

117TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 1500

To permit Amtrak to bring civil actions in Federal district court to enforce the right set forth in section 24308(c) of title 49, United States Code, which gives intercity and commuter rail passenger transportation preference over freight transportation in using a rail line, junction, or crossing.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

APRIL 29, 2021

Mr. DURBIN (for himself and Mr. BLUMENTHAL) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

A BILL

To permit Amtrak to bring civil actions in Federal district court to enforce the right set forth in section 24308(c) of title 49, United States Code, which gives intercity and commuter rail passenger transportation preference over freight transportation in using a rail line, junction, or crossing.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Rail Passenger Fair-
5 ness Act”.

1 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

2 (1) Congress created Amtrak under the Rail
3 Passenger Service Act of 1970 (Public Law 91–
4 158).

5 (2) Amtrak began serving customers on May 1,
6 1971, taking over the operation of most intercity
7 passenger trains that private, freight railroads were
8 previously required to operate. In exchange for as-
9 suming these passenger rail operations, Amtrak was
10 given access to the national rail network.

11 (3) In return for relief from the obligation to
12 provide intercity passenger service, railroads over
13 which Amtrak operated (referred to in this section
14 as “host railroads”) were expected to give Amtrak
15 passenger trains preference over freight trains when
16 using the national rail network.

17 (4) In 1973, Congress passed the Amtrak Im-
18 provement Act of 1973 (Public Law 93–146), which
19 gives intercity and commuter rail passenger trans-
20 portation preference over freight transportation in
21 using a rail line, junction, or crossing. This right,
22 which is now codified as section 24308(c) of title 49,
23 United States Code, states, “Except in an emer-
24 gency, intercity and commuter rail passenger trans-
25 portation provided by or for Amtrak has preference
26 over freight transportation in using a rail line, junc-

1 tion, or crossing unless the Board orders otherwise
2 under this subsection. A rail carrier affected by this
3 subsection may apply to the Board for relief. If the
4 Board, after an opportunity for a hearing under sec-
5 tion 553 of title 5, decides that preference for inter-
6 city and commuter rail passenger transportation ma-
7 terially will lessen the quality of freight transpor-
8 tation provided to shippers, the Board shall establish
9 the rights of the carrier and Amtrak on reasonable
10 terms.”.

11 (5) Many host railroads have ignored the law
12 referred to in paragraph (4) by refusing to give pas-
13 senger rail the priority to which it is statutorily enti-
14 tled and giving freight transportation the higher pri-
15 ority. As a result, Amtrak’s on time performance on
16 most host railroads is poor, has declined between
17 2014 through 2019, and continues to decline.

18 (6) According to Amtrak, 6,500,000 customers
19 on State-supported and long-distance trains arrived
20 at their destination late during fiscal year 2019.
21 Nearly 70 percent of these delays were caused by
22 host railroads, amounting to a total of 3,200,000
23 minutes. The largest cause of these delays was
24 freight train interference, which accounted for more
25 than 1,000,000 minutes of delay for Amtrak pas-

1 sengers, or approximately 2 years, because host rail-
2 roads chose to give freight trains priority.

3 (7) Poor on-time performance wastes taxpayer
4 dollars. According to a 2019 report by Amtrak's Of-
5 fice of Inspector General, a 5 percent improvement
6 of on-time performance on all Amtrak routes would
7 result in \$12,100,000 in cost savings to Amtrak in
8 the first year. If on-time performance on long-dis-
9 tance routes reached 75 percent for a year, Amtrak
10 would realize an estimated \$41,900,000 in operating
11 cost savings, with a one-time savings of
12 \$336,000,000 due to a reduction in equipment re-
13 placement needs.

14 (8) Historical data suggests that on-time per-
15 formance on host railroads is driven by the existence
16 of an effective means to enforce Amtrak's preference
17 rights:

18 (A) Two months after the date of the en-
19 actment of the Passenger Rail Investment and
20 Improvement Act of 2008 (division B of Public
21 Law 110-432), which included provisions for
22 the enforcement of these preference rights, was
23 enacted, the on-time performance of long-dis-
24 tance trains improved from 56 percent to 77

1 percent and Class I freight train interference
2 delays across all routes declined by 40 percent.

3 (B) One year after such date of enactment,
4 freight train interference delays had declined by
5 54 percent and the on-time performance of
6 long-distance trains reached 85 percent.

7 (C) In 2014, after some of the provisions
8 in the Passenger Rail Investment and Improve-
9 ment Act of 2008 related to enforcement of
10 preference were ruled unconstitutional by a
11 D.C. Circuit Court, long-distance train on-time
12 performance declined from 72 percent to 50
13 percent, and freight train interference delays in-
14 creased 59 percent.

15 (D) The last time long-distance trains
16 achieved an on-time rate of more than 80 per-
17 cent in a given month was February 2012.

18 (9) As a result of violations of Amtrak's right
19 to preference, Amtrak has been consistently unable
20 on host railroad networks to meet its congressionally
21 mandated mission and goals, which are codified in
22 section 24101 of title 49, United States Code (relat-
23 ing to providing on-time and trip-time competitive
24 service to its passengers).

1 (10) Amtrak does not have an effective mecha-
 2 nism to enforce its statutory preference right in
 3 order to fulfill its mission and goals. Only the Attor-
 4 ney General can bring a civil action for equitable re-
 5 lief in a district court of the United States to en-
 6 force Amtrak's preference rights.

7 (11) In Amtrak's entire history, the only en-
 8 forcement action initiated by the Attorney General
 9 was against the Southern Pacific Transportation
 10 Company in 1979.

11 (12) Congress supports continued authority for
 12 the Attorney General to initiate an action, but Am-
 13 trak should also be entitled to bring a civil action be-
 14 fore a Federal district court to enforce its statutory
 15 preference rights.

16 **SEC. 3. AUTHORIZE AMTRAK TO BRING A CIVIL ACTION TO**
 17 **ENFORCE ITS PREFERENCE RIGHTS.**

18 (a) IN GENERAL.—Section 24308(c) of title 49,
 19 United States Code, is amended, by adding at the end the
 20 following: “Notwithstanding sections 24103(a) and
 21 24308(f), Amtrak shall have the right to bring an action
 22 for equitable or other relief in the United States District
 23 Court for the District of Columbia to enforce the pref-
 24 erence rights granted under this subsection.”.

1 (b) CONFORMING AMENDMENT.—Section 24103 of
2 title 49, United States Code, is amended by inserting “and
3 section 24308(c)” before “, only the Attorney General”.

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