910-06-P]

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Federal Railroad Administration

Safety Advisory 2026-01; Restricted Speed

AGENCY: Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), Department of Transportation (DOT).

ACTION: Notice of Safety Advisory.

SUMMARY: FRA is issuing Safety Advisory 2026-01 to remind railroads and their employees of the importance of compliance with Federal regulations and railroad operating rules governing restricted speed. This Safety Advisory contains a summary of seven recent train accidents involving failure to operate at restricted speed and makes recommendations to railroads to ensure employee compliance with restricted speed requirements, with particular emphasis on operations in positive train control (PTC) Restricted Mode.

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SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

While the overall safety of railroad operations has improved in recent years, a series of accidents has highlighted the need for railroads to review, to reemphasize, and to adhere to Federal regulations and railroad operating rules and procedures governing the requirements of restricted speed, including in PTC territory. FRA has reviewed operational testing data which suggests a concerning trend in PTC-governed territory. When restricted speed is in effect, there appears to be a lack of robust, representative testing to ensure compliance with the requirement that train crews be prepared to stop

within one-half their range of vision. FRA is concerned that a significant safety gap has emerged due to a misunderstanding of the role of PTC in restricted speed compliance.

For purposes of this Safety Advisory, "restricted speed" is defined as "a speed that will permit a train or other equipment to stop within one-half the range of vision of the person operating the train or other equipment, but not exceeding 20 miles per hour, unless further restricted by the operating rules of the railroad."[1] Though terminology varies slightly by railroad, consistent with FRA's definition, railroad restricted speed rules generally require trains to operate at a speed that permits stopping within one-half the range of vision, short of a train, engine, railroad car, roadway workers or equipment fouling the track; an improperly lined switch; or other obstruction. In other words, restricted speed is not a fixed numerical value; it is a dynamic requirement that must be constantly evaluated and adjusted as conditions change. These definitions place the responsibility for determining an appropriate speed squarely on the operating crew.

FRA's recent accident investigations and field observations indicate that, in some cases, train crews are relying on PTC-enforced speed limits in Restricted Mode to meet the requirements of the applicable restricted speed rules. In doing so, crews may fail to account fully for visibility limitations, train length and tonnage, braking characteristics, grade, curvature, and other conditions that materially affect the ability to stop within one-half the range of vision. FRA emphasizes that the requirement to be able to stop within one-half the range of vision is the controlling element of restricted speed and takes precedence over any maximum authorized speed.

Recent Incidents

The following is a list of seven recent collisions, including the date, speed and outcome, that appear to involve a failure to comply with restricted speed operating rules

[1] 49 CFR 214.7. *See also* § 236.812.

or related signal indications. Information regarding these incidents is based on FRA's preliminary investigations and findings to date.

Date	Speed at time of collision	Outcome
5/18/26	13 mph	6 freight cars derailed
1/30/26	27 mph	Moving train (lead locomotive and 2 non-hazmat cars) collided with standing train (2 freight cars)
12/19/25	17 mph	Derailment of passenger equipment resulting in passenger and crew injuries
12/23/24	30 mph	4 locomotives and 4 freight cars derailed
12/6/24	20 mph	Moving train derailed 6 freight cars; standing train derailed 12 cars
3/2/24	13 mph	3-train collision; moving train struck standing train derailing 3 cars; those cars fouled an adjacent track and were struck by a third train, derailing 3 locomotives and 6 freight cars
2/22/24	12 mph	Freight train collided with helper train, no derailment

Discussion

Preliminary investigations indicate that collisions occurring while movements should have been governed by restricted speed frequently result from an interplay of factors rather than a single causal mistake. Those factors often include an excessive reliance on PTC enforcement, failure to reduce speed commensurate with reduced visibility, train-handling characteristics, engineer and conductor distraction, and an overreliance on operational testing of PTC in Restricted Mode to encompass all operating conditions.

