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NTSB Most Wanted List Includes Some TTD Priorities

Talking about transportation safety isn't enough – measures are needed to close gaps in the system that expose both workers and the public. That's where the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) comes in.

Since it was established more than 40 years ago as an independent safety and accident investigation agency, the NTSB has pressed regulators and lawmakers to move on safety measures that will make transportation safer. Their recommendations are not binding but they sure pack a punch.

This year's Most Wanted List identifies some pressing transportation safety challenges considered priorities by TTD members unions. While each proposal deserves close examination, three deserve urgent attention and action.

The first of these is rail tank car safety. In the last five years, there has been a dramatic increase in the rail transport of crude oil and ethanol, reflecting a quickly-changing energy landscape. With a rise in transport comes greater risk, exemplified by accidents like the 2013 derailment of a tank car carrying crude oil in North Dakota, which caused fiery eruptions and led to the evacuation of a nearby town.

We agree it's essential to strengthen safety regulations covering the hundreds of thousands of DOT-111 tank cars currently in use, as well as the rules for new tank cars. We also support the idea of utilizing new technologies such as positive train control to enhance safety, as well as improved preparation for rail tank car ruptures – particularly better communication with local and state emergency response agencies. And in all of this, we must seek to protect the train crews as well as the communities through which the tank cars travel. One of these best ways to protect both is establishing 2-person crews as the minimum size required on freight trains.

The NTSB should join us in calling on the Obama Administration to complete new rules that accomplish this objective.

A second issue of vital public interest is public helicopter safety. Though it generally flies under the radar, the nation's public helicopter system is vital to emergency medical service, search-and-rescue operations, and law enforcement. Some key steps need to be taken to improve public helicopter safety, including the development and implementation of safety management systems that include risk management practices – particularly flight risk evaluation programs. We also need to implement best practices for flight crews that include scenario-based training and fatigue management. And while we're at it, we should install radio altimeters, night vision imaging systems, and terrain awareness warning systems. In addition, we support changes and improvements to flight recording systems, both to preemptively address safety issues and to help investigators document what occurred during a crash so that future accidents can be prevented.

Finally, we must make enhanced transit safety a top priority this year. This means better security measures both for the public and for the workers who operate our transit systems. One essential step for increasing public safety for transit users is improving training for frontline employees. Employers must abide by the minimum standards established by Congress so that employees are able to determine the seriousness of a threat, communicate and coordinate with fellow workers and passengers, and implement evacuation and security incident procedures.

Equally important is providing for the safety of transit workers. Many transit employees face unacceptably high risks, like bus drivers, who have been the target of increasing assaults by passengers. Such measures as the installation of plexiglass partitions separating drivers from passengers, driver-side doors, and the presence of uniformed police officers would decrease the likelihood of dangerous passenger behavior. Penalties should also be increased and the courts should enforce sentencing guidelines.

The NTSB is offering important recommendations about how we can make our transportation system safer. During a time of excessive partisan rancor in Congress, it is time for those we elect to heed these warnings and advance these common sense safety reforms.

In 2015 we should push for investments in transportation like our lives depend on it – because they do.