



## **Governor's Council on Freight Rail**

2026 Annual Report

January 2026

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## **Governor's Council on Freight Rail**

**Minnesota Department of Transportation, Central Office**  
**Transportation Building**  
**395 John Ireland Boulevard**  
**Saint Paul, MN 55155**  
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The Governor's Council on Freight Rail was established to elevate coordination and partnership between the State and railroads, to actively promote safety and reduce risks, and to ensure efficient movement of goods to support our economy while minimizing the impacts of those operations on our local communities.

[Executive Order 24-02; Amending Executive Order 19-19](#)

[Executive Order 19-19; Rescinding Executive Order 16-06](#)

This is a report on the activities of the Council. Topics encompass key issues identified by the Governor in the activities of this Council, including capacity enhancements, capital improvement priorities, economic development and safety. The Council has no recommendations for actions needed to improve freight rail operations in the State of Minnesota at this time.

## **Governor's Council on Freight Rail Membership**

*Membership in the Council is pursuant to Executive Order 24-02. There are no open appointments. The Governor or the Governor's designee will serve as the Chair of the Council.*

- Chair, MnDOT Commissioner Nancy Daubenberger
- Department of Agriculture, Commissioner Thom Petersen
- Employment and Economic Development, Commissioner Matt Varilek
- Metropolitan Council, Interim Chair Deb Barber
- Pollution Control Agency, Commissioner Katrina Kessler
- Department of Public Safety, Assistant Commissioner John Cunningham
- Class 1 Railroad, Kevin Donahue
- Class 1 Railroad, Andy Cummings
- Class 1 Railroad, Kelli O'Brien

- Class 1 Railroad, Lydia Underdahl
- Class II and III Railroad, Peter Gilbertson
- Class II and III Railroad, Dan Kippley
- Class II and III Railroad, Mark Wegner
- Amtrak, Martin A. Sandoval II
- League of Minnesota Cities, Levi Novacek
- Association of Minnesota Counties, Heidi Nelson
- Minnesota Indian Affairs Council, Grant Johnson
- Labor Union, Nicholas Katich, SMART-TD
- Labor Union, Joel Mueller, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen.

## The Governor’s Council on Freight Rail Meetings

### All meetings were held in person:

- April 30, 2025
- October 29, 2025

## Activities of the Council

### April 30, 2025

An update from MnDOT Office of Freight and Commercial Vehicle Operations, on the Minnesota Rail Service Improvement Program (MRSI), including its history and current status. Industry members of the council reiterated their support for the program and support to increase the funding level to better reflect the actual identified needs. Council received an overview of the “Greater State Investment in Improving and Expanding Freight Rail Infrastructure is Critical to the Growth of Local Communities and Job Creation in Minnesota” report from the Minnesota Regional Railroads Association compiled by [RailNow - 2025-2030 forecast](#).

BNSF Railway Executive Director and Public Affairs Director, and Twin Cities and Western Railroad President and CEO, presented “Freight Rail: This is Now.” They shared safety data and enhancements led by the railroad industry focusing on safety and the economic engine of freight rail in Minnesota.

As directed by the Legislature, MnDOT commissioned a wayside detector study, due in January 2026. The MnDOT Office of Freight and Commercial Vehicle Operations provided a status update on the plan for completing the study, including engagement with industry. The study will be a comprehensive review of safety, fiscal impacts, and operational effectiveness of wayside detectors.

## October 29, 2025

The Bureau of Criminal Apprehension Operations, Department of Public Safety provided an overview of the role, responsibilities and the protocols for Chief Duty Officer Reports, as related to freight rail operations.

The draft Wayside Detector Study was presented to the Council. In accordance with the statutory directive for the study, the Council was engaged to consider and review issues related to wayside detectors, including analyzing existing federal regulations and guidance, incidents and performance data, safety complaints, and best practices. The Commissioner must submit a joint report with the Governor's Council on Freight Rail to the legislature by January 15, 2026.

Minnesota AgriGrowth Executive Director presented "Shaping MN's Farm and Food Economy." Minnesota AgriGrowth is committed to building a robust agriculture and food economy in Minnesota by 2040. Three areas were identified to strengthen Minnesota's farm and food economy including the need for global research and innovation; desire to have advanced real processing facilities in Minnesota; and the prioritization of import and export infrastructure in Minnesota.

Information on cargo theft and fraud was presented by the Center for Transportation Studies (CTS), University of Minnesota. CTS hosted a roundtable in September 2025 with representatives from multiple leading companies alongside public and academic partners to discuss the interconnected issues of theft and fraud in the cargo and freight system. This growing issue affects nearly every American company and jurisdiction. It also impacts American consumers. Overall, freight fraud accounts for billions of dollars in losses and inefficiencies, jeopardizes the supply chain, and affects consumers.