FRA reiterates that restricted speed is principally a visual and physical requirement, not merely a numeric speed cap. Operating crews must maintain a vigilant lookout, continuously determine their actual range of vision, and account for train-handling factors, such as train length and tonnage, braking capability (including the relative roles and limitations of dynamic and automatic air brakes), track grade, and curvature, when selecting an appropriate speed. The controlling obligation under restricted speed rules is the ability to stop the movement physically within one-half the

distance that the crew can see the track to be clear. Thus, if only 20 car lengths ahead of clear track is visible because of curvature, weather, or darkness, the train must be prepared to stop within 10 car lengths; maximum speed authorized by timetable, rule, or system enforcement is subordinate to that stopping distance requirement. As visibility decreases, the maximum safe speed that permits stopping within one-half the range of vision declines rapidly.

PTC is a safety overlay that, among other things, enforces specified speed limits, preventing certain classes of human-performance errors. Nevertheless, FRA is concerned about the safety implications of overreliance on PTC, particularly when PTC is used in Restricted Mode. In many system configurations, PTC's use in Restricted Mode enforces the upper limit of restricted speed; however, the crew remains responsible for ensuring the train can be stopped within one half their range of vision.

Given the high level of responsibility associated with restricted speed operations, non-compliance with restricted speed requirements can have significant certification consequences and may result in revocation or suspension of locomotive engineer or conductor certification under FRA's regulations. Restricted speed violations are among the most serious operational infractions in the railroad industry because of their strong association with rear-end collisions, sideswipes, injuries, and yard accidents.

Recommended Railroad Action

Considering the above discussion, FRA recommends that railroads:

(1) Review with operating employees the circumstances of the seven collisions identified in this Safety Advisory, and any similar incidents on their own properties, with emphasis on the signal indications or other authorities in effect, visibility conditions, track geometry, and train-handling practices, and on how compliance with restricted speed and related rules appears to have broken down.

(2) Assess the effectiveness of training and rules instruction related to restricted speed, including initial and recurrent training in certification programs, with emphasis on the requirement, under applicable operating rules and Federal regulations, to adjust speed continuously so that the train can be stopped within one-half the range of vision, rather than relying on maximum authorized or system-enforced speeds as the primary element of the rule. FRA recommends that railroads ensure that training includes scenario-based discussion of how visibility, locomotive orientation, train length and tonnage, grade, curvature, and environmental conditions affect stopping distance under restricted speed requirements.

(3) Reinforce through rules, training, and supervisory oversight that PTC, including during its use in Restricted Mode, is an overlay and does not negate or diminish the crew's responsibility to adjust speed based on visibility, obstructed views, and train-handling characteristics to comply with the visual requirements of restricted speed. FRA recommends that railroads ensure employees understand that PTC in use during Restricted Mode does not detect misaligned switches or standing equipment, or provide any visual safeguard, and that tonnage, braking characteristics (dynamic and air), and environmental factors (such as wet leaves, frost, ice, and contaminated rail) must dictate speed adjustments when operating under restricted speed rules, even when PTC permits a higher speed.

(4) Evaluate quarterly and 6-month reviews of operational testing data as required by 49 CFR 217.9, and, as appropriate, increase the level of operational testing concerning the operation of trains on main tracks, sidings, and yard or terminal tracks at restricted speed, including in PTC territory, and when operating in PTC during Restricted Mode. FRA recommends that a representative number of operational tests be conducted on trains following other trains into occupied blocks or sidings, particularly in high-density

corridors, and that such tests, where practicable, include review of locomotive event recorder and onboard video data to verify compliance with restricted speed requirements.

(5) Reinforce that all crew members in the controlling locomotive share responsibility for maintaining situational awareness during restricted speed operations and that unnecessary distractions must be eliminated during such operations. FRA recommends that railroads emphasize, in training and supervision, the importance of active communication among crew members regarding signal indications, track conditions, and the location of other trains and equipment, and that any uncertainty regarding conditions ahead should result in a reduction of speed or a stop until the situation is clearly understood.

FRA encourages the railroad industry to take actions consistent with the preceding recommendations, and to take all actions that help ensure the safety of the Nation's railroad employees and the public. Nothing in this Safety Advisory alters any existing regulatory requirements, operating rules, or obligations under Federal law. FRA may modify this Safety Advisory 2026-01, issue additional safety advisories, or take other appropriate actions it deems necessary to ensure the highest level of safety on the Nation's railroads, including pursuing enforcement or other corrective measures under its rail safety authority.

Issued under authority delegated in 49 CFR 1.89.

John Karl Alexy,

Associate Administrator for Railroad Safety and Chief Safety Officer.

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