

Why GAO Did This Study

The Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008 mandated certain railroads implement PTC by December 31, 2015. In prior work, GAO found that most railroads reported that they will miss this deadline due to numerous interrelated challenges caused by the breadth and complexity of PTC.

GAO was asked to review the progress of PTC implementation since GAO's last PTC report in 2013. The current report examines (1) progress railroads have made in implementation and in addressing challenges, and (2) how FRA has overseen implementation.

GAO reviewed relevant documentation, such as laws and regulations and PTC plans created by railroads. GAO used a structured interview guide to interview 29 railroads identified by FRA or others as implementing PTC—including the four largest freight railroads, 13 commuter railroads, and 12 smaller freight railroads—regarding their progress and challenges. GAO selected these railroads based on various factors, including size and geographic location and whether they are required to implement PTC. GAO also interviewed FRA officials and industry associations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FRA develop a plan that outlines how the agency will hold railroads accountable for making continued progress toward the full implementation of PTC by, among other things, collecting any additional information needed to track progress of individual railroads. DOT agreed with the recommendation.

View [GAO-15-739](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

POSITIVE TRAIN CONTROL

Additional Oversight Needed As Most Railroads Do Not Expect to Meet 2015 Implementation Deadline

What GAO Found

Most railroads in GAO's review (20 of 29) estimate that they will implement positive train control (PTC)—a communications-based system designed to prevent certain types of train accidents—1 to 5 years after the statutory deadline of December 31, 2015 (3 did not have an estimated completion date). Of the remaining 6 railroads, one was excepted from installing PTC based on limited speeds on its track, and 4 commuter railroads and 1 small freight railroad estimate they will have PTC operational on their own tracks by the deadline. However, the ability of these 5 railroads to fully operate with PTC may be affected because other railroads that operate equipment on their tracks—known as tenants—or that own tracks that they operate on—known as hosts—may not be equipped with PTC. In addition, the ability of railroads to meet the deadline may be affected by the interoperability of their PTC system with those of other railroads and whether they can obtain final system approval from the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). Railroads GAO interviewed said they continue to face implementation challenges. For example, these railroads told GAO:

- Development of a major component of the Interoperable Electronic Train Management System, being installed by the largest railroads, continues to be delayed. Smaller railroads have been challenged in obtaining PTC support and components due to the limited number of vendors.
- Some host railroads have many tenant railroads and the host railroad must work with tenants to determine if the tenants should equip with PTC. One large freight railroad said it must make this determination for 260 tenants. Railroads must ensure their systems are interoperable, a task that can be challenging when multiple railroads are involved.

FRA has overseen railroads' PTC implementation through a variety of methods, but these efforts were not sufficient to monitor and report on the progress of individual railroads. For example, while FRA reviewed railroads' annual reports, FRA officials said that the information in these reports was not sufficient to monitor progress and identify implementation challenges because the reports did not consistently include details such as the challenges railroads were encountering as they implemented PTC. Federal government standards for internal controls state that agencies should ensure adequate means to obtain information and communicate with stakeholders, and that the information should be relevant, reliable, and timely. In May 2015, FRA established an internal PTC task force that plans to collect new data on individual railroads' progress. However, the task force is newly formed, and FRA is still in the process of determining the strategies and plans it will use to oversee PTC implementation. GAO has previously reported on the benefits of developing comprehensive plans, including establishing deadlines for achieving objectives. As it is clear most railroads do not expect to meet the December 31, 2015, deadline, developing a plan for oversight that includes how FRA will monitor railroads' progress could help FRA ensure railroads comply with their implementation plans and help address uncertainties such as interoperability, regardless of whether the deadline is extended.