Another set of eyes in the cab

Proposed FRA rule draws cheers and jeers from railroads, politicians, and unions

"Big Brother" may soon watch railroaders across the country do their work. Following a series of deadly derailments, railroads and regulators across North America are looking at installing inward-facing camera to keep an eye on train crews while they work. While the practice is winning cheers from railroad companies and politicians, who say it will keep employees accountable, it's getting jeers from railroaders and their unions, which believe that locomotive cabs are a private work place environment and the cameras will be used to simply idle out punishment.

In March, New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority announced its two committer operations, Metro-North Railroad and the Long Island Rail Road, would join a growing list of railroads that are installing inward-facing cab cameras this year. The announcement came nearly four months after a deadly derailment took place in New York City on Metro-North, where authorities say the engineer fell asleep. Earlier in the year, on Jan. 13, Senators Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., announced that the Federal Railroad Administration would propose a new rule requiring in-cab cameras sometime in 2014.

According to FRA Associate Administrator Kevin Thompson, the agency has been working on the in-cab camera proposal for six months and plans on initiating a rulemaking later this year through the Railroad Safety Advisory Committee, a council that includes railroads, unions, and other interested parties. Following input from the council, the FRA is expected to forth a proposed rule for public comment. It is still unclear when a final rule would be enacted.

"Installing safety cameras inside and outside locomotives is a simple, straightforward safety strategy that will help prevent future derailments and collisions," Blumenthal says. "Installing these cameras will also ensure that misconduct and misbehavior is recorded so those involved can be held accountable."

-- Connecticut Sen. Richard Blumenthal

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FRA has also taken other steps to improve safety. In 2013, Kansas City Southern and Union Pacific began installing cameras to watch train crews, while in early 2014, CSX Transportation installed two inward-facing cameras on E54444C No. 801.

Canadians National is working on a similar program in Canada called LVR, Locomotive Voice and Video Recorder. In late 2013, the railroad installed two additional, inward-facing cameras on SD60M 2 No. 8943 to start the program. The pilot program calls for the installation of cameras in 19 to 20 locomotives for testing in the Toronto-Montreal corridor, according to a document. Trains obtained.

Railroad spokesman Mark Hallman says, "CN’s work is closing quickly with its unions on a pilot project that will involve a number of midline locomotives.

In a fact sheet issued to KCS employees in July 2013, the railroad explained how the new cameras would be used. The sheet states that there are two cameras inside the locomotive cab, one positioned over the engineer, with a view of the control panel, and another on or near the front of the cab that has a broad view of the interior space of the cab. The document says the video would be active whenever the engine is running and the recording cycle of the engine is general seven to 10 days. When data drive is full, the older video will be automatically recorded over, until it’s pulled for review.

"While KCS is looking at the freight industry effort, there are other railroads also installing these cameras," KCS spokeswoman Denise Carlson tells Trains. "If the FRA decides to mandate inward-facing cameras, ideally the mandate would be consistent with how the industry is using these cameras and not restrict the use of the cameras in any way that would impede efforts to improve safety."

But unions have been leery of in-cab cameras. Soon after KCS began installing cameras inside of its locomotives, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen and the United Transportation Union sued the railroad arguing that train crews had the right to privacy in the cab. KCS said that locomotive cabs are not private places but rather a shared space that is always subject to monitoring. The court ruled in the railroad's favor.

John Bentley, spokesperson for the BLET, says the union has been unable to review the new FRA proposal, and directs Trains to comments made by union National President Dennis Pierce following the Metro North derailment in December.

Bleem argues that in-cab recording devices would be a distraction to train crews and says, "cameras are essentially an accident investigation tool and not an accident prevention tool."

"If we were to learn from fatigue-related accidents in the railroad industry, we must look at the actual causes of fatigue and not just training a camera on a fatigued engineer who will sometimes be tired or from being tired, an assumption that bores on abstinence," Bentley writes.

UTU spokeswoman Amy Rayner denied multiple requests for comment for this story — just in case, a newspaper reporter from Missions and frequent Trains news contributor.