



The Honorable Martin J. Oberman
Chairman, Surface Transportation Board
395 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Oberman,

As you may know, the Coast Guard is responsible for the permitting of bridges crossing U.S. navigable waters and for the regulation of drawbridge operations, including those for railroads. The Coast Guard's fundamental role in this regard is to ensure that bridges do not unreasonably obstruct navigation, either by inadequate clearances for vessels to pass through the bridge, or via drawbridge operations that do not provide sufficient openings to accommodate the needs of navigation.

I understand that before the STB is a proceeding regarding Amtrak's plan to restart passenger service along the Gulf Coast, and I further understand that the Coast Guard's role in regulating drawbridges along the route has been a topic of discussion. To the extent that it may be of assistance to the Board or the parties before it, the Coast Guard offers the following information about the regulation of drawbridges generally, and about the specific bridges along this line, some of which are pending a request for approval for remote operation.

Coast Guard drawbridge regulations are codified in 33 CFR Part 117, with the general regulations applicable to all drawbridges found in subpart A and specific regulations governing the operations of particular drawbridges found in subpart B. Generally, drawbridges are required to open promptly upon a signal from a vessel requesting an opening. Drawbridges listed in subpart B may have specific schedules for opening or times such as rush hour where they are not required to open thereby reducing roadway traffic delays. Any member of the public can petition the Coast Guard to change the operating schedule of a drawbridge. See 33 CFR § 117.8.

Unlike highway drawbridges, which usually require stopping vehicle traffic to open for the passage of maritime traffic, railroad bridges are opened either on demand, or in many cases, are left in the open to navigation position, except when a train is crossing. In most cases, once a train enters an area near the bridge called a "block," deference is given to the train to cross prior to opening for maritime traffic. Coast Guard regulations note in 33 CFR § 117.9 that "Trains are usually controlled by the block method. That is the track is divided into blocks or segments of a mile or more in length. When a train is in a block with a drawbridge, the draw may not be able to open until the train has passed out of the block and the yardmaster or other manager has 'unlocked' the drawbridge controls."

Due to this system that protects trains from unanticipated bridge openings, vessels will occasionally have to wait for a moving train to cross the bridge before it can open to navigation. Although bridge tenders have historically operated drawbridges locally, there is growing national interest in operating bridges from remote locations where one tender may watch and operate more than one bridge.

Gulf Coast Bridges

The following drawbridges are located on the line along the Gulf Coast between New Orleans, Louisiana and Orlando, Florida. Bridges indicating “no specific requirements” are regulated under the general drawbridge provisions of 33 CFR 117, subpart A.

Alabama

§ 117.105 Bayou Sara. The draw of the CSX Transportation Railroad bridge, mile 0.1 near Saraland, shall open on signal; except that, from 6 p.m. to 10 a.m. the draw shall open on signal if at least eight hours notice is given. During periods of severe storms or hurricanes, from the time the National Weather Service sounds an “alert” for the area until the “all clear” is sounded, the draw shall open on signal.

§ 117.113 Tensaw River. The draw of the CSX Transportation Railroad bridge, mile 15.0 at Hurricane, shall open on signal; except that, from 5 p.m. to 9 a.m., the draw shall open on signal if at least eight hours notice is given. During periods of severe storms or hurricanes, from the time the National Weather Service sounds an “alert” for the area until the “all clear” is sounded, the draw shall open on signal.

§ 117.115 Three Mile Creek. (a) The draw of the US43 bridge, mile 1.0 at Mobile, need not be opened from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. daily. At all other times, the draw shall open on signal if at least 12 hours notice is given. (b) The draw of the Norfolk Southern railroad bridge, mile 1.1 at Mobile, shall open on signal if at least five days notice is given.

No Specific Requirements: Chickasawbogue River, Mobile River

Florida

§ 117.258 Apalachicola River. The draw of the CSX Railroad bridge, mile 105.9, at River Junction shall open on signal Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. At all other times the bridge will open on signal if at least 4 hours notice is given.

§ 117.271 Blackwater River. The draw of the CSX Transportation Railroad bridge, mile 2.8 at Milton, shall open on signal; except that, from 8 p.m. to 4 a.m., the draw shall open on signal if at least eight hours notice is given.

