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New Rule Strengthens Railroad Bridge Safety Programs, Oversight

Federal Railroad Administrator (FRA) Joseph Szabo today announced a Final Rule requiring railroad track owners to adopt and follow specific procedures to protect the safety of their bridges, and to strengthen federal oversight of railroad bridge maintenance programs. This rule is a requirement under the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008.

“This Final Rule will help ensure the 100,000 railroad bridges in the United States are maintained and inspected to the standards accepted by sound engineering practices,” said Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. “The structural integrity of bridges that carry railroad tracks is vitally important to the safety of railroad employees and to the public.”

The Final Rule requires track owners to implement bridge management programs that include at least annual inspections of railroad bridges; know the safe capacity load of bridges; and, conduct special inspections if the weather or other conditions warrant such inspections.

In addition, it requires an inventory of all railroad bridges, the audit of the bridge management programs, and inspections by the FRA; it also requires railroads to maintain the design documents of each bridge and to document all repairs, modifications, and inspections of each bridge subject to FRA review. Finally, the Final Rule allows FRA to levy fines of up to \$100,000.

“During the past five decades, not one fatality has been caused by the structural failure of a railroad bridge, and there have been just nine injuries since 1982,” said FRA Administrator Szabo. “Most of the older bridges in the U.S. were designed to carry loads much heavier than the trains of today, but we believe this Final Rule will institutionalize best engineering and inspection practices for all railroad bridges and give the FRA greater enforcement power in order to continue this record of excellence.”

The move to institutionalize engineering and inspection best practices took hold in the industry in 1995, but took a large step in January, 2009, when FRA published an amendment to its bridge policy – since adopted by the industry – to include the [*Essential Elements of Railroad Bridge Management Programs*](#). The *Essential Elements* are included in the Final Rule in accordance with the Rail Safety Improvement Act and provide railroad track owners with a uniform, comprehensive set of components for inclusion in their bridge management programs. With this information, a track owner may develop a single, comprehensive set of instructions, information and data as guidance for his or her employees who are responsible for the management, inspection, maintenance, and safety of railroad bridges.

The Final Rule is available at

<http://www.fra.dot.gov/downloads/safety/bridgefinalsafetyrule2010.pdf>

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