



ARKANSAS STATE RAIL PLAN **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY** 2025



Arkansas Department of Transportation

NOTICE OF NONDISCRIMINATION

The Arkansas Department of Transportation (ARDOT) complies with all civil rights provisions of federal statutes and related authorities that prohibit discrimination in programs and activities receiving federal financial assistance. Therefore, ARDOT does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, color, age, national origin, religion (not applicable as a protected group under the FMCSA Title VI Program), or disability in the admission, access to and treatment in ARDOT's programs and activities, as well as ARDOT's hiring or employment practices. Complaints of alleged discrimination and inquiries regarding ARDOT's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to Civil Rights Officer Joanna P. McFadden (ADA/504/Title VI Coordinator), P. O. Box 2261, Little Rock, AR 72203, (501) 569-2298, (Voice/TTY 711), or the following email address: joanna.mcfadden@ardot.gov

Free language assistance may be available upon request.

This notice is available from the ADA/504/Title VI Coordinator in large print, on audiotape, and in Braille.

Table of Contents

1	Overview	1
2	Stakeholder Input.....	2
3	Existing Conditions	5
	<i>Existing Freight Rail System</i>	5
	<i>Existing Passenger Rail System</i>	8
	<i>Safety</i>	10
	<i>Rail System Needs</i>	11
4	Freight Rail Opportunities	14
5	Passenger Rail Opportunities.....	15
6	What's Next?	17



Union Pacific Locomotive (Jonesboro)

Overview

The Arkansas State Rail Plan (SRP) provides a strategic assessment and blueprint for the state's railroads. Since the first railroad tracks were constructed across Arkansas in the 1850s, rail has played a significant role in the development and prosperity of the state. With a unique geography consisting of fertile agricultural land and other natural resources, as well as proximity to major population centers across the United States, both freight and passenger railroads continue to shape the state's economy and travel habits.

Arkansas' freight railroads employ over 2,000 workers across every corner of the state with an estimated payroll of nearly \$300 million, each helping make rail one of the most efficient and safest ways to transport freight. This includes many of Arkansas' most important exports from rice and soybeans to machinery for the aerospace industry. In 2019, the state's freight railroads carried over 160 million tons of freight valued at more than \$300 billion.

Arkansas' railroads move people, as well as freight. Amtrak's Texas Eagle provides intercity passenger rail service through Arkansas, connecting Arkansas to destinations in Texas, Illinois, and beyond. In 2023,

Arkansas' freight railroads employ over 2,000 workers across every corner of the state with an estimated payroll of nearly \$300 million.

the Texas Eagle carried more than 28,000 passengers in Arkansas.

Recognizing the value and impact of freight and passenger rail across the state, this SRP was developed with guidance and input from key stakeholders including the general public and a Rail Advisory Committee (RAC). Outreach efforts included an online presentation, survey, in-person listening session, and interviews. The information collected through this engagement process was used to document needs and opportunities for investment and highlights the importance of the rail system to Arkansas and the need for ongoing coordination between railroad stakeholders.

In 2019, the state's freight railroads carried over 160 million tons of freight valued at more than \$300 billion. In 2023, Amtrak's Texas Eagle rail service, which provides intercity passenger rail service through Arkansas, carried more than 28,000 passengers in Arkansas to destinations both within and outside of the state.

Stakeholder Input

To develop this SRP, ARDOT employed the following methods and strategies to effectively solicit input from key stakeholders:



RAIL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

A Rail Advisory Committee (RAC) was assembled, consisting of key industry stakeholders, representatives from the state's railroads, rail shippers, industry representatives, planning & development districts, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), and other relevant groups. Throughout the SRP development process, the RAC provided input, vetted materials, and helped to guide next steps. ARDOT and the SRP project team conducted three meetings with the RAC.

Rail Advisory Committee Participants

- Amtrak
- Arkansas & Missouri Railroad
- Arkansas Association of Railroad Passengers
- Arkansas Railroad Association
- Arkansas Rice Federation
- Arkansas Soybean Association
- Ash Grove Cement Company
- BNSF Railway
- Canadian Pacific Kansas City Limited
- Central Arkansas Planning & Development District
- Delek US Holdings, Inc.
- East Arkansas Planning & Development District
- Electric Cooperatives of Arkansas
- Federal Railroad Administration
- Genesee & Wyoming Railroad
- Green Bay Packaging, Inc.
- Patriot Rail
- Port of Pine Bluff, Harbor Industrial District
- Southwest Arkansas Regional Intermodal Authority
- Springdale Chamber of Commerce
- Texarkana MPO
- The Poultry Federation
- Union Pacific Railroad
- Welspun Tubular LLC
- West Memphis – Crittenden County Port Authority

Public Outreach Meeting
in Northwest Arkansas





STORYMAP & SURVEYING

A web-based StoryMap and survey were developed to share information with stakeholders and the general public throughout Arkansas. The survey asked respondents about their interactions with, and needs of, Arkansas' passenger and freight rail systems.



IN-PERSON ENGAGEMENT

In July 2023, ARDOT hosted a listening session with the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission (NWARPC) in Springdale. The purpose of this listening session was to gather input on what the future of rail, and especially passenger rail service, should look like in Arkansas with a focus on the Northwest corner of the state.



