

STATE UTILITY CONFERENCE
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RAILROAD HIGHWAY CROSSING PROTECTION

The subject of Highway Crossing Protection dates back to the early days of railroading, when horse drawn vehicles were used exclusively - there was very little noise and the speed of the vehicles was slow; therefore the driver had no difficulty in hearing the whistle and bell of an approaching train and he could stop quickly.

When the automobile came into general use, it became apparent that more adequate highway crossing protection would have to be provided as vehicle noise, speed, braking distance and radius of travel became greater.

Many flashing lights and wigwag signals were installed by the Railroads at heavily travelled crossings, but the designs and methods of mounting varied greatly. Recognizing this situation, the American Railway Association (now the Association of American Railroads) appointed a committee to establish uniformity. Certain fundamental requirements were prescribed and have been developed into present day standards.

The Alaska Railroad installed the first automatic flashing light signals in 1953. We have 470 miles of main line track between Seward and Fairbanks with 110 primary, secondary and private crossings at grade. These crossings are protected by standard railroad crossbucks. Thirty four are protected by automatic flashing light signals and we have one crossing gate with flashing light signals. Seven additional automatic flashing light signals are scheduled to be installed this year.

The Interstate Commerce Commission Report No. 33440 of January, 1964 which was sustained by the Supreme Court in 1966 as a proper reflection of ICC authority, states that after an extensive investigation of highway - railroad crossing accidents, the principal cause of grade crossing accidents is failure of the motor vehicle operators to stop or exercise due care and caution or to observe and comply with existing safety laws and regulations.

In the past, it was the Railroad's responsibility for protection of the public. This responsibility has now shifted. It is now the highway not the railroad; the motor vehicle not the train which creates the hazard and must be primarily responsible for its removal.

The ICC Report further states that highway users are the principal recipients of the benefits flowing from rail highway grade separations and from special protection at rail highway grade crossings. For this reason, the cost of installing and maintaining such separations and protection devices is a public responsibility and should be financed with public funds the same as highway traffic devices.

Since 1966, the State of Alaska through the Federal Highway Program has financed the installation and maintenance of 20 automatic flashing light signals on The Alaska Railroad and will finance the seven that are to be installed this year.

Fatalities from rail - highway grade crossing accidents represent less than 3% of the total killed on U. S. Highways. In 1969 there were 3,774 crossing accidents involving pedestrians and vehicles with trains.

These accidents resulted in 1,490 deaths and 3,669 injuries. Although these figures are the lowest since 1966, through November of 1970 there were 1,284 killed and 2,973 injured at rail - highway grade crossings.

Here in Alaska in 1969, we had 12 accidents at rail - highway crossings resulting in four injuries and no fatalities . In 1970, we had 14 accidents resulting in two injuries and three fatalities.

Of the 1,490 deaths in the United States at rail - highway Crossings in 1969, 537 persons were killed at crossings having automatic protection devices or a watchman or trainman was .flagging the crossings. In other words, more than one third of the fatalities were at crossings with other than the passive railroad cross bucks.

Here again in Alaska the three fatalities were at a crossing protected by an automatic flashing light signal. The above figures indicate that in addition to additional or improved protections, or better yet separation at grade crossings, we need better enforcement of our laws and more emphasis placed on education of the hazards at grade crossings.

In closing, I would like to touch on a problem we have here in Alaska that is difficult if not impossible to understand. Time and time again our maintenance employees find crossing signals with lights broken by the public they are installed to protect. The lights are found broken by beer bottles or rocks or shot out by rifles , hand guns and even shotguns.

These crossing signals are not inexpensive to install or maintain.

They average about 2,000.00 each to install and \$580.00 each a year to maintain.

We have found the best deterrent to willful destruction has been to install posters at the signal locations offering a reward for information leading to the conviction of persons found destroying the signals or other property.

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The Alaska Railroad