

For Immediate Release

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Montana Sees Steady Decline in Railroad Related Accidents

Helena, Mont. – Accidents and fatalities associated with railroads are on the decline in Montana state rail safety inspectors told the 5 member panel of the Montana Public Service Commission Tuesday.

According to data produced by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) railroad related accidents or incidents fell from 198 events in 2008 to 98 events in 2017, a 55 percent decline. During that same period the number of railroad employee on-duty injuries also dropped 63 percent from 100 injuries in 2008 to just 37 injuries in 2017.

“At a time when train derailments are making headlines across the country on a regular basis, it’s encouraging to see the PSC’s efforts to promote a strong culture of railroad safety taking hold,” said Commissioner Tony O’Donnell, R-Billings. “While these numbers are a dramatic improvement over previous years, there’s more work to be done to ensure the integrity of the rail system in Montana.”

Railroad related accidents and incidents are falling at a much faster rate in Montana than most other states in the Pacific Northwest. Out of eight states in the region only Alaska and Wyoming have experienced sharper declines in the number of events over the last decade.

PSC Railroad Inspector Dave Jackson attributes Montana’s strong performance to an improvement in rail safety education, as well as stronger relationships between regulators and stakeholders.

“Our partnerships with industry members and organizations like Operation Lifesaver have played a major role in driving down rail accidents and employee injuries,” he said. Everyone has a role to play in rail safety from the mechanic changing out a defective wheel on a locomotive to the school bus driver who drives through a crossing on their daily route.”

The PSC is a partner in the FRA’s state rail safety program. The agency employs two certified inspectors who are responsible for enforcing state and federal regulations through boots on the ground inspections. In 2017 the program completed 360 inspections and identified 1,424 defects, resulting in the issuance of 14 total violations.

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Operation Lifesaver: Operation Lifesaver is a nonprofit, public safety education and awareness organization dedicated to reducing collisions, fatalities, and injuries at highway rail crossings, and trespassing on or near railroad tracks. Operation Lifesaver offers free rail safety education instruction to school groups, professional drivers, and first responders.

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Made up of five elected commissioners, the PSC works to ensure that Montanans receive safe and reliable service from regulated public utilities while paying reasonable rates. Utilities regulated by the PSC generally include private investor-owned natural gas, electric, telephone, water, and sewer companies. In addition, the PSC regulates certain motor carriers, and oversees natural gas pipeline safety and intrastate railroad safety.