DIRECT ENGAGEMENT

ARDOT engaged directly with the state's railroads and representatives from industries that rely heavily on rail, including the agriculture, poultry, and metals manufacturing industries. ARDOT also conducted interviews with representatives from Missouri and Texas for the purpose of identifying opportunities for coordination.

Top findings and themes from stakeholder outreach include:

SAFETY

There is a strong desire to implement infrastructure upgrades across the rail network to address safety needs, especially at highway-rail grade crossings.

STRONG DESIRE FOR IMPROVED & EXPANDED PASSENGER RAIL SERVICE

Stakeholders would like to see alternative mobility options to destinations within and near Arkansas.

RAIL AS AN ECONOMIC INVESTMENT TOOL

Investment in both passenger and freight rail is viewed as a highly valuable tool for spurring economic growth, both in urban and rural areas of Arkansas.

COORDINATION & PARTNERSHIPS TO ACHIEVE RESULTS

The development of strong partnerships, including between the public and private sectors, as well as through multi-state coalitions, will be a critical strategy to achieve meaningful results and upgrades to the statewide rail network.

BALANCING COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INTERESTS

Thoughtful and efficient planning considers factors such as noise and vehicular traffic needs resulting from increases in rail traffic.

Consistent with ARDOT's other multimodal transportation planning efforts, including the 2022 State Freight Plan (SFP), the following goals have been adopted for the Arkansas rail network:



Safety and Resiliency

Improve statewide safety by funding projects that reduce fatal and serious injury crashes, reduce vulnerability, and improve resiliency of the system.



Economic Competitiveness

Improve intermodal transportation system connectivity, efficiency, and mobility to support existing industries and strengthen national and regional economic competitiveness.



Infrastructure Condition

Invest in existing infrastructure and supporting technologies to maintain and preserve the existing system.



Congestion Reduction, Mobility, and System Reliability

Invest in the multimodal transportation system to improve mobility, connectivity, accessibility, and reliability for people and goods.



Environmental Sustainability

Enhance the performance of the transportation system while avoiding, minimizing, and/or mitigating impacts to natural and cultural resources.

An overarching vision to guide future rail planning efforts is also needed. The 2025 SRP vision is designed to incorporate the identified goals and explicitly apply them to both freight and passenger rail service across the state.



Arkansas will preserve, maintain, and improve a competitive, safe, efficient, resilient, and environmentally sound freight and passenger rail network that maximizes economic competitiveness and meets the mobility needs of Arkansas communities.



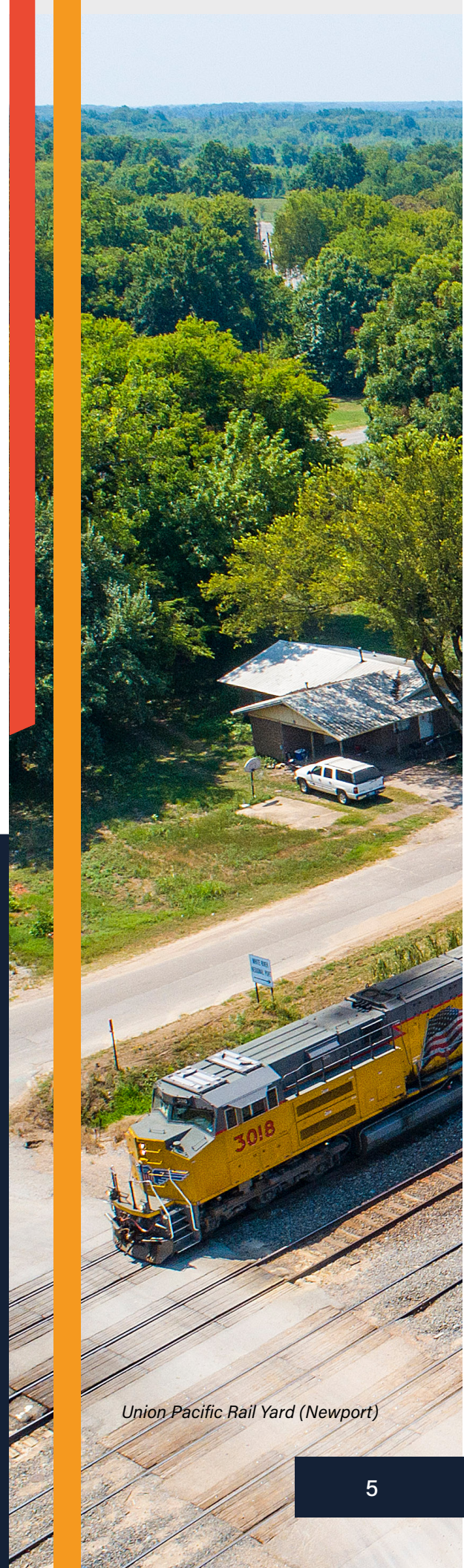
Existing Conditions

Arkansas' rail system includes freight and passenger rail assets and services found across the state. Existing conditions, including a system inventory, usage, and needs are documented below.

Existing Freight Rail System

The Arkansas freight rail network is comprised of 25 freight railroads and spans over 2,600 miles. The network includes mileage across all regions of Arkansas, providing service to urban and rural areas alike. Approximately 60 percent of this mileage is owned and operated by three Class I railroads. These Class I railroads are well-connected to the national network and play a pivotal role in hauling goods within the state as well as across state lines. The remaining network is comprised of 22 Class III railroads that vary in size from small switching & terminal railroads a few miles in length, to regional networks spanning hundreds of miles across multiple states. Class III railroads play an important role in connecting many local businesses and industries with customers both within and outside of Arkansas, while also providing valuable connections to the larger Class I national network.

