

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New safety system coming to BNSF Line prompts major revision of schedule

More time will be needed between train runs due to Positive Train Control

CHICAGO (March 19, 2018) – Metra’s busiest line, the BNSF Line between Aurora and Chicago Union Station, will be the first Metra line to have the new Positive Train Control (PTC) safety system fully operational – but the enhancement will require a significant revision of the line’s schedule starting this summer.

Metra and BNSF Railway today unveiled the proposed weekday schedule revision (available at metrarail.com today and on trains and at Chicago Union Station this week) and asked for public comment. Feedback will be accepted at BNSFservice2018@metrarr.com until April 15. Metra may revise the proposal based on feedback, with a goal of implementing the new schedule in June or July.

In addition to adjusting the schedule for PTC, Metra and BNSF Railway are proposing other changes to relieve overcrowding on some of the busiest trains, match the schedule to actual operating conditions and reduce bunching at a choke point near Cicero. As a result, there will be numerous minor changes to the total running times and the station stop patterns of trains. There will be no changes to weekend trains at this time.

PTC is a federally mandated safety system that will automatically stop a train if the engineer fails to obey a signal or exceeds the speed limit. The system integrates GPS, trackside sensors and communications units, onboard computers and Metra’s centralized train dispatching system. Together, these components track trains and monitor the crew’s compliance with speed restrictions and signals. Although it can’t prevent all accidents, PTC increases safety by preventing train-to-train collisions, unauthorized entry into work zones and derailments due to speeding or moving through misaligned track switches.

Under PTC, the crew of a train must initialize the system before each individual run. This includes entering information about the size and makeup of the train (because its weight affects its stopping distance) and any other details about conditions along the route (such as work zones or speed restrictions) that could affect the safe operation of the train. The initialization process is expected to take about six minutes.

On the current BNSF schedule there are about 30 instances in which a train completes a run and turns around to start a new one in less than 10 minutes, typically at the ends of the line

but occasionally mid-route. In those 10 minutes, the engineer must move from the cab car to the locomotive or vice versa, and the crew must clear the train, perform a brake test and conduct a job briefing. With the added task of initializing the PTC system, these “flips” are expected to take 12 to 15 minutes, so the schedule of many trains must be adjusted for increased turn times, and those changes, in turn, will affect nearly all other trains on the schedule.

Similar changes will be needed on other lines with tight flips as PTC is implemented.

PTC systems have three main components: onboard computers and communications equipment; trackside antennas, servers and communications equipment; and a centralized back office dispatch system to store and communicate information to the trains and trackside locations.

Metra is responsible for creating the back office system and installing the equipment on board all Metra trains and along the five routes it controls (Metra Electric, Rock Island, SouthWest Service and the Milwaukee District West and North). The freight companies that own the other six lines – BNSF Railway (the BNSF Line), Union Pacific Railroad (the three UP lines) and CN Railroad (Heritage Corridor and North Central Service) – are responsible for the trackside equipment and back offices for those routes.

One of the key features of PTC – and one of its biggest challenges – is that PTC systems must be interoperable between railroads. This means that Metra’s onboard equipment must be able to seamlessly communicate not only with Metra’s trackside and back office components, but with the freight railroads’ trackside and back office components, and vice versa.

BNSF Railway anticipates that PTC will be fully operational on the BNSF Line this year. UP also expects to have PTC operational on its lines starting this year. For Metra, PTC will start on the Rock Island Line this year and on the other lines in 2019 and 2020.

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About Metra

Metra is one of the largest and most complex commuter rail systems in North America, serving Cook, DuPage, Will, Lake, Kane and McHenry counties in northeastern Illinois. The agency provides service to and from downtown Chicago with 242 stations over 11 routes totaling nearly 500 route miles and approximately 1,200 miles of track. Metra operates nearly 700 trains and provides nearly 290,000 passenger trips each weekday.

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