah, Georgia, and New York. Service between Philadelphia and Washington was scheduled to resume on Monday.

Derailements are a daily occurrence among freight railroads in the United States. A total of 1,042 freight train derailements, which excludes Amtrak derailements,

occurred in 2021, according to the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). This total yields an average of three derailements per day. During the five years before the pandemic, the annual number of derailements averaged about 1,300. In 2020, the number decreased to just above 1,000. This number, while still high, reflects the spread of the virus among workers and decreased traffic at the onset of the pandemic.

In the past four weeks alone, the following incidents occurred:

- On March 6, two Union Pacific trains derailed near Pittsburg, Texas. The trains had been coupled together at a length of more than 13,000 feet. Four locomotives were pulling the trains.
- On February 24, a train derailed in Joplin, Missouri, rolling onto the road and blocking traffic for hours. News reports did not name the company.
- On February 21, 20 cars on a Union Pacific Train derailed near Coolidge, Arizona, spilling cyclohexanone, a solvent used for metal degreasing and spot removal.
- On February 17, a BNSF train derailed in Frazee, Minnesota, striking and derailing a second train, which was stopped. Some of the cars were hauling lithium batteries and petroleum, and nearby residents were evacuated as a precaution.
- On February 12, seven empty cars derailed on a BNSF train leaving Denver, Colorado. Three cars fell into the South Platte River.

Excessively long trains, overworked crews and reduced maintenance teams contribute to derailements. The dangerous policies that the freight railroads have adopted are having predictable results. At BNSF, these conditions have been compounded by a new points-based attendance policy that exacerbates workers' already grueling schedules.

Instituted last month, the policy is intended to ensure that workers are available for duty around the clock, which will increase stress, fatigue and the risk of accidents. Many workers have resigned since the policy was implemented, and reducing employee head count was doubtless among the company's motivations.

Norfolk Southern alone had 144 derailments in 2021, which is approximately 14 percent of the total for the industry. In the five years before the pandemic, Norfolk Southern averaged about 180 derailments per year.

The railroad has been involved in several serious accidents in recent years. In September 2018, a Norfolk Southern train derailed and fell onto the Station Square T station in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was carrying 23 rail cars, each one loaded with two containers. The fallen cars damaged the rails to such an extent that light-rail cars could not pass through the station for weeks. An FRA investigation concluded that a defect in the rail, which a recent inspection had not detected, had caused the derailment.

An even more serious incident occurred in October 2006, when a Norfolk Southern train derailed while crossing the Beaver River in New Brighton, Pennsylvania. The train carried 83 tank cars full of denatured ethanol, a flammable substance. Twenty-three of the tank cars fell, and about 20 released ethanol, which ignited and burned for two days. Homes in the area were evacuated until the fires were extinguished. The National Transportation Safety Board found that Norfolk Southern's inadequate rail inspection and maintenance program had caused the derailment.

The Station Square derailment involving 23 double-stacked cars reflects the railroads' ongoing efforts to boost profits by increasing the amount of freight that trains carry. Trains now haul more cars than they did previously and can extend for as long as three miles. At the same time, the companies have reduced crews from five workers to two over the past decades to cut expenses. This prioritization of profit above all else places a heavy burden on the infrastructure, leading to rail breakages and derailments.

Indeed, the railroad tracks themselves have been the most frequent cause of derailments in recent years, according to FRA data. The freight railways are owned and maintained by the railroad companies.

But since Amtrak travels mostly on track owned by

the freight railroads, the latter's cost-cutting also jeopardizes the riding public's safety. Passengers who had planned to travel on the Northeast Corridor last weekend were forced to make alternate arrangements at the last minute, or to cancel their trips altogether. The freight railroads' thirst for profit thus interferes with workers' ability to commute to their jobs or to visit their families.

The adequate maintenance of the railways collides with the profit motive, which pushes the wealthy investors who own the railroads to drive down expenses as much as possible.



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