

House passes rail safety bill

By ERICA WERNER

WASHINGTON (AP) — Spurred by the recent train crash that killed 25 people in Los Angeles, the House passed sweeping rail safety legislation Wednesday requiring more rest for workers and technology that can stop a train in its tracks if it's headed for collision.

At least one of the measures could have made a difference in the Sept. 12 head-on collision between a freight train and a commuter train — the nation's deadliest rail crash since 1993.

Lawmakers scurried to reach agreement on the safety bill in the wake of the disaster, which happened when a Southern California Metrolink commuter train failed to stop at a red light and ended up on the same track as an oncoming freight.

"I'm heartened that we're considering this bill now and I hope it's offering some small degree of comfort to the families that are suffering after the recent Metrolink disaster in California," said Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Pa., before the House passed the legislation by voice vote.

It now goes to the Senate, where prospects for passage are uncertain in the dwindling legislative hours before Congress adjourns for the election at the end of this week.

Investigators are looking at engineer fatigue as a possible factor in the Metrolink crash, and the Federal Railroad Administration says that so-called positive train control technology would have prevented the crash.

The technology can engage the brakes if a train misses a signal or gets off-track. The bill requires it to be installed by 2015 on all rail lines that carry passengers and on freight lines that carry hazardous materials.

That date may be too soon for the railroad industry, which says it supports positive train control but opposed a congressionally mandated timeline, but not soon enough for some lawmakers eager to move quickly on safety in the wake of the L.A. crash.

The package wraps in legislation reauthorizing Amtrak for five years and providing \$13 billion for the carrier. Some of that money would go to matching grants to help states set up or expand rail service.

The Amtrak portion of the legislation also establishes a program for private companies to bid to develop high-speed rail corridors on the East Coast, a private sector component pushed by Republicans who have been wary of what they've seen as ever-growing subsidies to Amtrak.

Amtrak's previous authorization expired in 2002. The carrier's supporters say a new authorization will allow Amtrak to make long-range plans and take advantage of what they say is a growing appetite for passenger rail.

"As Amtrak ridership continues to hit record levels, our bill gives passenger rail the resources it needs to meet the nation's increased demands," said Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J. Lautenberg authored the Senate versions of the rail safety and Amtrak bills, both of which had previously passed the House and Senate by wide margins. Lawmakers hadn't reached agreement on final package until late Tuesday.

The rail safety portion amounts to the first major rail safety reforms since the 1994 Federal Railroad Safety Authorization Act, which expired in 1998, leaving the Federal Railroad Administration operating under an expired law for the past 10 years.

The bill that passed Tuesday reauthorizes the railroad administration through 2013 and provides \$1.6 billion for rail safety programs during that time.

A key provision is the requirement for installation of positive train control, but Tom White, a spokesman for the American Association of Railroads, said he wasn't sure the 2015 deadline was obtainable.

"When you're dealing with new technology that hasn't in some cases been developed yet, it's very hard to say that a specific deadline is doable," White said. "Having said that, we're going to move forward as swiftly as we can."

The package would cap the monthly hours train crews can work at 276. An outdated law that currently governs train crew hours allows them to work more than 400 hours per month, compared to 100 hours per month for commercial airline pilots.

Associated Press writer Sarah Karush contributed to this report.

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