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Response to the Washington Post Editorial Board

By Jeremy Ferguson, President, SMART Transportation Division (SMART-TD)

To the Editorial Board of The Washington Post:

Your recent editorial dismissing the Railway Safety Act and related rail safety legislation as ineffective and cost-prohibitive reflects a familiar pattern in discussions about our industry: confident conclusions drawn far from the ballast and the communities that live alongside America's railroads.

SMART-TD represents the largest rail operating workforce in North America. Our members are the conductors and engineers who move the freight that powers this economy. They also inspect equipment in the dark, handle hazardous materials, and operate trains that can stretch three miles in length.

For railroaders, safety policy is not theory. It is survival.

Rail safety rules exist because railroads have repeatedly demonstrated that they will not voluntarily choose safety over profit when the two come into conflict. That is the context behind the Railway Safety Act of 2026. This legislation would codify a federal two-person crew minimum, strengthen standards for high-hazard trains, improve inspections, and modernize detection systems.

Predictably, the rail industry and its trade association, the Association of American Railroads, argue these reforms are too expensive. That argument has accompanied nearly every safety reform in railroading for more than a century.

Your editorial also dismisses concerns about crew size, citing the East Palestine derailment as proof that additional crew members would not have prevented the accident.

On the narrow question of whether a crew could physically repair an overheating bearing located half a mile behind the locomotive while the train was moving, that observation is technically correct.

But it completely misses the point.

The Norfolk Southern train that derailed in East Palestine had a **three-person crew**. When the cars left the rails, those railroaders immediately assessed the situation, identified hazardous materials involved, established the evacuation perimeter, secured remaining cars by tying hand brakes, and relayed critical information to dispatchers so first responders understood the danger.

They then separated the locomotives from the wreckage and moved outside the evacuation zone they had correctly established.

As your editorial notes, **nobody died that night in East Palestine.**

That outcome was not coincidental.

Compare that night to the 2013 hazardous-materials derailment in **Lac-Mégantic, Quebec**, where a train operated by a **single-person crew** rolled uncontrolled into the center of town and exploded. Forty-seven people died and much of the town was destroyed.

Crew size does not prevent every accident. But it absolutely shapes how disasters unfold and how communities look when they come out on the other side of them.

The public instinctively understands this. Ask almost anyone how many people operate a freight train, and they will assume far more than two. When they learn the industry already runs hazardous trains through their communities with just two people and wants to reduce that number to one or even none, the reaction is disbelief.

Railroads have also dramatically reduced the number of skilled mechanical inspectors while shifting abbreviated inspections onto already-overworked train crews. That is not modernization. It is a business decision to gamble.

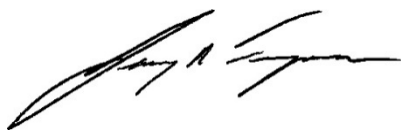
Meanwhile, federal regulators have fully implemented only five of 81 rail safety recommendations issued by the National Transportation Safety Board over the past decade.

Those numbers explain why legislation like the Railway Safety Act exists.

When an industry proves unwilling to regulate itself, and regulators lack the resources to enforce meaningful oversight, Congress must establish the minimum standards necessary to protect workers and communities.

That is exactly what this legislation seeks to do. If you would like further insight into the reasoning behind this purpose-built legislation, feel free to reach out to SMART-TD. If you want to understand rail safety, you'd be well served to talk with those of us who live it and not those who look at my members' deaths and dismemberments as the cost of doing business rather than the red line that it is.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jeremy Ferguson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jeremy Ferguson
President
SMART Transportation Division (SMART-TD)