Other Than DC-to-Boston, Long-Distance Train Travel's Days Are Numbered: Cameron on Transportation

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We are all familiar with Amtrak's local operations in the Northeast: The sleek Acela zooming along to Boston at up to 145 mph and the slower, traditional trains making local stops along the Connecticut coast.

But Amtrak is a national railroad and some of its long-distance trains face delays of several hours — not minutes.

The problem is Amtrak owns and operates the trains, but not the tracks.

From Washington to Boston, the Northeast Corridor is owned, maintained, dispatched and operated by

Amtrak. The one small exception is here in Connecticut, from Greenwich to New Haven, where the track is owned by the state, but run under contract by Metro-North.

But in the rest of the country, Amtrak operates on what it euphemistically calls “host railroads,” all of them freight operators. Think Norfolk Southern, CSX, Burlington Northern Santa Fe (owned by Warren Buffet) and the Canadian railroads, CN and CP. Those railroads charge Amtrak for riding over its tracks and don’t always give the passenger trains priority over their more profitable freight traffic.

In 1979, Amtrak was prepared to take Southern Pacific to court with evidence that The Sunset Limited running between Houston and New Orleans was regularly “sidetracked” in favor of freight runs. Though there was no trial, the courts ordered SP to give Amtrak trains first dibs to improve on-time performance.

The railroads refused, arguing that federal agencies had no right to tell them how to run their railroads. The freight operators won — twice — with courts slapping the wrists of both the Federal Railroad Authority and the Surface Transportation Board.

Environmental and advocacy groups appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, arguing it was in the national interest to have an efficient, reliable, on-time national passenger railroad. But the high court declined to hear the case.

Amtrak now uses both a carrot and a stick to deal with its freight railroad “hosts,” offering financial incentives to keep its trains on time and public shaming if they don’t. On the Amtrak website, the best (Canadian Pacific) and worst (Norfolk Southern and Canadian National) freight railroads are graded from A to F.

On long-distance passenger runs, Amtrak trains like The Texas Eagle (Chicago to Los Angeles) now run up to five hours late. As a result, Amtrak needs to substitute buses and accommodate passengers who miss their connections.

Freight railroads say they have their own problems without being burdened by Amtrak. In a booming economy, the freight operators can barely keep up with customer demand on a track network saturated with mile-long oil trains (“pipelines on wheels”) and double-stack container trains moving east from California.

But all of these Amtrak complaints may be moot as the days of long-distance trains seem numbered. While fast trains like Acela can actually turn a small profit, multi-day “land cruises” on celebrated trains like the California Zephyr and The Empire Builder just hemorrhage money. Their days are limited, so ride them while you can.

We’ll always have Acela, but the glory days of long-distance rail travel in the U.S. are nearing an end, probably to the delight of the freight operators.

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