Amtrak Host Railroad Report Card 2020

The results are in – which host railroads made the grade?

Host railroads are graded on the amount of delay caused to Amtrak passengers. Customers traveling over a host railroad receiving an "A" grade can generally count on being on time. The four-year GPA shows which railroads have delivered consistent service.

	Host Railroad	2020 Grade	4-year GPA
1	Canadian Pacific	A	4.0 (A)
2	BNSF	A	3.3 (B+)
3	Canadian National	B+	1.3 (D+)
4	CSX	B+	2.8 (B-)
5	Union Pacific	B-	2.7 (B-)
6	Norfolk Southern	C	0.5 (F)

End of year highlights

- ❑ **Host railroad performance generally improved from last year.** Delays began declining months *before* the effects of the pandemic were felt in the U.S.
- ❑ **Freight trains are still the #1 cause of delay to Amtrak passengers.** While the law has required railroads to provide preference to passengers over freight for nearly 50 years, freight trains caused 700,000 minutes of delay in 2020 alone – that's more than a year of passengers waiting for freight to go first!
- ❑ **The amount of freight rail volume does not affect Amtrak delays.** By the end of 2020, rail freight volume was *higher* than in 2019, while many Amtrak passengers still arrived on time. Data analysis finds there is no correlation between the level of freight rail volume and the amount of delay to Amtrak passengers.
- ❑ **New legislation helped motivate better performance, but more must be done.** Legislation introduced in Congress last year would have allowed Amtrak to enforce our existing right to preference over freight – we are not allowed to do that today – and must be reintroduced and signed into law so that most passengers arrive on time.

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Amtrak Route Grades 2020

Which routes made the grade?

Passing grade: 80% of customers arrive on time within 15 minutes of schedule

	Route	Class I Freight Host Railroads	Percentage of On-Time Customers	
State Supported Trains				
9 of 27 routes fail to achieve 80% standard	Keystone	*(other hosts)*	96%	PASS
	Hiawatha	CP	94%	
	New York – Albany	*(other hosts)*	94%	
	Vermonter	*(other hosts)*	94%	
	Springfield Shuttles	*(other hosts)*	93%	
	Carl Sandburg / Illinois Zephyr	BNSF	91%	
	Ethan Allen Express	CP	90%	
	Richmond / Newport News / Norfolk	CSX, NS	88%	
	Pacific Surfliner	BNSF, UP	88%	
	Roanoke	NS	88%	
	Capitol Corridor	UP	87%	
	Downeaster	*(other hosts)*	86%	
	Lincoln Service	CN, UP	85%	
	San Joaquins	BNSF, UP	83%	
	Piedmont	NS	83%	
	Pennsylvanian	NS	82%	
	Adirondack	CN, CP	80%	
	Carolinian	CSX, NS	80%	
	Maple Leaf	CSX	77%	FAIL
	Blue Water	NS, CN	77%	
	Pere Marquette	CSX, NS	76%	
	Missouri River Runner	UP	74%	
	Heartland Flyer	BNSF	73%	
	Illini / Saluki	CN	72%	
	New York – Niagara Falls	CSX	69%	
	Cascades	BNSF, UP	67%	
	Wolverine	NS, CN	56%	
Long Distance Trains				
14 of 15 routes fail to achieve 80% standard	City of New Orleans	CN	88%	PASS
	Palmetto	CSX	75%	FAIL
	Lake Shore Limited	CSX, NS	71%	
	Coast Starlight	BNSF, UP	70%	
	Auto Train	CSX	69%	
	Silver Meteor	CSX	67%	
	Empire Builder	BNSF, CP	66%	
	Cardinal	NS, CSX	65%	
	Southwest Chief	BNSF	64%	
	California Zephyr	BNSF, UP	60%	
	Silver Star	CSX, NS	56%	
	Crescent	NS	53%	
	Capitol Limited	NS, CSX	52%	
	Texas Eagle	BNSF, UP, CN	48%	
	Sunset Limited	BNSF, UP	33%	

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Why are Amtrak trains delayed by freight trains?

Frequently Asked Questions on Amtrak and Host Railroad Performance

1. What is a "host" railroad?

Most of Amtrak's network consists of tracks owned, maintained, and dispatched by highly profitable freight railroads, known as "host" railroads where Amtrak uses their tracks. Most of the trains on these rail lines are the freight railroads' own freight trains. Because the freight railroads make all dispatching decisions about which trains have priority, freight railroads have a tremendous amount of influence over Amtrak's operations on their lines. Every year, Amtrak pays host railroads millions of dollars for use of their tracks and other resources.

2. Why doesn't Amtrak own all of its rail lines?

Amtrak owns only 3% of the 21,400 route-miles traveled by Amtrak trains, primarily on the Northeast Corridor. The rest are mostly owned by freight railroads. Prior to Amtrak's creation in 1971, railroads transported both freight and passengers. However, because the railroads were losing money on their passenger trains, Congress created Amtrak to relieve the private railroads of their obligation to operate passenger trains while retaining the efficient and economical way to transport large numbers of people in areas across the country. In return for relieving freight railroads of this obligation, there were two very important conditions:

a. *Amtrak would retain access to the railroads' lines in order to operate passenger trains, and*
b. *Amtrak trains would receive preference over freight trains.*

3. Why are Amtrak trains delayed by freight trains?

Host railroads make all dispatching decisions regarding which trains are allowed to go first and which trains must wait. Federal law requires Amtrak passenger trains to receive preference over freight transportation, but the largest cause of delay to Amtrak trains on host railroads is "Freight Train Interference," typically caused by a freight railroad requiring an Amtrak passenger train to wait so that its freight trains can operate first.