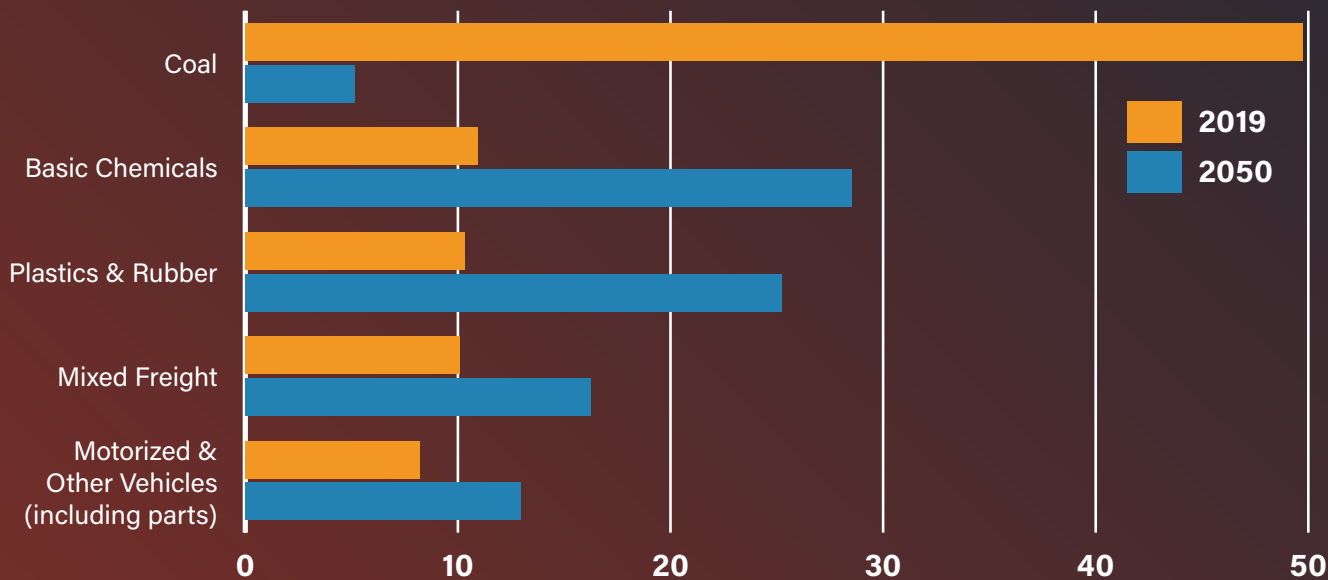
**The Arkansas
freight rail network
is comprised of
25 FREIGHT
RAILROADS
and spans over
2,600 MILES.**



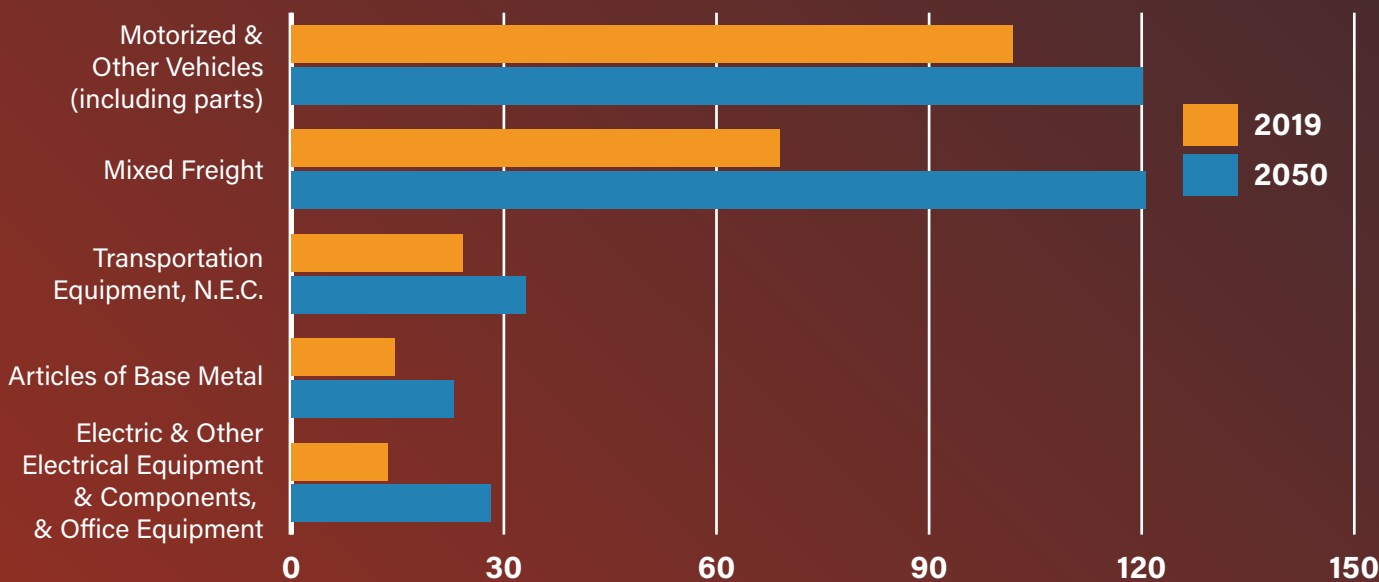
Union Pacific Rail Yard (Newport)

