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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-149](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 1980, the train accident rate has improved significantly, but progress has leveled off over the past 10 years. Recent serious accidents—such as one in Graniteville, South Carolina, that led to 9 deaths and 292 injuries—elevated concerns. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) develops safety standards and inspects and enforces railroads' compliance with these standards.

This report addresses 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. To complete this work, GAO reviewed FRA regulations, planning and policy documents, and safety data. GAO also contacted FRA officials in headquarters and three regional offices and others.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that FRA develop measures of the direct results of its oversight and evaluate the effectiveness of its enforcement program. The Department of Transportation did not provide overall comments on these recommendations but did provide several technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-149.

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.

RAIL SAFETY

The Federal Railroad Administration Is Taking Steps to Better Target Its Oversight, but Assessment of Results Is Needed to Determine Impact

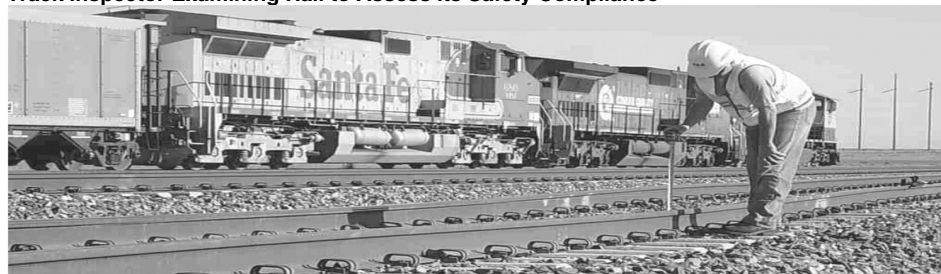
What GAO Found

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. In its May 2005 National Rail Safety Action Plan, the overall strategy for targeting its oversight at the greatest risks, FRA provides a reasonable framework for guiding these efforts. Its 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, the action plan outlined the agency's development of a new inspection planning approach. Under this approach, 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 specific and broad-scale 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. While this type of approach can provide additional assurance of safety, GAO is not recommending that FRA adopt it because its various initiatives to reduce the train accident rate have not yet had time to demonstrate their effects on safety.

FRA uses a broad range of goals and measures to assess the impact of its oversight. For example, it has developed (1) new goals to target its inspection and enforcement programs at reducing various types of railroad accidents and (2) related measures to monitor its progress. These measures include the rate of train accidents caused by human behaviors, track defects, and equipment defects. 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.