

## **Grain Inspection Advisory Committee Agenda Item**

Inspecting grain at shuttle loading facilities is a challenging and demanding endeavor. Shuttle trains consisting of 110 railcars or more can take anywhere from 10 to 20 hours to load and inspection crews typically work the entire shift. Grain Inspectors who work shuttle trains have work schedules that vary on a daily basis, frequently involve nights, weekends and holiday and are extremely unpredictable. This unpredictability makes it very difficult for Official Grain Inspection Agencies to attract and retain inspection staff. During the last 12 months, the turnover rate for all Missouri Grain Inspector positions has averaged 41%. Retention rates for newly hired Inspectors are even worse, with roughly 2 out of 3 leaving the profession. We know from exit interview data that unpredictable work schedules are the biggest reason people choose to leave the job.

Most inspection agencies would likely agree that hiring and retaining grain inspection staff has never been more difficult than it is right now. The U.S. unemployment rate is near historic lows, job openings are exceeding the number of available workers and “remote working” is becoming increasingly popular, both in the public and private sectors. In other words, today’s employees have lots of options and fewer of them are willing to put up with the unpredictable work schedules of a Grain Inspector.

Much of this unpredictability could be eliminated, if grain handling facilities had access to real time train location data. In Missouri, there are currently three primary railroad companies providing service to eleven high speed shuttle loading facilities. Those railroads are as follows: BNSF, Union Pacific and Kansas City Southern. None of these rail companies provide their grain handling customers with the ability to track their trains in real time. As a result, grain companies are forced to make best guesses on when to request grain inspection personnel to arrive on site. These start times change frequently, resulting in inspection staff being placed “on call” for long hours at a time before they actually wind up reporting to work. These delays result in financial costs to the grain elevator, as well as the inspection agencies and play havoc with the personal lives of all employees involved.

Conversations with other official grain inspection agencies suggest this problem is not specific to Missouri and is a challenge across the country. For that reason, USDA has a vested interest in taking a public position on this matter by sending a letter to the Surface Transportation Board (STB) pushing for greater transparency within the railroad industry and specifically calling for access to real time train location data for their grain handling customers.

Just recently, both USDA and the National Grain and Feed Association (NGFA) publicly expressed concern over “significant rail disruption” that are negatively impacting grain companies across the country. The inability to hire and retain official grain inspection staff due to a lack of accurate information also has the potential to create similar disruptions. By taking a public stand on this issue, FGIS can hopefully play a role in starting a serious conversation with

the rail industry that ultimately leads to a policy change regarding access to real time train location data.

The question before the Committee is whether or not to propose a recommendation to USDA to submit a letter to the STB requesting greater transparency by the railroad industry and specifically calling for access to real time data for trains, in route to grain handling facilities, so that more accurate train arrival times can be predicted.