



Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes Division of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Freddie N. Simpson
President

Perry K. Geller, Sr.
Secretary-Treasurer

February 29, 2016

Docket Operations Facility
U. S. Coast Guard

Re: U. S. Coast Guard Interim Rule Docket No. USCG-2015-0814 Drawbridge Operation Regulation; Lake Pontchartrain, Slidell, LA

Comments of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes Division (BMWED)

BMWED is the recognized collective bargaining representative for railroad maintenance of way employees who inspect, install, construct, repair and maintain railroad tracks, railroad bridges, and operate railroad drawbridges on all Class I railroads in the United States. As such, BMWED, its membership, and all of Rail Labor have a vested interest in railroad safety, railroad bridge operations, and the safety of rail workers and the public at large. BMWED is filing these comments in response to the above-referenced Interim rule published in the Federal Register on December 29, 2015.

The U.S. Coast Guard, at the request of Norfolk Southern Railroad (NSRR), has created an interim rule that modified the method of operation for the NSRR Bascule Bridge across Lake Pontchartrain, mile 4.8 near Slidell, St. Tammany Parish, LA. This interim rule changes the current form of operation of the Lake Pontchartrain Bridge from being operated by a drawtender on the bridge to being remotely operated by a drawtender in Decatur, AL, which is over 300 miles from Lake Pontchartrain.

The public docket does not include a copy of the NSRR's written request to the USCG for modifying the method of operation of the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge; therefore, BMWED and the public at-large are at a distinct disadvantage in providing comments to the docket. Without being able to view the original request brought forth by NSRR, it is impossible to fully analyze the potential effect of this change to the operation of the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge and its impact on the safe and efficient passage of marine traffic and railroad operations. As such, BMWED opposes the U.S. Coast Guard interim rule.

BMWED believes this interim rule will increase delay and decrease the efficiency of maritime vessel passage through Lake Pontchartrain. Our understanding is that NSRR intends to operate three (3) drawbridges, including the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge, with one drawtender, remotely from Decatur, AL. Under NSRR operating and safety rules, the drawtender at Decatur, AL can only tend to one drawbridge at a time. When a call comes in to Decatur via radio or land line requesting operation of one of the other drawbridges while the drawtender is currently operating a drawbridge, that request will go unanswered and will be delayed until the drawtender fully completes the process of facilitating traffic, either marine or railroad, through the particular drawbridge he is currently operating. This will undoubtedly have a significant impact on mariners and maritime traffic at the remotely operated drawbridge in Lake Pontchartrain.

The interim rule does not sufficiently consider the impact of remote drawbridge operations on maritime traffic. In light of the complexity of remote bridge operations, the inability of a single drawtender to simultaneously monitor multiple requests for drawbridge positioning from railroad and marine traffic on three (3) drawbridges, and the fact the NSRR will prioritize railroad operations over marine traffic, marine traffic will be adversely impacted. The remote drawbridge operating system put in place by NSRR has yet to be proven effective in securely monitoring all aspects of maritime and rail traffic. Contrary to USCG statements, there is the potential for significant adverse impacts on marine vessel passage from remote control operations at Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge. For instance, should a remotely controlled drawbridge fail to respond, or if the remote drawtender is unable to ascertain the position of the drawbridge, marine traffic will be unable to pass until a qualified bridge repairman can be dispatched to the location to analyze the malfunction and effectuate repairs. Such problems are traditionally and routinely addressed by on-site drawtenders located on moveable bridges; however, removal of the drawtender will remove this efficiency. Additionally, mariners will likely experience changes in transit through the drawbridge site because their signal to open the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge will be competing with rail and vessel communications originating from at least two other drawbridge locations on the NSRR system.

The interim rule is devoid of any measures or protocols to abort drawbridge movement while in the process of either raising or lowering the drawbridge in the event there is detection from any one of the closed circuit systems used if a vessel or blockage through the passage way is detected. The interim rule is also devoid of any information on how marine traffic is to contact the remote drawtender if they are unable to make contact with the remote drawtender operator via radio channel 13 or telephone. In addition, the docket is devoid of any safety rationale concerning the removal of the

drawtender from the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge or how remote operation of the bridge will improve the efficiency of vessel passage or provide an equivalent level of safety for marine and rail operations.