Louisiana

§ 117.436 Chef Menteur Pass. The draw of the U.S. Highway 90 bridge, mile 2.8, at Lake Catherine, shall open on signal; except that, from 5:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m., Monday through

Friday except Federal holidays, the draw need open only on the hour and on the half-hour for the passage of vessels. The draw shall open at any time for a vessel in distress.

§ 117.486 Pearl River. (a) The draw of the CSX Transportation railroad bridge, mile 1.0 near English Lookout, shall open on signal; except that, from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. the draw shall open on signal if at least four hours notice is given. (b) The draw of the US 90 highway bridge, mile 8.8 near Pearlington, shall open on signal; except that, from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. the draw shall open on signal if at least four hours notice is given.

No Specific Requirements: Industrial Canal, Rigolets

Mississippi

No Specific Requirements: Bay St. Louis, Biloxi, Pasagoula

Requests for Remote Operation

Pursuant to 33 CFR 117.42, the Coast Guard must approve the remote operation of a drawbridge with the specific information for each approved bridge listed in subpart B. The Coast Guard will evaluate the proposed operating requirements upon receipt of a written request for a change in the operating regulations. This evaluation typically includes:

- Visiting the bridge site to determine if there are sufficient sensors on the bridge which allow the remote tender to effectively and safely open and close the bridge;
- Visiting the remote operations facility to determine if the remote operator has sufficient equipment to effectively and safely open and close the bridge;
- Ensuring the remote operator has sufficient resources, including procedures to safely open and close the bridge;
- Ensuring the bridge owner has sufficient bridge operators to re-man the bridge if the remote systems fail or at the order of the Coast Guard; and
- The history of the bridge opening reliably and promptly on signal.

If the Coast Guard determines the requested change in operation will permit vessels to transit through the bridge in a reasonably free, safe, and unobstructed manner, the District Commander will commence a rulemaking to implement the change. The Coast Guard will not initiate a rulemaking process if the proposed change to the operating regulations will unreasonably obstruct navigation.

The Coast Guard has completed evaluation of the proposed remote operations and is preparing final rules to authorize the CSX bridges at Bayou Sara and Mobile Bay to operate remotely.

Required Reports to Congress

As a result of discussions over the past several years between the Coast Guard and its Congressional oversight committees, the Coast Guard is required by statute to evaluate the operation of the Gulf Coast bridges upon resumption of Amtrak passenger service to ensure the bridges are not causing delays to the rail service, freight service or waterway users.

SEC. 839. DRAWBRIDGES CONSULTATION.

(a) CONSULTATION.—In addition and subsequent to any rulemaking conducted under section 117.8 of title 33, Code of Federal Regulations, related to permanent changes to drawbridge openings that result from Amtrak service between New Orleans, Louisiana and Orlando, Florida, the Commandant shall consult with owners or operators of rail lines used for Amtrak passenger service between New Orleans, Louisiana and Orlando, Florida and affected waterway users on changes to drawbridge operating schedules necessary to facilitate the On Time Performance of passenger trains. These changes to schedules shall not impact Coast Guard response times to operational missions.

(b) TIMING.—Consultation in subsection (a) shall occur after commencement of Amtrak passenger service on the rail lines between New Orleans, Louisiana and Orlando, Florida at the following intervals:

(1) Not less than 3 months following the commencement of Amtrak passenger service.

(2) Not less than 6 months following the commencement of Amtrak passenger service.

(c) REPORT.—If after conducting the consultations required by subsection (b)(2), the Commandant finds that permanent changes to drawbridge operations are necessary to mitigate delays in the movement of trains described in subsection (a) and that those changes do not unreasonably obstruct the navigability of the affected waterways, then the Commandant shall submit those findings to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation of the Senate and the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure of the House of Representatives.

Conclusion

To date, the Coast Guard has not found a need for new or additional drawbridge operating regulations to facilitate restoration of passenger rail service, but will consult with all stakeholders and reevaluate the operations of these bridges upon commencement of service.

I would be pleased to respond to any further questions you or your staff may have.

Sincerely,



Brian L. Dunn
Chief, Office of Bridge Programs
U. S. Coast Guard
By direction