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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

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August 28, 2012

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
441 G Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro,

Following multiple high-profile rail accidents over the past several weeks, we request that the Government Accountability Office conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the state of the country's railroad safety programs and policies. The United States rail system is the most extensive rail system in the world and vital to the economy and mobility of both people and freight. Demand for freight rail transportation has continually increased and is expected to double by 2030. Intercity and commuter railroads also continue to set ridership records as Americans look to rail to meet their daily transportation needs. However, despite legislative action in 2008, several recent incidents serve as stark reminders that railroad safety continues to be a concern.

Just after midnight on August 21, 2012, two locomotives with 80 loaded coal cars derailed near downtown Ellicott City, Maryland. According to reports, two pedestrians on or near the tracks at the time of the accident were killed. In addition, several cars filled with coal derailed and spilled over the bridge the train was traversing at the time of the accident. In the early morning hours of July 11, 2012, a freight train partially derailed in central Ohio and several cars carrying highly flammable ethanol exploded into flames. The fire was seen for miles and homes were evacuated to prevent injury and death and damage to property. Similarly, in the afternoon of July 4, 2012, a fully loaded coal train derailed in a suburb of Chicago with the subsequent collapse of a bridge over a local road leading to the death of two people.

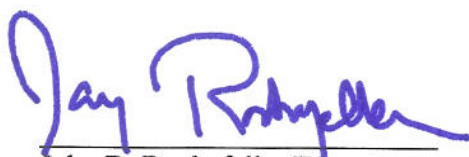
While the cause of these accidents is still under investigation, such incidents raise questions about the safety of the rail system. While rail is generally a safe form of transportation, these accidents remind us that things can still go wrong and the consequences can be serious – even deadly.

With this in mind, we request that the Government Accountability Office conduct a review of railroad safety and how railroads, the Federal Railroad Administration, state rail safety agencies, and other stakeholders ensure the safety of people and goods that use the rail system. This review should identify how railroads go about ensuring the safety of their own operations and infrastructure as well as the role of the federal government in ensuring rail safety and the extent to which the federal government is meeting the requirements included in the Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008.

It will be particularly useful if this review identifies how rail safety risk factors are determined, how these factors are used to allocate inspection and other safety resources especially when new risk factors, such as heat waves, occur across the rail network, and what improvements in inspections or risk models could be made to increase the safety of the rail system. Recent accidents involved rail bridges and tunnels and this infrastructure also should be reviewed. This information will assist in the oversight of rail safety issues and help identify any gaps in safety that may exist.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this matter. If you have questions please contact Ian Jefferies of the Democratic Staff at (202) 224-9000 or Dan Neumann of the Republican staff at (202) 224-9046.

Sincerely,



John D. Rockefeller IV
Senator



Richard J. Durbin
Senator



Frank R. Lautenberg
Senator