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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-390T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Although the overall safety record of the railroad industry, as measured by the number of train accidents per million miles traveled, has improved markedly since 1980, there has been little or no overall improvement over the past decade. Serious accidents resulting in injuries and deaths continue to occur, such as one in Graniteville, South Carolina, that resulted in 9 deaths and 292 injuries. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) develops safety standards and inspects and enforces railroads' compliance with these standards.

On January 26, 2007, GAO reported on FRA's overall safety oversight strategy. (See [GAO-07-149](#).) The report discussed how FRA (1) focuses its efforts on the highest priority risks related to train accidents in planning its oversight, (2) identifies safety problems on railroad systems in carrying out its oversight, and (3) assesses the impact of its oversight efforts on safety. GAO recommended that FRA (1) put into place measures of the results of its inspection and enforcement programs and (2) evaluate its enforcement program. In reviewing a draft of that report, the Department of Transportation did not provide overall views on its contents or its recommendations.

The statement is based on GAO's recent report.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-390T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-390T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or [siggerudk@gao.gov](mailto:siggerudk@gao.gov).

## RAIL SAFETY

# The Federal Railroad Administration Is Better Targeting Its Oversight, but Needs to Assess the Impact of Its Efforts

## What GAO Found

In planning its safety oversight, FRA is focusing its efforts on the highest priority risks related to train accidents through initiatives aimed at addressing their main causes—human behaviors and defective track—as well as through improvements in its inspection planning approach. FRA's May 2005 National Rail Safety Action Plan, the agency's overall strategy for targeting its oversight at the greatest risks, provides a reasonable framework for guiding these efforts. FRA's initiatives to address the most common causes of accidents are promising, although the success of many of them will depend on voluntary actions by the railroads. In addition, under the action plan, FRA has adopted a new inspection planning approach in which inspectors focus their efforts on locations that data-driven models indicate are most likely to have safety problems.

In carrying out its safety oversight, FRA identifies a range of safety problems on railroad systems mainly by determining whether operating practices, track, and equipment are in compliance with minimum safety standards. However, FRA is able to inspect only about 0.2 percent of railroads' operations each year, and its inspections do not examine how railroads are managing safety risks throughout their systems that could lead to accidents. Such an approach, as a supplement to traditional compliance inspections, is used in the oversight of U.S. commuter railroads and pipelines and of Canadian railroads. GAO did not recommend that FRA adopt this approach because the agency's various initiatives to reduce the train accident rate have not yet had time to demonstrate their effects on safety.

FRA uses a range of goals and measures to assess the impact of its oversight, such as (1) goals to target its inspection and enforcement programs at reducing various types of railroad accidents and (2) related measures, such as rates of track-caused accidents, to monitor its progress. However, FRA's ability to make informed decisions about these programs is limited because it lacks measures of their direct results, such as the correction of identified safety problems. Furthermore, FRA has not evaluated the effectiveness of its enforcement program.

Track Inspector Examining Rail to Assess Its Safety Compliance



Source: FRA.