BMWED research also reveals:

1. There will be a significant increase in radio chatter and phone calls coming into Decatur from NSRR radio frequencies, USCG radio frequencies, and well as from cell phone and land line telephone. When communications previously monitored by three (3) drawtenders is funneled to just the one (1) remaining drawtender in Decatur, AL, the potential for delay is magnified three-fold. The drawtender will be hard-pressed to monitor and decipher communications between the crews on the trains talking with each other, chatter on the maritime radio channels, and legitimate requests or emergency requests related to operation of any one of the three bridges under the drawtender's control.
2. There are approximately 15 +/- trains per day for which the drawtender has to supervise the raising and lowering of the drawbridge at Lake Pontchartrain. Of these, Amtrak is passing over the drawbridge twice daily. If there is need for maritime traffic through the drawbridge at Lake Pontchartrain, that need will be delayed due to these trains needing to cross the drawbridge. Of course, any increase in rail traffic volume over Lake Pontchartrain will result in further delay of maritime traffic.
3. According to NSRR policy, every time a train is signaled in on approach of the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge, the drawtender has to have the drawbridge lined and locked (lowered) into position for train movement a minimum of 10 minutes before a freight train passes over the drawbridge and a minimum of 15 minutes before any passenger train (Amtrak) passes over the drawbridge. If the attention of the drawtender is then diverted to another drawbridge under his control, the drawbridge at Lake Pontchartrain will remain in the closed position until the drawtender completes his tasks at the other drawbridge(s) under his control. In essence, marine traffic at the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge will be directly competing with marine and rail traffic at the other rail drawbridges being operated remotely by the one drawtender stationed in Decatur AL.
4. There are reportedly nine (9) cameras installed on the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge and the drawtender uses one (1) screen to view all nine (9) cameras at the same time in Decatur, AL. The images from these nine (9) cameras are

reportedly of insufficient size and quality to always provide the drawtender with sufficient detail in order to ascertain when marine traffic is safely clear of the drawbridge. Under such a scenario, the drawtender will be forced to halt operation of the drawbridge for safety reasons. Additionally, should 2 or more cameras malfunction, or if inclement weather occurs, the interim rule requires the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge to be operated by a drawtender located onsite at the bridge. Under either scenario, marine vessels will experience significant delays due to the time it will take to dispatch a drawtender to the drawbridge location.

5. On a “manned” bridge, the drawtender routinely performs lubrication, inspection, and minor maintenance and repair on the drawbridge in order to assure the drawbridge will operate as intended. Without a drawtender present on the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge, these routine day-to-day inspections and maintenance procedures will not occur, thereby increasing the potential for mechanical failure. When mechanical failure does occur on the unmanned Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge, an NSRR employee will have to be dispatched from a distant location to troubleshoot the problem. Dispatching a qualified bridge employee to Lake Pontchartrain may take several hours due to the fact that the closest qualified NSRR employee is located approximately 100 miles away. Once a qualified employee reaches the drawbridge, it may take several additional hours or even days to troubleshoot the problem, make repairs and test the drawbridge. If the drawbridge fails in the closed position, the waterway would be inaccessible for marine traffic, including emergency rescue vessels, United States Coast Guard vessels, local marine patrol vessels, commercial vessels and pleasure craft.

BMWED recognizes the need for safe and reliable maritime traffic through the passage of the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge. We want to help ensure the continuation of efficient maritime and rail traffic. With the removal of the drawtender from the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge, BMWED believes both rail and marine traffic will experience decreased throughput and increased delays. Remote control drawbridge operations cannot provide the same level of safety and efficiency as that provided through manned operations. No amount of cameras, sensors and or monitors can provide the same level of safety pre-checks, maintenance, visual monitoring, and communications efficiency as provided by an actual on-site drawtender.

Finally, NSRR’s claim of increased efficiency of railroad operation should raise a caution flag for the USCG. Clearly, NSRR’s claim of “efficiency” will be derived solely

through the reduction in labor costs to NSRR by converting manned operations at the Lake Pontchartrain drawbridge to remote operations from Decatur, AL. There are no “efficiencies” that will accrue to maritime operations and there is no public benefit in the interim rule. The only “efficiencies” will be slight reduction in labor costs for NSRR, and those will come exclusively at the expense of mariners and drawtenders.

Based upon the reasons stated above, and in the interest of maritime operations, the interest in public and railroad safety, we respectfully request the United States Coast Guard to rescind the interim rule in its entirety.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fredrick N. Jensen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial 'F'.

President