In 2019, the state's freight railroads carried over 160 million tons of freight valued at more than \$300 billion. The composition of these commodities can vary widely. Some common goods include chemicals, plastics, mixed freight, electronics, metals, and agricultural goods. By 2050, tonnage is expected to grow by 25 percent to nearly 200 million tons valued at nearly \$500 billion. Although coal tonnage is expected to decline through 2050, increases in the tonnage of other goods, especially chemicals, plastics, and mixed freight, are expected to more than offset declines in coal. The increase in tonnage and value highlight the critical role that Arkansas' freight railroads play in supporting the state's industries, jobs, and population alike.

Top 5 Rail Commodities by Tonnage, 2019 & 2050



Top 5 Rail Commodities by Value, 2019 & 2050



Existing Passenger Rail System

Passenger rail service in Arkansas is provided by the long-distance Amtrak Texas Eagle. Daily service is operated from Chicago, through St. Louis and Little Rock, continuing southwest to Dallas/Fort Worth and San Antonio. The service is operated by Amtrak along Union Pacific Railroad's Hoxie and Little Rock Subdivisions, which form a northeast-to-southwest corridor diagonally through the state. Stations are located at Walnut Ridge, Little Rock, Malvern, Arkadelphia, Hope, and Texarkana, as shown below.

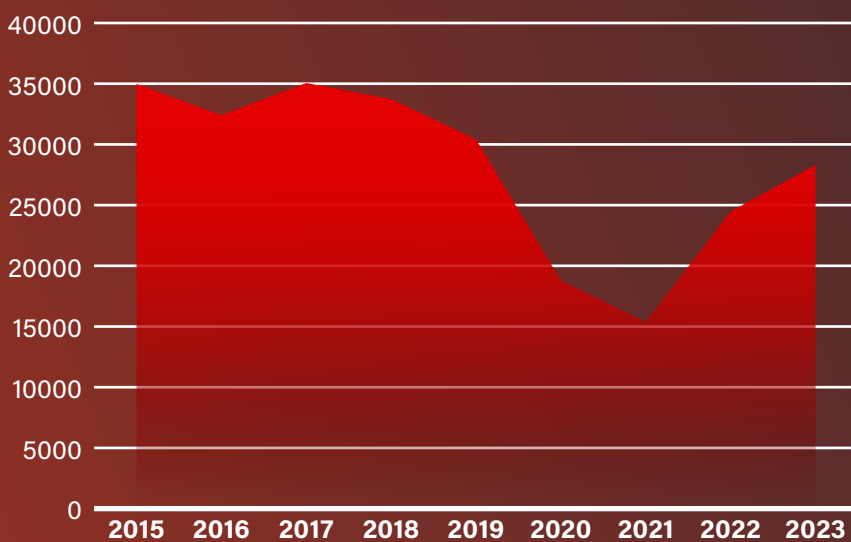
Arkansas Passenger Rail Network



Union Station
(Little Rock)

Since the development of the 2015 SRP, ridership along the Texas Eagle in Arkansas has dropped from a high of approximately 35,000. This decline was in line with ridership levels across the entire Texas Eagle corridor. However, demand for passenger rail has begun to rebound, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. From a low of approximately 15,000 passengers in 2021, ridership on the Texas Eagle surged by 60 percent to nearly 25,000 in 2022, then exceeded 28,000 in 2023 and 37,000 in 2024. The growth of ridership on the Texas Eagle route in Arkansas was higher than the rest of the route from 2023 to 2024, which experienced growth of nearly 11 percent. Little Rock is the state’s busiest station, with over half of the state’s ridership.

Arkansas Total Ridership, 2015 to 2023



2023 Ridership by Station

<i>Little Rock</i>	<i>16,474</i>
<i>Texarkana</i>	<i>5,293</i>
<i>Walnut Ridge</i>	<i>2,617</i>
<i>Malvern</i>	<i>1,464</i>
<i>Hope</i>	<i>1,417</i>
<i>Arkadelphia</i>	<i>1,050</i>

Since the development of the 2015 SRP, important updates impacting the Arkansas rail network include:

MERGERS

Formally approved by the Surface Transportation Board (STB) in 2023, Canadian Pacific and Kansas City Southern have officially merged into a new railroad known as Canadian Pacific Kansas City Limited (CPKC). The new railroad, which includes trackage across most of western Arkansas, becomes the first to link Canada, Mexico, and the United States, and could result in increased rail activity through Arkansas.

POSITIVE TRAIN CONTROL

Positive Train Control (PTC) has been fully implemented across all required portions of the statewide rail network. Mandated through the Rail Safety Act of 2008, PTC implementation is a valuable tool to prevent train-to-train collisions, over-speed derailments, incursions into established work zones, and movements of trains through switches left in the wrong position. The benefits of PTC implementation should be seen in years to come through reductions in overall incidents, injuries, and fatalities.

