

Subject: [BLE NewsFlash] FRA issues switching safety Q&As

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CLEVELAND, February 1 -- The Federal Railroad Administration has issued more switching safety recommendations in the wake of January 6's fatal accident in Graniteville, S.C.

Late last week, the FRA issued a series of Questions and Answers to help clarify aspects of its Safety Advisory 2005-01, issued on January 11.

The FRA issued the initial Safety Advisory following the fatal accident in Graniteville, S.C., which resulted in the release of deadly chlorine gas and the loss of 10 lives, including that of BLET Member Christopher Seeling.

S.A. 2005-01 basically asks companies to make sure their rules require train crews who handle hand-operated switches to advise a dispatcher after they restore track switches to their normal position.

In its investigation of Norfolk Southern's January 6 accident in Graniteville, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) indicated that a misaligned manual switch may have been one of the factors that resulted in a freight train being diverted from a main track onto a siding and into the path of parked locomotives. The accident happened in dark territory.

The FRA's Operating Practices Division issued Safety Advisory 2005-01 five days after the accident. A copy is available on the BLET website at: <http://www.blet.org/pr/pdf/SwitchSafetyAdvisory011005.pdf>

The follow-up Questions and Answers are as follows:

Q1. Will a timetable special instruction or general order meet the recommendation of an "operating rule" with regard to the implementation of the SA?

A1. Yes.

Q2. Will railroads that currently have a procedure to allow crews to leave main track switches in reverse position, protected by the train dispatcher through a track warrant or similar means, when releasing their limits, still be permitted to do this, i.e., leave the main track switch in reverse position?

A2. Yes. The switch left in the reverse position is protected by the train dispatcher, and even though the track warrant will so state, FRA still recommends that the switch position (reverse) be stated anyway when the crew releases the limits of their main track authority. Naturally, the crew will be referring to their switch position awareness form when they do this.

Q3. Are railroads who permit main track switches to be left in reverse position and protected by track warrant, or similar means, required to have hard coded safety-edit procedures built in to their dispatching systems?

A3. No, although FRA believes it serves as an excellent safeguard, since it prompts the dispatcher to verify the switch position with a member of the crew before the computer will allow the dispatcher to release the limits of a track warrant.

Q4. Where railroads, such as the LIRR, use distant switch indicators to protect facing point switches in dark territory, would this exempt them from the recommendations the SA? Would the same apply to railroads, such as BNSF, in dark territory, that use signals to govern movements over automatic switches? Ditto for self-restoring power-operated switches on CSX?

A4. Yes, in all three situations.

Q5. Do the provisions of the SA apply to movements wholly within territory where operating rules require movement at restricted speed, or the functional equivalent, such as yard limits or restricted limits?

A5. No, since the strict requirements of these rules impose that train and engine movements proceed prepared to stop within one-half the range of vision, short of an improperly lined switch.

Q6. If a train happens to be within yard limits at the time it reports clear of the limits of its track warrant, do the recommendations contained in the SA apply?

A6. No, since no specific switch is involved at the time a crew reports clear of its limits.

However, FRA suggests that the crew report to the dispatcher that, according to the information recorded on their switch position awareness form, that "all main track switches that we operated within the limits of our main track authority are lined and locked in their proper position."

Q7. If a main track switch is handled multiple times, does each time have to be recorded on the switch position awareness form?

A7. No. Just the first time the switch was reversed, and the last time it was normalled before leaving the area.

Q8. Does the employee actually operating the switch have to be the same one reporting a train clear of the limits, such as when the crew of one train operates the switch for another train, such as at a meeting point?

A8. No. The crew actually operating the switch would record it on their switch position awareness form. The crew that is actually reporting clear of the limits of their main track authority would state, at the time of reporting clear, after verifying with the crew that actually operated the switch, that the switch was restored to normal by the crew of the other train.

Q9. How is the switch position awareness form to be completed when one crew is authorized by track warrant to leave a main track switch in reverse position, and another crew comes along and is instructed on its track warrant to "normal" the switch?

A9. The switch position awareness form should note this. For example, the crew reversing the switch would show on their form the time the switch was reversed, but in the "time switch lined normal" column, would record that they were authorized by track warrant to leave the switch in reverse. Likewise, the crew that "normalled" the switch would show in the "time switch lined reverse" column, that the switch was authorized to be left reverse by track warrant, and then record the time they "normalled" the switch on their form.

Q10. If, during a torrential rainstorm, the conductor is 50 cars back and reverses the switch, notifies the engineer by radio, and then some 20 minutes later, after the switching moves are complete, "normal" the switch, also notifying the engineer by radio, then walks back up to the engine, is it OK for the engineer to have already filled in his/her initials first, at the actual times the switches were operated, and for the conductor to then record his initials after getting back up on the engine?

A10. FRA is not concerned with who records their initials first on the switch position awareness form. It is merely recommended that all employees record this information on the form as soon as possible and conduct a job briefing.

Q11. Is there a retention period for the switch position awareness form?

A11. No, but FRA recommends that the crew either retain them for a reasonable time, such as for five days or five trips, or turn them in to a designated officer at a terminal for review.

Q12. Are spring switches in dark territory covered by the SA?

A12. No, unless operated by hand by a member of the crew.

Q13. Concerning recording the time and crew's initials on the switch position awareness form whenever a main track switch is reversed, would it be acceptable to just record the name and location of the switch on the form, which would signify that the switch was handled, and then record the time and crew's initials when the switch was finally restored to normal (or authorized to be left in reverse position, as provided in the operating rules)?

A13. Yes. Although the Safety Advisory recommends the time and crew's initials whenever a main track switch is reversed, the absolute safety-critical information is the switch position at the time the crew leaves the immediate vicinity of that switch, and that is the more crucial item that should be recorded on the form.