

US transport chief rides 300-mph Japanese maglev

May 11 2010, By JAY ALABASTER , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood took a ride Tuesday on the fastest passenger train in the world, a Japanese maglev, as part of Tokyo's sales pitch for billions of dollars in high-speed train contracts from the U.S.

Washington is attempting to drive development of a new train network that will eventually span the country, but the U.S. has almost no domestic experience or technology. [Japan](#), with one of the most advanced train systems in the world, is an eager seller, though it has had scant success with exports so far.

LaHood, who in the past few months has also ridden high-speed trains in Spain and France, said he was impressed with Japanese technology but that was only part of the equation. He said potential manufacturers need to "come to America, find facilities to build this equipment in America, and hire American workers."

"It's getting America into the high-speed rail business, but it's also putting Americans to work building the infrastructure," he said.

During his short visit to Tsuru, a quiet town in the shadow of Mt. Fuji about 50 miles (80 kilometers) west of Tokyo, he came straight to the Maglev Test Line in Yamanashi prefecture. The train hit speeds of 311 miles per hour (502 kph) during a 27-minute run.

Unlike standard trains that ride along on metal rails, magnetic levitation

trains float along suspended by powerful magnets. The Japanese version, developed mainly by operator JR Central, uses superconducting magnets to hover above the track.

The train set a speed record for a passenger train of 581 kilometers per hour (361 mph) in 2003, which JR officials say still holds today.

After decades of testing, the train has been approved by the government and is to begin service in Japan in 2027 between Tokyo and central Nagoya.

"I explained this is proven technology that is already in practical use," said JR Central Chairman Yoshiyuki Kasai.

The U.S. in January awarded \$8 billion in starter funds to several regional projects, and is due to give \$2.5 billion more this year, LaHood said.

Japan's high-speed rail services are among the most advanced in the world, with hundreds of trains running each day and an average annual delay that is typically less than a minute. No passengers have died from a collision or derailment in nearly a half century of service. The only derailment was during a major earthquake in 2004.

For the sales pitch in the U.S., top government officials are working closely with the country's main train operators.

But unlike in Europe, where border crossings and interoperability are prerequisites for doing business, Japan's trains have been developed on an island with homebrew technology. Other Japanese industries with enviable but non-compatible technologies, like its mobile phone operators, haven't fared well in repeated attempts to go abroad.

In addition to the obvious financial benefits, Japan's sleek bullet trains are a point of pride for the country, and the media is closely following the sales race in the U.S. On Tuesday at the Otsuki research facility, dozens of photographers attempted to snap pictures of a 330-foot (100-meter) experimental train as it flew back and forth on the test track.

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