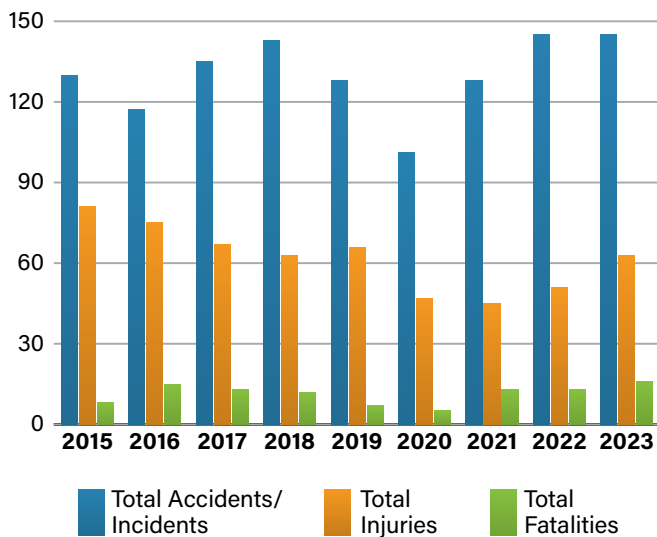
Safety

Safety is ARDOT's top priority. As a result of both innovations in the field of transportation safety and targeted investments made across the state, rail is one of the safest modes of freight and passenger transportation. However, safety remains a key topic of concern for many rail system stakeholders, who see an ongoing need to improve overall safety, including the safety of highway-rail grade crossings.

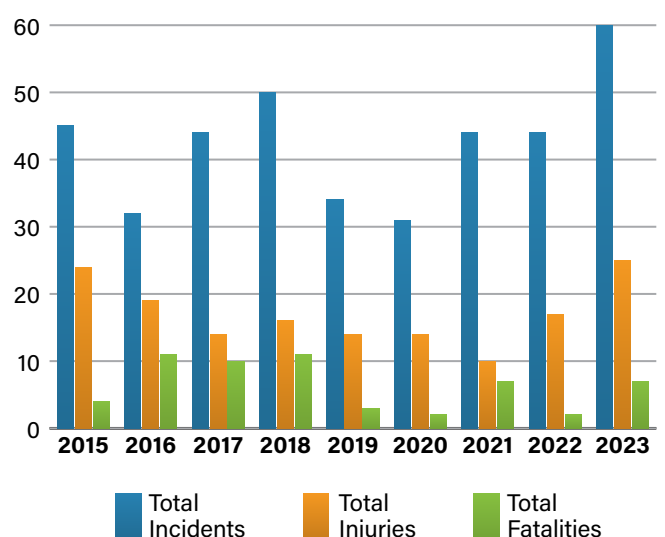
SAFETY INDICATORS

From 2015 to 2023, total rail incidents ranged from a low of 101 incidents in 2020 to a high of 145 incidents in 2022 and 2023. During the COVID-19 pandemic, total incidents dropped, but subsequently rebounded, corresponding in part to increases in rail and total traffic. However, after peaking at 81 in 2015, injuries followed a declining trend from 2015 to 2023. Fatalities, although rare, have remained elevated in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, with 16 fatalities recorded in 2023. These figures highlight the importance of proactive planning that maximizes safety in the transport of goods and passengers alike.

Arkansas Rail Accidents/Incidents & Safety Metrics (2015 to 2023)



Arkansas Highway-Rail Grade Crossing Incidents & Safety Metrics (2015 to 2023)



When specifically considering incidents occurring at highway-rail grade crossings, the number of incidents, injuries, and fatalities have fluctuated since 2015, but the overall trend has remained flat. Targeted investments in crossing protections, grade separations, as well as other mitigation measures will be key to improving these metrics over time.

In Arkansas, total incidents involving hazardous materials transported by rail have been both rare and minor. Between 2015 and 2023, annual incidents ranged between 5 and 15, with no discernible trends. It is also noted that only two of these incidents involved hospitalizations. When considering the overall annual tonnage and traffic transported by rail and along the statewide rail network, this range of annual incidents yields an approximately 99.9 percent success rate of hazardous material transport.

Grade crossing safety is of paramount importance for communities in Arkansas located along rail lines. There continues to be a need for improved infrastructure across grade crossings, including upgraded alert systems, protection devices, and additional grade separations.

Idling trains, particularly in at-grade crossings, can impact traffic operations and quality of life in local communities.

Given the recent high-profile train derailments that have involved hazardous materials in the United States, stakeholders remain concerned about this traffic through Arkansas. Deploying emergency response equipment and resources at designated locations along high traffic rail corridors could help ease concerns.

Rail System Needs

Through an examination of existing conditions, and guided by extensive stakeholder input, some key rail system needs were identified:

ADDITIONAL CAPACITY

Targeted investments to allow for the operation of additional and heavier trains.

IMPROVEMENT & ELIMINATION OF AT-GRADE CROSSINGS

Reduce the number of at-grade crossings, the most effective way to improve the safety of highway-rail interactions, as well as targeted infrastructure and protection upgrades when elimination of the at-grade crossing is not feasible.

SYSTEM ENHANCEMENTS

Increase the economic competitiveness of the system through the addition of spurs and sidings.

