

Ohio gets federal rail money to upgrade hazmat transport tracks

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WASHINGTON, D. C. — The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) on Monday announced that it's awarding more than \$1.4 billion in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law money to 70 rail improvement projects in 35 states and Washington, D.C.

Ohio got three of the awards, with the largest amount — more than \$16.2 million — allotted to rehabilitate bridges and make several track-related improvements along approximately 180 miles of the Kanawha River Railroad (KNWA) through the North Central Appalachia Rail Enhancement and Rail Corridor Preservation Project.

The FRA said that project will allow for increased speeds while improving safety, reliability, and capacity on a rail line that moves needed goods, including chemicals and hazardous materials, in rural areas of West Virginia and Ohio.

A Feb. 3 Norfolk Southern derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, made rail safety a front burner national concern. Toxic chemicals spilled including vinyl chloride, butyl acrylate, ethylhexyl acrylate, and ethylene glycol monobutyl ether. Federal and state officials who feared the vinyl chloride tanks would explode set them on fire, creating a massive plume of thick black smoke. Other chemicals got into local streams, killing fish and traveling down into the Ohio River.

[Authorities say environmental monitoring](#) has shown the area's air and drinking water are safe, but residents are still worried. Property values have declined as a result and farmers say they're having trouble selling their crops. [An "after chemical exposure" community survey found](#) 75% of respondents reported headaches, 64% had anxiety and 61% reported coughing.

President [Joe Biden announced Wednesday](#) that he's ordering the Federal Emergency Management Agency to designate a federal disaster recovery coordinator to oversee long-term recovery efforts. U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) has been coordinating with and supporting the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to investigate the derailment. The FRA is also assessing Norfolk Southern's compliance with rail safety regulations and scrutinizing Norfolk Southern's overall safety culture.

Ohio's [U.S. Senators](#) and [House of Representatives members](#) have introduced separate legislation intended to boost rail safety and prevent future derailments.

FRA Administrator Amit Bose said his agency did not get any grant requests for projects in the East Palestine area. He said it received 234 eligible applications from

all over the country that totaled more than \$6 billion in funding requests. He said the projects awarded Monday will improve nearly 1,900 miles of track.

“Each of these grant recipients has a lot to be proud of,” added Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg. “It shows how competitive of a process it is.”

Buttigieg said that the United States sees “far too many derailments on our freight lines.”

“It’s been over 1,000 per year for decades and we’re seeing communities that face the consequences, every day, of trains that are stopped at crossings for sometimes 15, 30, 60, 90 minutes at a time,” Buttigieg told reporters on Friday. “And we all know that inter-city passenger rail in the United States lags behind our peer countries. And a big reason why we face these challenges has to do with America underinvesting in rail for more than a half century. Now that’s changing.”

The Transportation Department said the \$1.4 billion it’s announcing today is the largest amount it’s ever awarded for rail safety and rail supply chain upgrades through the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) program. It said nearly two-thirds of the money will go to rural communities.

An Ohio Rail Development Commission plan to improve tracks, upgrade multiple grade crossings, and do bridge rehabilitation along the Napoleon, Defiance & Western Railway (NDW) got almost \$11 million. The FRA said its completion will help improve rail safety, increase capacity and enhance its operations.

The International Association of Sheet Metal Air Rail and Transportation Workers got more than \$600,000 for a data-driven safety training and education program for front-line railroad employees the union represents. The FRA said the training program will focus on freight service employees and union members working in inter-city passenger transportation. It will cover issues that include, but are not limited to, accident investigations and dealing with unruly and violent passengers.