

NOTICE OF SAFETY ADVISORY 98-3 - Recommended practices for the safe use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs by safety-sensitive railroad employees.

On December 24, 1998, FRA published a Notice of Safety Advisory 98-3 in the Federal Register (Vol. 63, No. 247), addressing recommended practices for the safe use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs by safety-sensitive railroad employees. It reads as follows:

FRA issues this advisory in support of DOT's efforts to ensure that transportation employees safely use prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs. Safe rail operations depend upon alert and fully functional professionals who have not been adversely affected by drug use, whether medically appropriate ("legal") or not. FRA has always prohibited illicit drug use and unauthorized use of controlled substances by safety-sensitive employees, but is equally concerned about the potentially adverse side effects from other prescription drugs and OTC products. Because DOT and FRA testing (including FRA's post-accident program) targets only alcohol and controlled substances, FRA does not have a clear picture of the extent to which the performance of safety-sensitive employees is adversely affected by legal drug use.

Accordingly, although not specifically addressed in its alcohol and drug testing regulations (49 CFR part 219), FRA strongly recommends that rail employers and safety-sensitive employees follow § 219.103 guidelines when considering the use of all prescription and OTC drugs. Simply stated, in the interest of safety, FRA strongly recommends that either a treating medical professional or a railroad-designated physician make a fitness-for-work determination concerning all prescription and OTC drug use prior to permitting an employee to return to work in safety sensitive service. This determination should also be made whenever an employee currently performing safety-sensitive functions is concerned about possible effects on his or her job performance from the use of prescription or OTC drugs.

Section 219.103(b) authorizes railroads to establish reporting and approval procedures for all prescription and OTC drugs which may have detrimental effects on safety. Additionally, FRA recommends that railroads educate their employees on these reporting and approval procedures and, most importantly, on how to use prescription and OTC medications safely.

FRA will take all appropriate action to continue reducing the negative impact from inappropriate use of all prescription and OTC medications. Moreover, FRA strongly encourages the rail industry to voluntarily develop programs on safe prescription and OTC drug use before such programs are mandated or directed through legislation.

Issued in Washington, D.C., by George Gavalla, Acting Associate Administrator for Safety.

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