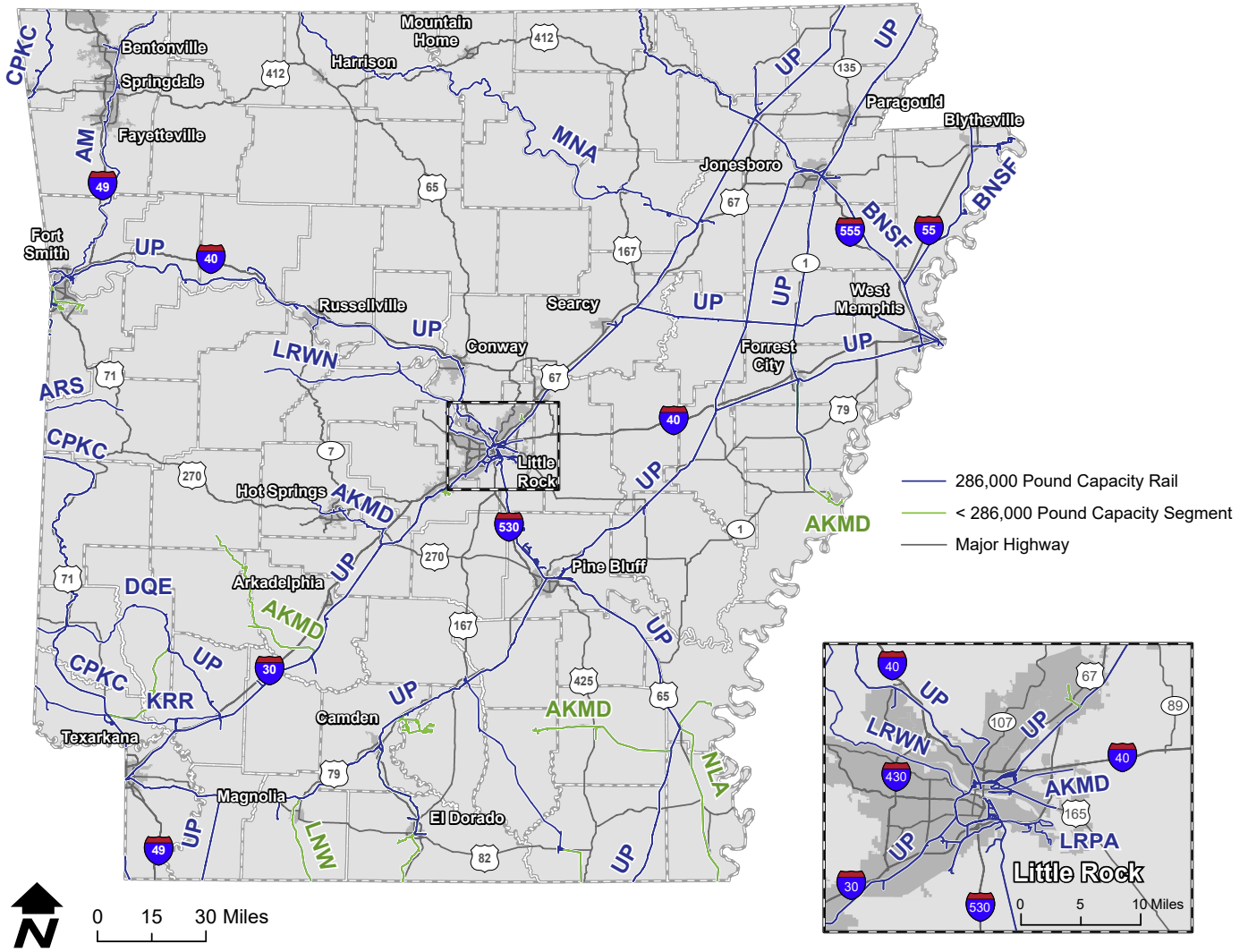
TRACK QUALITY & WEIGHT RESTRICTIONS

Upgrades targeted at ensuring that the rail network is up to a 286,000 pound weight standard, especially in the southern region of the state.



*Union Pacific Track
(Pope County)*

Arkansas Rail Network Weight Restrictions



Memphis & Arkansas Bridge over Mississippi River

Specific needs and challenges related to passenger rail include:

SERVICE PARAMETERS

Passenger rail service along Amtrak's Texas Eagle is operated only once per day in each direction. In Arkansas, this occurs exclusively during the nighttime hours. Operated along freight railroad-owned tracks, many of the challenges and needs facing freight railroads also impact passenger rail service.

SERVICE EXPANSION

In line with national trends, there is renewed interest in increasing intercity passenger service. In Arkansas, this includes additional services to other portions of the state, as well as new stations.



*Missouri & Northern Arkansas Bridge
over North Fork River (Norfolk)*



Concrete Ties

Freight Rail Opportunities

Demand for effective and reliable freight rail service is expected to grow in the coming decades. To address current needs and the growth of freight rail demand, the SRP identifies capital investment projects across the Arkansas rail network, grouped into the following categories:

IMPROVEMENT & ELIMINATION OF AT-GRADE CROSSINGS

At-grade crossing projects specifically address the needs of Arkansas' nearly 2,500 highway-rail at-grade crossings. ARDOT's funding from the Railway-Highway Crossings Program (also known as Section 130) can be utilized to address these needs by installing protective equipment and funding other eligible project types.

ADDITIONAL CAPACITY

Through the construction of additional mainline trackage, new right-of-way (ROW) trackage, upgrades to accommodate increased weight (286,000 pound weight standard), and general projects aimed at reducing rail traffic congestion and increasing system capacity. The majority of projects identified in the SRP fall under this category.

