

Iowa's Railroads and You

Like most motorists, you want your trips to go as quickly and smoothly as possible. Things like having to wait at a railroad crossing while the train crosses, or having to slow for a rough railroad crossing may seem like an inconvenience. But, when you look at the overall picture, you will find there are many things that affect your trips: heavy traffic, including large trucks, on the interstates; congestion on urban freeways; a lot of pedestrian traffic at crosswalks; a bus stopped on the street while passengers are boarding or exiting; slow-moving farm equipment or bicyclists on a rural road; or any number of other disruptions. The reality is that Iowa's transportation system is extremely complex. Iowa has many diverse transportation users and all types of vehicles traveling at differing speeds over the same or intersecting routes.

Many Iowa industries depend on rail transportation to deliver raw goods for manufacturing and to ship finished products. Iowa's agricultural commodities, including value-added products like ethanol, are highly dependent on rail transportation. Without the economical bulk transport that rail provides, many of these industries would either cease to exist or their profitability would seriously decline.

Railroads make up only 3 percent of Iowa's complex 130,000-mile transportation system, yet rail carries an impressive 37 percent of the freight that moves into or out of Iowa – in 2002 that was over 84 million tons. That equates to more than 8,800 semitrailer loads per day, 365 days a year that are taken off Iowa's highways. This use of rail shipping decreases traffic congestion

on streets and highways, decreases air pollution, and helps our roadways last longer while supporting the growth of Iowa's agricultural and manufacturing industries.

The top priority for all modes of transportation is safety. Therefore, you need to balance your desire for a quick, smooth trip with all the factors that go into creating a safe traveling environment for everyone.

So how can you safely and effectively interact with Iowa's railroads? The following questions and answers provide you with information on some of the issues related to Iowa's railroads and how you can address any concerns you may have.

How many highway/railroad crossing accidents occur in Iowa each year?

In 2003 there were 58 accidents in Iowa. Fortunately, safety at rail crossings is improving. During the last 30 years, the number of accidents has fallen dramatically despite increased highway and railroad traffic.

How can I not be one of those statistics?

Be aware and attentive when approaching a railroad crossing. If the crossing is equipped with lights and signals, obey the warnings. It is illegal, as well as dangerous, to drive around lowered gates. If no lights and signals are present, it is your responsibility to watch for and yield to any approaching train traffic. Don't even think about "beating" a train or taking any risks. A freight train striking a standard motor vehicle is roughly equivalent to a car hitting an empty pop can – about a 4,000-to-1 weight ratio. When a car and a train collide it is always the car, and far too often the occupants, who lose.

Can I go hunting or take a hike on the railroad right-of-way?

No, the railroad right-of-way (the tracks and the area adjacent to the tracks) is private property and you will be considered a trespasser and subject to state laws governing trespassing. More importantly, you are putting yourself in danger when you are on railroad property. It is both unsafe and illegal to hunt or hike along the tracks, take the shortcut through the right-of-way, or fish off the railroad bridge. Children in particular are drawn to the open area of the right of way and should be warned that this is a very dangerous place to be.

How can I identify a railroad crossing?



Each railroad crossing should have an identification tag with the name of the railroad company and a unique identifying AAR-DOT number. The embossed metal tag, similar in appearance to a license plate, is 4 inches by 9 inches,

and is generally located on the post supporting the signal or the crossbuck sign. If you cannot find the identification number, then the street name and general location may be sufficient for identification.

How can I report a railroad/highway signal that is not working?



At many crossings, a toll-free number is listed on the signal house or crossbuck near the crossing, along with the rail crossing identification number. Contact the railroad at the listed number and provide the crossing identification number or crossing location and the nature of the problem. If you are unable to identify the railroad to contact, notify your local law enforcement agency of the problem.

How long can a train block a rail/highway crossing?

Iowa Code Section 327G.32 states that a railroad corporation or its employees shall not operate a train in such a manner as to prevent vehicular use of a highway, street or alley for more than 10 minutes except in any of the following circumstances:

- when necessary to comply with signals affecting the safety of the movement of the trains;
- when necessary to avoid striking an object or person on the track;
- when the train is disabled; or
- when necessary to comply with governmental safety regulations, including but not limited to speed ordinances and speed regulations.

City and county law enforcement officers can issue tickets to railroads that violate this code section.

Can a city require a railroad to operate at a specific speed?

No. Federal regulations preempt any local speed restrictions on trains. (Section 20106 of Title 49, United States Code.)

Can a city require a railroad to not blow the train whistle?

Currently, state law requires the sounding of the locomotive's horn at least 1,000 feet before a road crossing is reached. Railroad companies require their employees to blow their horns at crossings.

The FRA has issued a proposed rule (scheduled to go into effect Dec. 18, 2004) that will require all locomotives to blow their horns. This federal rule will preempt any local or state statutes. Under the rule, local jurisdictions meeting certain safety requirements can apply for a "quiet zone" where train horns are not routinely sounded. The Federal Railroad Administration will be the final authority on the safety improvements and other measures that must be in place to qualify for a quiet zone. For further information refer to the Federal Railroad Administration's web site at www.fra.gov or contact the regional FRA office at 816-407-9651.

Does the Iowa DOT have jurisdiction over every crossing in the state?

No, the DOT only has jurisdiction over highway railroad crossings on the state highway system. The local highway authority (city or county) has jurisdiction over their respective crossings.

Contact the Office of Rail Transportation with crossing concerns on the state highway system (highways designated as Iowa or U.S. highways) at 515-239-1140.

How can I get flashing lights at a crossing that has only a crossbuck?

Contact the highway authority responsible for the particular roadway or the railroad to express your concern. The Iowa DOT administers federal crossing safety funds which assist in installing active warning devices such as signals. The local highway authority (city or county) or railroad must apply for those funds.

How do I get a rough rail crossing fixed?



Contact the highway authority (city or county) responsible for the particular roadway and ask them to work with the railroad to seek repairs to the crossing. Under Iowa Code, the railroads have the legal responsibility for "safe and sufficient" crossings. The Iowa DOT administers crossing surface repair funds that assist in payment for reconstruction of public grade crossings. The local highway authority (city or county) or railroad must apply for those funds. Applications are processed in the order in which they are received. However, because funding is limited, a project may not receive funding for several years.

Private roadway/railroad crossings are not eligible for this funding program. Crossings on the primary road system (roadways designated as Iowa or U.S. highways) are handled between the Iowa DOT and the operating railroad company.

I can't figure out who to contact about a railroad or rail/highway crossing issue I am concerned about. How can I get help?

The Iowa DOT's Office of Rail Transportation can assist you in locating the correct contact person at the operating railroad or the appropriate highway jurisdiction.

How can I get more information about Iowa's railroads?

For more detailed and additional information about rail transportation in Iowa refer to the Iowa DOT's Office of Rail Transportation Web site at www.iowarail.com, or call 515-239-1140.

Iowa Department of Transportation
Office of Rail Transportation
800 Lincoln Way
Ames, IA 50010
515-239-1140
www.iowarail.com



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