

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:  
APPROPRIATIONS  
COMMERCE  
HEALTH, EDUCATION,  
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

May 15, 2024

Mr. Jim Vena  
Chief Executive Officer  
Union Pacific Railroad  
1400 Douglas Street  
Omaha, NE 68179

Dear Mr. Vena:

With over 3,300 miles of active train tracks across Wisconsin and 140,000 miles nationwide, reliable rail service is essential for businesses large and small to move their goods to market. Farmers, manufacturers, paper mills, energy producers and many other industries are dependent on efficient and cost-effective freight rail. In recent years, service levels from Class I railroads experienced severe disruptions and certain metrics, particularly staffing, have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. Unfortunately, recent trends suggest much of the industry is reversing any progress that was made, leaving the system brittle and vulnerable to future service problems and safety incidents moving forward. I ask that you provide an update on your long-term staffing strategies to avoid the challenges of recent years.

Following the Surface Transportation Board (STB)'s Hearing on Urgent Issues in Freight Rail Service in April 2022, Class I railroads were required to submit documentation on rail service and employment for six months, as well as service recovery plans from the four largest railroads.<sup>1</sup> In January 2024, the STB extended the reporting requirements for employment data for those four railroads, citing significantly lower employment levels compared to pre-pandemic levels. As the STB noted in its decision, staffing shortages were often cited as a major reason for the exceptionally poor service levels in the April 2022 hearing. I am concerned that recent actions taken by Class I railroads could lead to future disruptions.

Following a decision by Union Pacific (UP) to furlough hundreds of employees, including maintenance of equipment workers, Federal Railroad Administrator Amit Bose sent a letter to the railroad raising "significant concerns" about the impact of the furloughs on safety operations.<sup>2</sup> This unfortunately is consistent with the long-term staffing trends at the railroad. UP had 37,501 employees in 2016 compared to 26,713 in 2022 – a 28.76% decrease. This is compared with only a 3% decrease in carloads and 1% decrease in tons of freight from the same time window. Even relative to other Class I railroads, then-STB Chairman Marty Oberman recently described UP as a "standout failure" and "on a furlough odyssey" in a recent speech.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> BNSF Railway Company (BNSF), CSX Transportation, Inc. (CSX), Norfolk Southern Railway Company (NS), and Union Pacific Railroad Company (UP)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.stb.gov/wp-content/uploads/FRA-Administrator-Bose-Letter-to-Mr.-Jim-Vena-2.29.24.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.stb.gov/wp-content/uploads/02-29-24\\_Oberman\\_SEARS-speech.pdf](https://www.stb.gov/wp-content/uploads/02-29-24_Oberman_SEARS-speech.pdf)

Moreover, UP sought to shield required employment data from the STB from public by asking the STB to consider the data confidential. Wisely, the STB denied that motion.<sup>4</sup>

I continue to hear from Wisconsin businesses concerned about service levels from Class I railroads returning to the unacceptable levels documented in the STB's hearing in 2022. Given the impacts staffing shortages had in contributing to the service meltdown at that time, it is evident that a shrinking workforce will only compound service issues in the future, as well as increase the risk of derailments and accidents.

I ask that you provide Union Pacific's outlook for operations and staffing for the remainder of this year, including whether the railroad plans on conducting any furloughs. In your response, please address the following issues:

- Service: Please discuss whether your current train and engine employee headcount is adequate to meet current and projected service demand.
- Safety: Please discuss whether UP's current and projected staffing levels are sufficient to meet the highest level of safety for employees and communities where your railroads operate, and what your specific hiring goals are for this year for each of the six employment categories reported to the STB.
- Capacity constraints: Please identify any specific locations on your network currently experiencing sustained congestion due in whole or in part to staff limitations and capacity constraints, and what actions are being taken to alleviate congestion, including re-routes and/or infrastructure enhancement.
- Number of train starts: Please provide the total number of trains operated on a monthly basis, as the FRA is currently proposing to require, to better understand the impact of changes in operations on safety and service.
- Communication: Please describe initiatives to proactively communicate with shippers regarding service issues, and potential alternative solutions that are available when normal service is disrupted.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tammy Baldwin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Tammy" and last name "Baldwin" clearly legible.

Tammy Baldwin  
United States Senator

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.stb.gov/news-communications/latest-news/pr-24-13/>