

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-274](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

About 93 trains a day on average crossed into the continental United States from Canada and Mexico in 2014, according to DOT's Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS). Trains enter and leave the United States through 30 POEs—23 on the northern border and 7 on the southern border. Although international freight rail plays an important role in U.S. economic and trade interests, the movement of rail through U.S. communities at the border can result in blocked highway-rail grade crossings and vehicle traffic congestion. House Report 113-464 accompanying the Departments of Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Act included a provision for GAO to review the impact of international rail crossings on U.S. border communities.

This report (1) describes the factors that affect the movement of freight rail and the actions taken by federal agencies and others to expedite freight rail in selected POEs and (2) examines what is known about the impacts of freight rail operations on highway-rail grade crossings in POE communities. GAO visited four POE communities that were selected in part based on BTS's 2010–2014 data on average incoming train volume. In each POE, GAO interviewed officials from local and state governments, the railroad, CBP, and FRA. GAO also interviewed officials from DOT, CBP, the Border Trade Alliance, and the Association of American Railroads.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations in this report. DOT and CBP provided technical comments, which were incorporated.

View [GAO-16-274](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov

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U.S. BORDER COMMUNITIES

Ongoing DOT Efforts Could Help Address Impacts of International Freight Rail

What GAO Found

Factors such as inspections and crew changes affect freight rail movements in the four U.S. border port of entry (POE) communities GAO visited, which can result in blocked highway-rail grade crossings. Federal agencies and others have taken actions to expedite rail in these communities. As part of its mission to safeguard the border, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) scans inbound rail cars on both borders using the Rail Vehicle and Cargo Inspection System (R-VACIS), a machine used to detect anomalies and threats to national security. CBP generally requires trains to slow in order to pass through R-VACIS. To expedite freight rail and reduce blocked highway-rail grade crossings, CBP, for example, adjusted its procedures to allow certain trains to go through R-VACIS faster at two POEs on the northern border. Similarly, crew changes can result in stopped trains and blocked U.S. highway-rail grade crossings, particularly on the southern border. U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) officials stated that crew changes are required due to differences in safety regulations between the U.S. Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) and Mexico. Railroads have expressed interest in eliminating such crew changes but face challenges such as FRA and labor union safety concerns.

The impacts of international freight rail on highway-rail grade crossings in communities GAO visited vary based on border-specific factors and community characteristics, and DOT improvement efforts including the issuance of a final rule could provide better data for help determining these impacts in the future. Inspections and crew changes, as well as rail traffic levels, can vary across POEs. For example, some factors play a role at southern, but not northern POEs. In addition, freight rail impacts vary based on community characteristics such as the availability of overpasses. State and local officials face data limitations, which reduce their ability to quantify rail-related community impacts. For example, local officials often do not have data on the number and length of trains passing through the community. In September 2014, GAO recommended that DOT improve the availability of national data to assess freight impacts on traffic congestion. DOT agreed and has actions under way. In January 2015, the FRA issued a final rule requiring railroads to update FRA's highway-rail crossing inventory once every 3 years. Prior to this rule, railroads voluntarily submitted data that were not always updated. DOT data efforts could better equip state and local governments to define the extent of blocked highway-rail grade crossings in communities nationwide, including at rail border communities.

A Highway-Rail Grade Crossing in Laredo, Texas



Source: GAO. | GAO-16-274