SYSTEM ENHANCEMENTS

Related projects include the construction of new sidings, roadways, and other necessary infrastructure to access businesses and facilitate improved rail access.

IMPROVED UTILITIES

Utility projects are identified as addressing the needs of supporting infrastructure systems, such as drainage or energy systems.

ACCELERATED MAINTENANCE

Accelerated maintenance projects are capital investments aimed at addressing maintenance needs associated with the system, including to prevent and mitigate wear and tear damage to railroad tracks and other railroad infrastructure.

Passenger Rail Opportunities

Passenger rail is an often overlooked component of the state's multimodal transportation system. The development of this SRP comes at an exciting time for passenger rail both within Arkansas and across the United States. Nationally, intercity rail ridership demand has continued to increase. There is also an ongoing effort to bolster the nationwide rail network.

Since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, ridership in Arkansas has continued to increase. As indicated through multiple channels of stakeholder input, the presence of intercity passenger rail service is viewed as a significant benefit to Arkansas by improving connectivity through the state and spurring economic development.

Stakeholders point to a need for increased passenger rail investments as a means of improving mobility and connectivity both within Arkansas and to major destinations outside Arkansas.

Through each of the utilized outreach efforts, stakeholders noted the importance and potential of the state's passenger rail service:

Nearly **95% of respondents** to the outreach survey see the **presence of passenger rail service as "Important" or "Very Important" to Arkansas' economy.**

There is a **strong desire for passenger rail service to additional portions of the state outside of the Texas Eagle corridor**, especially Northwest Arkansas. There is also strong desire for service to additional towns within the Texas Eagle corridor, including Bald Knob, as well as interest in providing service to nearby communities such as Jonesboro.

In conjunction with service improvements such as additional frequency and increased reliability, **Amtrak could see increased ridership in Arkansas** as a result of increased vehicular traffic congestion and rising gas prices.

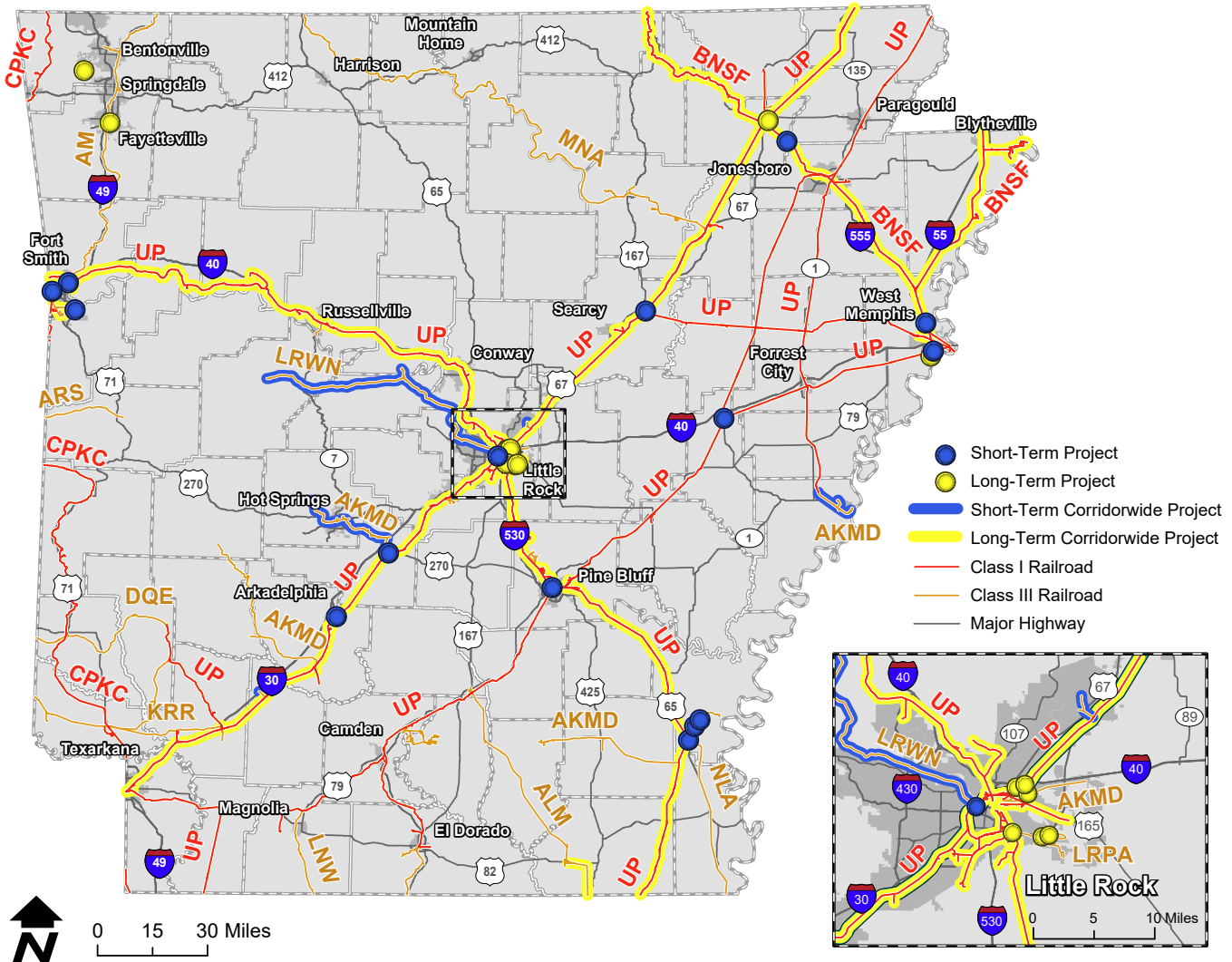
There is a strong desire for increased passenger rail service in Arkansas. This includes:

New stations along the Texas Eagle corridor, including at Bald Knob.