Host railroads often delay Amtrak trains, carrying hundreds of passengers, in favor of their trains carrying coal, garbage, crude oil, empty freight cars, or any other freight that the host chooses to prioritize over Amtrak passengers. Sometimes a host railroad will make Amtrak passengers follow the same freight train – moving at a much slower speed than a passenger train – for 50 to 100 miles, or force Amtrak passengers to wait in a siding while a freight train that is too long to fit in any sidings on the rail line is prioritized first.

Freight trains caused 700,000 minutes of delay to Amtrak passengers in 2020 – that's equivalent to more than a year of passengers waiting for freight to go first.

4. Are freight railroads allowed to prioritize freight over people?

No! By federal law, with very few exceptions, Amtrak passenger trains must be given preference over freight trains on any rail line. Unfortunately, only the Department of Justice can enforce this law, and it has brought only one enforcement action against a freight company in Amtrak's history – and that was over 40 years ago! As a result, freight railroads suffer no significant consequences for prioritizing their freight over you, our passenger. An analogy to air travel puts this reality in perspective: what if air cargo carriers were responsible for air traffic control? Planeloads of travelers would be left circling above airports while cargo jets landed first unless there were effective regulatory mechanisms in place to protect passengers.

For more information about Amtrak and freight railroads, please read our white paper on the subject.

5. How many passengers should arrive on time?

The minimum standard set by federal rule is that 80% of customers should arrive at their destination within 15 minutes of the scheduled time. On many services, our expectations should be even higher. As delays rise, it becomes harder to achieve the 80% standard, which is why Amtrak is so focused on reducing the delays we can control, and why we call on host railroads – which are responsible for two-thirds of the delays experienced by passengers – to follow the law that requires these railroads to put people first.

6. Are there costs to all of these delays?

Freight train delays waste the valuable time of our passengers – 700,000 minutes in 2020, and even more when other delays caused by host railroads are included. In addition, there are real costs incurred by Amtrak, states, and the federal government. A recent study estimated that Amtrak could realize one-time savings of $336 million, and annual savings of $41.9 million, if Amtrak trains were able to operate reliably. This money could be invested in providing better Amtrak service across the country.

7. If a train is always late, then why not just change the schedule?

Amtrak schedules are negotiated with freight railroads and already include substantial amounts of padding, known as "recovery time," to allow trains to be on time even when there are delays. Amtrak has sometimes tried lengthening schedules, but this approach is usually ineffective at improving performance on freight railroads because some freight railroads use this additional time in the schedule to continue to prioritize their own trains, resulting in even more delays to Amtrak passengers. We have added hours to our schedules, only to see customers arrive even later than they did before. Longer schedules are less convenient for passengers and prevent Amtrak from fulfilling its mandate to offer service that is competitive with other modes of travel. They also increase Amtrak's crew and equipment costs.

8. Is there any incentive for freight railroads to deliver Amtrak trains on time?

Amtrak offers financial incentives to host railroads for providing reliable performance, however these incentives have proven to be ineffective for some hosts, which continue to prioritize freight trains and delay Amtrak passengers even though they could earn financial incentives for good performance.

9. How does Amtrak evaluate host performance?

Amtrak evaluates host performance based on "host-responsible delay minutes per 10,000 train-miles," which measures how much delay each host railroad causes to Amtrak trains. The measure is normalized by the number of miles traveled by each train (a "train-mile") so that routes of different lengths, and hosts with different levels of Amtrak service, can be compared to each other.

10. What distinguishes host railroads with good Amtrak performance?

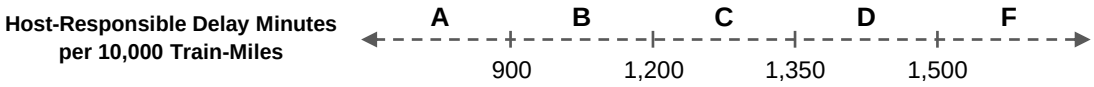
When host railroads achieve good Amtrak performance – meaning Amtrak trains consistently operate with limited delay over their rail lines – it is typically attributable to a combination of the following:

- *A commitment to providing quality service for Amtrak's passengers,*
- *An active partnership with Amtrak, where both sides work collaboratively and the host respects federal law which protects the rights of our passengers, and*
- *A well-disciplined operation, which benefits both Amtrak and freight customers alike.*

Notes

Amtrak Host Railroad Report Card 2020

1. Amtrak measures host railroad performance based on “minutes of host-responsible delay per 10,000 train-miles,” which measures the minutes of delay caused by each host, normalized by the number of miles traveled by each train and multiplied by 10,000.
2. Grades indicate aggregate host-responsible delays across all routes on each host. Performance on specific routes can vary.
3. Grades are awarded on the following scale:



4. 900 host-responsible delay minutes per 10,000 train-miles is generally correlated to performance that results in Amtrak trains that are 80% on-time.
5. Host railroads are ranked on the Report Card based on 2020 host-responsible delay minutes per 10,000 train-miles.
6. Canadian National’s Quebec operations are excluded from the report card calculations.

Amtrak Route Grades 2020

1. “On-time performance” (OTP) represents the percentage of customers that arrive at their destination station within 15 minutes of the scheduled arrival time.
2. OTP figures are based on 2020 calendar year performance.
3. The route grade table only lists Class I freight host railroads that host more than 15 miles of the given route, using the following abbreviations:

BNSF	BNSF Railway
CN	Canadian National Railway
CP	Canadian Pacific Railway
CSX	CSX Transportation
NS	Norfolk Southern Railway
UP	Union Pacific Railroad