

The Importance of Maintaining Two-Person Train Crews

By Paul Torres

Hello, my name is Paul Torres. I am currently a railroad conductor training to become an engineer. I've been with the railroad for seven years, working throughout Oregon—from La Grande to Portland and Eugene. Based on my experience in the field, I want to highlight some critical safety concerns that arise when there's only one person in the locomotive cab.

1. Safety

The safety of our communities and the crew must be the top priority. Trains are equipped with a device called an *alerter*, which requires the engineer to periodically press a button. If no response is received, the train initiates a penalty brake application. However, this system has limitations. It does not notify anyone nearby about a potential emergency or oncoming train traffic. On a train that may be traveling up to 70 mph and stretching over two and a half miles long, a sudden brake application could even lead to a derailment, especially depending on the train's makeup.

With two crew members, help is immediately available. Conductors are trained and certified in emergency response, making them the first line of assistance in critical situations—not just for the crew, but for the communities we pass through.

2. Cross-Checking Decisions

Having two qualified crew members allows for continuous verification of signals, speed restrictions, and switching operations. This system of checks and balances greatly reduces the risk of human error.

3. External Coordination

In emergencies, one crew member can coordinate with first responders or maintenance personnel while the other remains with the train to manage safe movement and control.

4. Monitoring Fatigue and Alertness

Railroading is demanding, and fatigue can set in quickly. Crew members can monitor each other for signs of drowsiness or inattention, reducing the risk of microsleeps and maintaining overall alertness.

5. Security

A second crew member provides a deterrent against unauthorized access to the train, increasing safety and security for both the cargo and the crew.

6. Equipment Troubleshooting

Mechanical issues are sometimes unavoidable. A second trained crew member can assist in diagnosing and resolving problems, minimizing downtime and ensuring smooth operations.

7. Documentation and Logging

While the engineer focuses on operating the train, the conductor is responsible for maintaining

accurate logs of operations, inspections, and any incidents—essential tasks that require attention and accountability.

Maintaining a two-person train crew is not merely a labor issue—it is a fundamental requirement for ensuring rail safety. The presence of a second qualified crew member significantly enhances our ability to respond to emergencies, reduce human error, and protect lives, infrastructure, and cargo. It's not just about the people operating the train—it's about the safety of every community we pass through.