

April 7, 2025

Chair and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer my strong support for Oregon's Two-Person Crew Bill SB-723. I come before you not only as someone who works on the railroad but also as a member of this community, a resident of Oregon, and a parent raising a family here. This legislation is not just practical, it's essential. It's a matter of public safety, worker protection, and environmental stewardship. It speaks of something far greater than efficiency or profit margins: it's about protecting our communities, our workers, and our environment. And it is long past time we enshrine it into law.

Every day, massive freight trains and some stretching two miles or more move through the heart of our towns, along our rivers, across our farmlands, and over our fragile trestles. These trains often carry hazardous materials from ethanol, crude oil, pressurized gas, and volatile chemicals. And yet, today, there is nothing stopping these trains from being operated by a single crew member.

Let me be clear: one person alone in the cab of a 20,000-ton machine traveling at 50 mph is a recipe for disaster.

This is not safe. One person alone cannot do everything required to safely operate a freight train. That person has to run and operate the train, maintain constant contact with dispatch, watch for obstructions and issues ahead, respond to mechanical problems, and be ready for emergencies. It is simply too much to ask of one individual. But with two trained professionals—an Engineer and a Conductor—those responsibilities are shared, and the risks are dramatically reduced. Two-person crews have long been the standard because they work. They provide vigilance, accountability, and the ability to act swiftly when something goes wrong.

And things do go wrong. When a train strikes a vehicle or pedestrian, for example, a single crew member must both secure the locomotive and try to assist at the scene, tasks that can conflict and delay emergency response. If a train derails and blocks a crossing, there's no way for one person to break the train apart and clear the road for emergency vehicles. If there's a hazardous spill, there's no one to help first responders identify the dangerous cars on the consist. If mechanical failure leaves a train stuck across a crossing, it can take hours for a one-person crew to fix the problem—during which time ambulances or fire trucks might be forced to find another way around.

And when things go wrong, that second person becomes the difference between a contained incident and a catastrophe.

I would ask you to consider Mosier, Oregon. In June 2016, a Union Pacific oil train derailed in the Columbia River Gorge, just steps from homes and an elementary school. Sixteen cars left the tracks. Several caught fire. Flames shot into the air, residents were evacuated, and a toxic oil sheen spilled into the Columbia River. Emergency responders, already stretched thin in a small rural town, had to act fast to contain what could've turned into another Lac-Mégantic tragedy.

Now imagine that train had been operated by a single person, who had been injured, unconscious, or unable to respond. How much longer would it have taken to alert authorities? How many more tankers might have ignited? How many more lives would have been placed at risk? The Gorge is not a hypothetical corridor—it is real, and it is vulnerable.

Now consider Oregon's aging wooden trestles, which carry trains over rivers, ravines, and farmland. These structures, some over a century old, are susceptible to fire. And there have been multiple fires. In recent years, fires have erupted on rail trestles in Lane, Douglas, and Jackson Counties. Portland has had trestle fires as well. When a trestle catches fire, the danger isn't just to the train. It's to firefighters, communities below, and the stability of the entire route.

When a train encounters a burning or compromised bridge, a two-person crew can divide responsibilities: one can secure the locomotive and the cargo, while the other assesses the situation, communicates with emergency responders, and helps reroute traffic. This kind of coordinated action cannot happen with a crew of one. A single person cannot manage all these tasks in a high-pressure moment.

And let's not ignore another danger, crew member incapacitation. Engineers have suffered heart attacks, blackouts, and strokes while in motion. When there's a second crew member, they can take over or apply the emergency brakes. When there's nobody else in the cab, there is simply just no one.

The railroad industry has argued that technology like Positive Train Control (PTC) makes two people unnecessary. But PTC doesn't put out fires or have eyes on the rails. It doesn't carry an injured crew from a wreck. It doesn't inspect a leaking tank or talk to a frightened dispatcher. It doesn't prevent a derailment that is caused by a washed-out culvert, a landslide, or an act of sabotage. Only human eyes and human hands can do that. **Two-person crews are a safety net we cannot afford to lose.**

And this bill is not just about railroaders, it's about the families who live along the tracks and our communities. It's about the firefighters who show up first. It's about the rancher whose livestock graze near a crossing. It's about the school children who take the bus over a grade crossing every morning. These are our people. Our neighbors. Our communities. They deserve the peace of mind that someone is looking out for them.

Let's not wait for the next Mosier.

Oregon has a proud history of leading on safety and environmental protection. This bill is a chance to lead again and to do so before tragedy strikes. The operation of freight trains with only

one crew member poses undeniable risks to both railroad employees and the communities through which these trains travel. Implementing a mandatory two-person crew policy is essential to ensure the safety and well-being of our communities in Oregon. I earnestly urge you to support and advocate for legislation that enforces this critical safety standard.

Please, pass the Two-Person Crew Bill. Let's keep our railways safe, staffed, and human.

Sincerely,

Matthias Keene