

Feds: Railroads slow to make progress on train technology

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The nation's three busiest commuter railroads - which together serve nearly 1 million riders in the New York City area each day - continue to lag behind their smaller West Coast counterparts in installing sophisticated train-control technology that's seen as an antidote to crashes involving speeding and other human factors, federal regulators said Monday.

The Long Island Rail Road, New Jersey Transit and Metro-North all made scant progress on implementing GPS-based positive-train control in the quarter ending Sept. 30, according to new Federal Railroad Administration data. Over the last three months, the LIRR and Metro-North have trained more employees on the system, the data shows, but neither they nor NJ Transit installed it on any tracks.

The railroads say the federal data doesn't fully reflect their progress and that they are still on track to meet a December 2018 deadline to install the technology, which is designed to automatically slow or stop trains that are going too fast.

"Metro North and LIRR have aggressively and diligently moved forward to fully implement PTC on both railroads before the Congressionally mandated deadline," said Tom Prendergast, the chairman of New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

The LIRR and Metro-North say they've installed PTC equipment on more than 300 train cars and placed more than 2,000 transponders along

their tracks. NJ Transit says it's awaiting federal approval to acquire a slice of required radio spectrum and has testing scheduled for next year on a 6-mile stretch of track.

Federal investigators have listed the lack of PTC as a contributing factor in at least 25 crashes over the last 20 years, including a Metro-North wreck in New York City in 2013 that killed four people and one involving Amtrak in Philadelphia last year that killed eight people.

In both crashes, trains entered sharp curves at more than double the speed limit. Investigators are now looking at whether PTC could have prevented a fatal crash in September, in which a train plowed into a station going double the 10 mph speed limit.

The railroad industry dropped opposition to PTC after a Metrolink commuter train whose engineer was texting ran a stop signal and collided head-on with a freight train near Los Angeles in 2008, killing 25 people.

Metrolink, which carries about 40,000 daily riders, is now among the nation's leaders in PTC implementation. The railroad has the system operating on all but 3 miles of track that it owns.

San Francisco's Caltrain, San Diego's Coaster and Seattle's Sounder commuter railroads all have PTC equipment installed on their locomotives, but none of them have the system fully implemented.

Even the busiest West Coast commuter railroad, Caltrain with about 57,000 daily riders, is tiny compared with the East Coast behemoths.

Caltrain owns 52 miles of track and has 67 locomotives, according to the federal data. The Long Island Rail Road, NJ Transit and Metro-North each own more than 300 miles of track, and together they operate more than 1,500 locomotives.

SEPTA, in the Philadelphia area, operates the only northeast commuter railroad nearing full implementation.

The transit agency's railroad division - the nation's fifth busiest with 134,000 daily riders, 108 miles of track and 288 locomotives - has PTC in place on all but one stretch of track, has equipment installed in all its trains and has completed training for all employees, according to agency and FRA data.

Amtrak has installed positive train control on most of the 450 miles of track it owns between Washington and Boston. A 56-mile state-owned stretch between New Rochelle, New York, and New Haven, Connecticut, still doesn't have the technology.

Freight railroads, which own the vast majority of track in the U.S., had PTC active on 12 percent of their tracks as of Sept. 30, up from 9 percent last quarter, according to the federal data.

Ed Greenberg, of the Association of American Railroads, said the industry has spent more than \$7.1 billion on PTC technology and expects final costs to reach about \$10.6 billion by the time it is fully operational on about 60,000 miles of track.

"The FRA's latest status update illustrates the complexities involved in developing, installing and then thoroughly testing this complex, revolutionary technology to ensure it is providing additional safety benefits," Greenberg said.

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