

Federal Railroad Administration seeks comments on train horn rules

Congressmen applaud move to address quality-of-life concerns

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Train horn rules

The Federal Railroad

Administration is inviting comments on its train horn rules. The FRA's announcement is available online at 1.usa.gov/1QY6o84, and that site is to include a link for people to submit comments once the announcement is published in the Federal Register, which is scheduled to occur Monday.

The Federal Railroad Administration is reviewing and inviting comments about its controversial 11-year-old train horn rules that require locomotives to blare their horns when approaching and passing through crossings.

Several members of Colorado's congressional delegation, including U.S. Sens. Michael Bennet and Cory Gardner and U.S. Rep. Jared Polis, applauded the federal agency's move and urged Colorado residents and local governments to send comments to the FRA.

"The current rule is not effectively serving Front Range communities with rail lines running through their city centers, and I am committed to seeing a final rule that continues to prioritize safety while also acknowledging the needs of individual communities," Yuma Republican Gardner said in a news release.

Denver Democrat Bennet and Boulder Democrat Polis noted in a separate news

release that "communities throughout Colorado, including Fort Collins, Loveland, Longmont, Greeley, Commerce City, Arvada, Castle Rock, Westminster and Windsor, have expressed concerns" about the way the FRA applies its current train horn rules.

"Train horn noise is a serious concern for Colorado communities that want to ensure public safety and improve their quality of life," Bennet said.

"We have continuously advocated for additional flexibility in the train horn rules to help these communities create quiet zones that can help boost economic development in their city centers," Bennet said.

Said Polis: "Time and time again, Coloradans have voiced their frustration over excessively loud train horn noise."

The public comment period begins Monday and will last 120 days before the Federal Railroad Association makes a final decision whether to change its rules.

Quiet zones

Under those federal rules, originally established in 2005, communities can apply for federal permission to create "quiet zones" where train horn rules can be relaxed if a municipality erects flashing lights and barrier gates and takes other measures to alert motorists and pedestrians about oncoming trains.

Local government officials and some members of Colorado's congressional delegation have objected, however, that it's prohibitively expensive for them to afford satisfying the federal agency's requirements for establishing such quiet zones. They've said the train horn noise is a nuisance for local residents and that it stifles economic development, discouraging business and housing developers from locating projects near railroad crossings.

Longmont officials estimated in 2013 that it could cost nearly \$7 million to set up quiet zones at a dozen crossings within the city.

A BNSF official told the Times-Call last October that 12 to 15 trains a day run through Longmont, although that number sometimes goes down to eight or nine per day.

In the Federal Railroad Administration's own written announcement that it's conducting "a retrospective review" of its locomotive train horn regulations, the agency said it is soliciting public comment "on whether FRA should modify, streamline or expand any requirements" of those regulations "to reduce paperwork and other economic burdens on the rail industry and states and local authorities while still maintaining the highest standards of safety."

Current rules

Present federal regulations require trains' engineers to sound their locomotives' horns while approaching public-grade crossings, until the lead locomotive fully occupies the crossing.

In general, those engineers must sound the horn for a minimum of 15 seconds, and a maximum of 20 seconds, in advance of reaching the crossing. The train's horn must also be sounded in a pattern of two long, one short and one long blast, according to the regulations, which also specify the minimum and maximum decibel levels.

The federal agency suggested that people making written comments address such questions as:

- "How can FRA decrease the barriers local communities encounter when establishing a quiet zone?"
- "What further actions can FRA take to mitigate train horn noise impacts for local communities while not decreasing safety for motorists and pedestrians?"
- "How can FRA change how train horns are sounded at grade crossings while not decreasing safety?"
- "Should train speed be a factor that is considered when establishing a new quiet zone?"

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