Who Tracks the Railroads?
THE CASE FOR TRANSPARENCY ON RAIL BRIDGES

The Problem

New Jersey has approximately 1,000 miles of freight rail lines crisscrossing our state traversing hundreds of bridges. Thousands of trains carrying millions of gallons of oil and toxic chemicals pass through urban, suburban and rural environments operated by 18 freight railroads.¹ Freight rail bridges, some more than 100 years old, cross over waterways such as Passaic, Delaware and Manasquan Rivers, as well as sensitive environmental areas like the Oradell Reservoir.

Yet, despite repeated calls for transparency on rail bridge infrastructure from federal agencies and the public, the rail companies refuse to release safety and inspection reports.

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is tasked with regulating the safety of our nation’s rail network, and is responsible for inspections and enforcement activities throughout the U.S. In 2015, the FRA reported that in the previous two years, only 800 of the 100,000 bridges nationwide were inspected.²i The public cannot rely on weak federal oversight to ensure our public health and waterways are protected.

According to the Association of American Railroads, the railroads are planning on spending $22 billion in 2017, approximately $60 million a day.³ Yet, the railroads refuse to make public safety inspection reports on freight bridges and ignore the opportunity to highlight how they are investing in our communities.

We need transparency by rail companies and disclosure of key information on the safety of rail bridges in New Jersey. We have the right to know.
RAIL BRIDGE FAILURE
CAUSES TOXIC TRAIN DERAILMENT
PAULSBORO, NJ

On November 30, 2012, nearly 700 residents were evacuated and at least 100 were sickened when more than 23,000 pounds of highly toxic, cancer-causing vinyl chloride (VC) spread through the working class and low-income town of Paulsboro, Gloucester County, after a train derailment caused a bridge to collapse into Mantua Creek. Four rail cars of VC and one car of ethanol derailed after the bridge failed to close properly. Conrail, a private company that owns the bridge and railroad tracks, ignored a failure signal before allowing the train to cross.

The National Transportation Safety Board, the independent federal agency responsible for investigating transportation accidents, reported that 23 trouble ticket work orders about this particular bridge had been written by Conrail in 2012, despite a major repair project in 2009. The latest failure report came after a train crossed the bridge the night before the incident.

The Fix

We call on the Governor and other elected officials to take the following steps to protect our lives, jobs, health, schools and businesses:

• Mandate a placard be posted on each bridge containing name of owner and contact phone number to report structural concerns.

• Require rail and bridge owners to submit annual bridge inspection records to NJ Department of Transportation (NJ DOT).

• Instruct the NJ DOT to create a public bridge database, in the absence of a national inventory list, including information about the safety of rail bridges, ownership, phone number, date of last inspection, summary of findings, scheduled repairs and replacements.
A Peak Behind the Curtain

There is one tool available to state and local officials to obtain information about rail bridges.

The FAST (Fixing America’s Surface Transportation) Act provides a vehicle for a State or a political subdivision of a State to obtain a public version of a bridge inspection report generated by a railroad for a bridge located within the respective jurisdiction. The request can only be made by an official in their capacity as a public official and online by filing out a Bridge Inspection Report Public Version Request form. The report will include information such as the date of the last inspection; the location of the bridge; contact information; and a general statement on the condition of the bridge.

Lack of Disclosure Fuels Mistrust

In November 2015, Waterkeeper Alliance, Riverkeeper & ForestEthics released Deadly Crossing: Neglected Bridges & Exploding Oil Trains documenting how inadequate federal oversight of rail bridges combined with the lack of transparency by rail companies leaves the public in the dark about the safety of these bridges.iv Even though transport by rail is an environmentally conscious means to move large freight, the lack of transparency jeopardizes public safety, and our waterways and environment. Disclosure of infrastructure investment and safety conditions shows the public what actions the railroads have taken to ensure safety. Good actors can be rewarded and those not investing can be held accountable by the public.

In the last four years, the volume of freight trains carrying hazardous materials, particularly crude oil, traveling through our communities has been a major concern for the public sparking a call to action. Legislative measures have been introduced to address these deficiencies, but to-date none have been signed into law.

With a pro big business agenda in Washington, DC we anticipate federal oversight to erode under the Trump administration. We are calling for the Governor and elected officials to take action to give us the right to know about the safety of freight rail bridges in our own communities.

Endnotes
i American Society of Civil Engineers, 2016 Report card for New Jersey’s Infrastructure, page 40
ii USA Today, September 10, 2015, Feds urge railroads to share more info about safety of aging bridges
iii American Association of Railroads, Freight Rail’s Private Investment
iv Waterkeeper Alliance, Riverkeeper & ForestEthics report Deadly Crossing: Neglected Bridges & Exploding Oil Trains
New Jersey Freight Bridges

Morgan Draw Bridge
Location: Sayreville, NJ and Old Bridge, NJ
Waterway: Cheesequake Creek
Construction Complete: 2012 (rehabilitated)
Material: ???
Owner: NJ Transit

Point No Point Bridge
Location: Newark, NJ and Kearny, NJ
Waterway: Passaic River
Construction Complete: 1890s
Material: ???
Owner: Conrail

West Trenton Railroad Bridge
Location: West Trenton, NJ
Waterway: Delaware River
Construction Complete: 1913
Material: Concrete
Owner: CSX

Dock Bridge
Location: Newark, NJ and Harrison, NJ
Waterway: Passaic River
Construction Complete: 1935
Material: ???
Owner: ???

Lower Trenton Bridge
Location: Trenton, NJ
Waterway: Delaware River
Construction Complete: 1928
Material: Steel
Owner: Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission

Arthur Kill Vertical Lift Bridge
Location: Elizabeth, NJ
Waterway: Arthur Kill aka Staten Island Sound
Construction Complete: 1959
Material: ???
Owner: NYC Economic Development Corporation

Delair Bridge
Location: Pennsauken, NJ
Waterway: Delaware River
Construction Complete: 1896
Material: Steel
Owner: ???

Brielle Draw Bridge
Location: Brielle, NJ and Point Pleasant, NJ
Waterway: Manasquan River
Construction Complete: 1911
Material: Steel
Owner: New Jersey Transit

?? illustrates lack of information available to the public

Photo Sources:

About WEC
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WEC is an alliance of 70 labor, community and environmental organizations working for safe, secure jobs and a healthy, sustainable environment. For more information, please visit www.njwec.org.