Increased frequency and reliability of the existing Texas Eagle service.

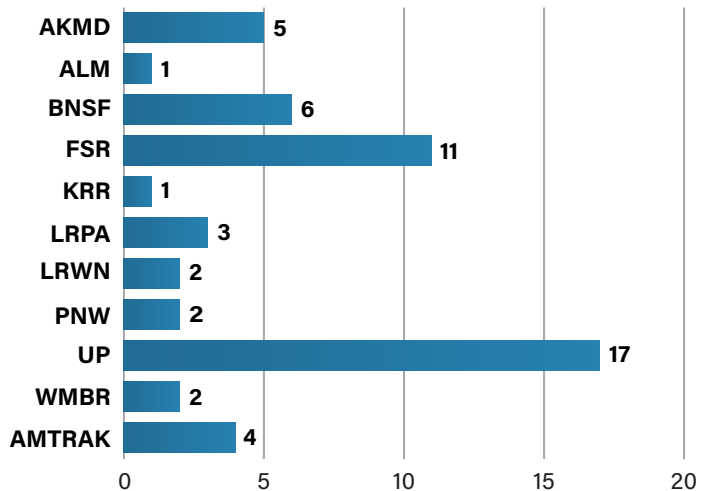
Expanded passenger rail service in Northwest, Central, and Northeast Arkansas, and to connect these cities and regions to out-of-state destinations such as Memphis or Kansas City.

Freight & Passenger Rail Investment Plan Projects



The investments shown on the map are proposed, and would be implemented by Amtrak or the state's freight railroads. These projects are anticipated to produce multiple benefits for Arkansas, such as improved safety, network reliability, and additional capacity to accommodate increased economic activity and service expansions. ARDOT supports the implementation of rail system improvement projects and will continue to coordinate with the state's railroads as needed as these projects commence. ARDOT will also continue to play a role in improving safety by investing Section 130 funding to address highway-rail grade crossing safety needs. While not shown on the map, ARDOT is currently working with Class I and Class III railroads to develop and implement 32 Section 130 projects across the state.

Investments by Railroad



What's Next?

As Arkansas' diverse economy continues to grow and evolve, a safe, reliable, and efficient rail system will be critical to the movement of goods and people alike. In the coming decades, rail tonnage is expected to increase and with it economic value, highlighting the need for proactive and sound rail planning. Similarly, passenger rail demand is expected to increase. With a focus on rail, this SRP is meant to build on previous and continuing multimodal transportation planning efforts. ARDOT's role in statewide rail planning includes coordinating with the state's railroads to make highway improvements, administering Section 130 formula funding to address highway-rail grade crossing safety needs, and facilitating rail planning efforts. Recognizing the importance and value of rail as a component of the statewide multimodal transportation network, ARDOT will continue to support and encourage investment in the statewide rail system.

Key takeaways for the implementation of this State Rail Plan include:

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES & PARTNERSHIPS

One of the most important and valuable benefits of the development of this SRP is improving access to additional funding opportunities & partnerships. Enacted in 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provides \$102 billion in rail funding appropriated and funded through 2026 across more than ten funding programs and grant opportunities. This SRP provides a foundation for proposed projects in Arkansas to increase competitiveness for these valuable grant opportunities. Additionally, the SRP provides a strong foundation for continued dialogue and coordination with key stakeholders, including neighboring states. These potential partnerships can further strengthen the case for additional targeted rail and multimodal investments across the state.

SAFETY

Recognizing the opportunities and concerns highlighted by stakeholders, ARDOT will continue to support and implement an overall strategy that emphasizes safety at highway-rail grade crossings. ARDOT welcomes opportunities to develop relationships with railroad owners/operators and local stakeholders to address concerns, mitigate negative impacts, and ensure a safe rail system. ARDOT also supports the implementation of new and innovative technologies to further enhance safety across the entire rail and multimodal network.

A FRAMEWORK OF SUCCESSFUL PLANNING

The insight gathered from this process of research, collaboration, and outreach helps to create a comprehensive assessment of the valuable and dynamic statewide rail system. Although an early step in the process, the plan identifies and supports opportunities for increased investments across the statewide rail network, to serve both freight and passenger needs.

ARDOT remains committed to delivering a modern transportation system to enhance safety and quality of life in Arkansas, emphasizing core values of Safety, Trust, Excellence, Accountability, and Modern Innovation. While ARDOT does not finance, own, operate, or maintain any rail infrastructure or services, ARDOT is also committed to engaging with the state's railroad owners, operators, and other stakeholders, recognizing that there are many mutually-beneficial opportunities to improve the multimodal transportation system.

AR DOT

ARKANSAS DEPARTMENT
OF TRANSPORTATION

www.ardot.gov
2025



WE MOVE
ARKANSAS RAIL