



Aberdeen, SD Chamber of Commerce Ag Week Interview with Joey Holzer, BNSF Division Trainmaster

What is your title and how many years have you been with BNSF?

As the Division Trainmaster in Aberdeen, I'm responsible for safe and efficient train movements in the area and the first point of contact for crews and our customers. I've worked at BNSF out of Aberdeen for 16 years.

How many trains are available or set up around Aberdeen on an average day?

BNSF Railway operates a rail network of 32,500 route miles in 28 states and three Canadian provinces. We lead the rail industry in hauling agricultural products, which is most of what you'll see shipped on our tracks around Aberdeen. Average train counts through Aberdeen can vary depending on the season and particular segments of our business. Typically, you'd see an average of 8 – 10 trains operate through Aberdeen daily, and then multiple other train moves as we're serving local customers every day.

How many employees are stationed out of the Aberdeen BNSF

We have approximately 120 employees in Aberdeen.

How many railroad cars are on an average train?

Our shuttle trains, which serve our agricultural customers with dedicated locomotives, are all loaded at the same origin and traveling to the same destination, and they have about 110 cars in each train.

What happened to the cabooses?

Like many people, I remember as a kid seeing cabooses through Aberdeen. Much has changed in our industry since then because of technology and that is the case with the caboose no longer being needed. Employees riding cabooses were monitoring train movement. Today, end of train devices provide that information.

What are the various items or cargo your trains are set up to transport?

We move the products and materials that help feed, clothe, supply and power communities like Aberdeen.

Is some cargo easier to transport, load, or unload than others

We are focused on growing with our customers. We meet our customers' demands to move their goods from where are to where they need to be. Our vision is to do that as safely as possible. In South Dakota, for example, our railroad provides safe transportation to link the state's ethanol industry to markets around the country.

How many bushels of grain is in 1 train car?

There are different sizes of hopper cars, but the majority of our fleet can handle about 110 tons, or 3,700 bushels, per car varying slightly depending on the type of grain.

How many bushels of grain in 1 whole train?

A shuttle train (about 110 rail cars) typically would transport about 410,000 bushels. Six of those shuttle trains fill one ocean vessel for export market.

How many bushels or loads does the Aberdeen BNSF haul in 1 year?

From the state, BNSF transports about 140,000 carloads of ag products each year.

How many bushels or loads does the nationwide BNSF haul in 1 year?

Volumes can vary year to year depending on any number of market factors. In 2023, BNSF moved more than 1.1 million carloads of grain and grain products.

Is it a pain to add various cargo items in the middle of the train?

We continue to leverage technology to make railroads safer and more efficient. While employees learn how to best “build” their trains, there are numerous ways to do so. We’re exploring ways through AI to help solve the puzzle and make the switching process to build that new train as efficient as possible.

Why do the trains have to cross 6th avenue at 7:45 in the morning?

Freight trains don’t operate on a set schedule, but we do have regular customers we serve locally based on their needs. Because of the nature of a rail network, we operate 24/7. If we didn’t work in every community during rush hours and lunch times, we would have difficulty moving goods from where they are to where they need to go. That said, we are mindful of the impact we have on communities where our own families live and work and try to minimize the impact of our operations in Aberdeen and other towns.

What are the primary and secondary destinations of any of your goods?

The large majority of grain from South Dakota makes its way to the Pacific Northwest for export.

What things have changed in railroad system over the past 20 years?

Over the last 20 years, we’ve continued to increase our already safe operations. The industry train accident rate is down 28 percent since 2000. For BNSF, 2023 was a record year for safety. We had the lowest injury frequency rate in our company’s 175-year history last year. We’re not done with these efforts until we operate with zero accidents and incidents, and we’ll remain focused on operating safely.

Are there any new technologies or new railroad lines planned for the future?

We are leveraging technology in all aspects of our operations, making us safer and more efficient than ever. Trackside detectors can monitor the health of rail cars moving across the tracks. Using 12 types of technology, detectors can alert us to problems before they could cause an incident. Positive Train Control (PTC) is another example of how technology is utilized. If a train is speeding or there is a misaligned switch, in areas with PTC installed, the system can take over and stop the train in certain circumstances. We’ll continue to leverage new technology and existing technologies in different ways to improve safety and efficiencies on our railroad.