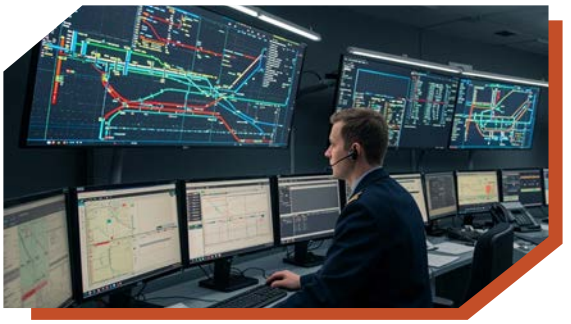
Inside THE RAIL
From NASA's Confidential Close Call Reporting System
ISSUE 31 JANUARY 2026



Train Dispatcher Reports

Train Dispatchers coordinate rail traffic movement while ensuring both efficiency and operational safety. Some railroad Train Dispatchers are also Power Supervisors, Power Directors, and Load Dispatchers, who each distribute electric power for the propulsion of commuter trains. Train Dispatchers work closely with Train and Engine service employees, Bridge Operators, and Maintenance of Way employees.

Although Train Dispatchers serve in various roles, their steadfast commitment to service unites them all. They work under intense pressure in dynamic safety-critical environments, keeping America's railroads moving safely and efficiently around the clock, every day.

Train Dispatchers began coordinating rail traffic movement in the early 1900s using paper and ink pens. They now use very sophisticated computers and electronics to control wayside signals, track switches, and on-rail movements.

Train Dispatchers are essential for the safety of all rail operations, some of which are thousands of miles away from their location. They are governed by numerous operating rules, manuals, timetables, instructions, and work under extreme scrutiny.

In this newsletter, we will examine several reports that were submitted to C³RS by Train Dispatchers.

Under Pressure

This Train Dispatcher reported various stressors including workload, combined territories, out of service tracks, a signal problem, time pressure, and supervisory pressure which contributed to the incident described below.

■ *There was a switch failure at Control Point (CP) X. I had to give Train A verbal permission past Signal X after first trying to display a signal. I failed to apply switch blocks for the move. A contributing factor was that I was working a combined territory. Earlier in the shift we had a signal problem plus, I was clearing up track work from the previous shift, and I was being pressured by Management who was standing directly behind me calling out moves.*

C³RS Expert Analyst's Callback Summary:

The reporter, a Dispatcher, stated that the Manager on duty responded by shouting instructions, and speaking in an aggressive tone. The reporter described the communication as, "Screaming and yelling," which the reporter felt created additional stress during a very busy and challenging situation. The reporter mentioned that it was a very busy time with multiple tracks Out of Service and the switch failure compounding train congestion. The reporter added that the route was locked, and blocking was applied to the signal, but not the switch. The reporter noted that each segment needs to be blocked separately as there is no block-all feature in the Dispatching System software…

Get the Entire Picture When Covering for a Dispatcher

In this report, a Dispatcher covered for another Dispatcher who was in the restroom. The Dispatcher didn't have all the information needed to cover the position.

■ *I was working as Dispatcher X on Territory X....Dispatcher Y went to the restroom, so I assisted and answered a call. The Local Dispatcher told me that Engine A had cleared west into Yard X… So, I repeated, "Engine A is clear west into Yard X clear of Subdivision X, Track X between Interlocking X and Interlocking Y, okay to remove blocking devices." Train A was on the approach to Interlocking X, the Local Dispatcher unblocked and gave the signal to Train A. Dispatcher Y returned, stopped Train A, and took back control of Territory Y. The blocking protection was up on our end because of cables hanging near the tracks that I thought had been cleaned up. In hindsight, I should have clarified with the Local Dispatcher what exactly the blocking protection was for…*

C³RS Expert Analyst's Callback Summary:

The reporter, a Dispatcher, stated that even though blocking protection applied by Dispatchers is labeled, the reporter did not notice the reason for the blocking protection prior to removing it. The reporter explained that not confirming with the Local Dispatcher what the blocking protection was for was the reason for the incident. In the future, the reporter will confirm what the blocking protection is for prior to removing it.

Use Caution When Voiding Track Bulletins

This Train Dispatcher used an out-of-date version of an issued Track Bulletin to void Temporary Speed Restrictions to Train Crews.

■ *Due to extreme temperatures, a revised Track Bulletin was sent out to Crews with a new time...My Manager provided me a new printed copy of the Track Bulletin. When giving the cancellation to the trains, I read off the item number, restriction, and all applicable information. It wasn't until the third Crew I was talking to that I realized that there was a discrepancy on my Track Bulletin. The Crews were repeating the correct cancellation limits, speeds, track, and times, but the item number was different. I then reviewed the Track Bulletin with the Assistant Dispatcher Supervisor and an additional Dispatcher and realized that the time effective on that one page of my Track Bulletin where I was issuing the cancellations of speed restrictions had the correct Track Bulletin number, correct date, but had a different time…This was the sheet that I had gotten in the afternoon from my Manager. I then reached out to any remaining Crews on my territory and verified that the limits that we cancelled were correct regardless of the item number as I had it incorrect but wanted to make sure, they were aware of the updated speeds for the locations to be traversed. The Crews confirmed that they had it correct regardless of the item number.*

C³RS Expert Analyst's Callback Summary:

The reporter, a Dispatcher, stated when the limits were voided, the reporter marked up the printed copy on the desk with the wrong color pen. The reporter asked the Dispatcher Supervisor for another printed copy of the Track Bulletin and was given a draft copy and not the issued copy the Crews were receiving. The reporter was unaware of the discrepancy. When verifying the limits when voiding the Temporary Speed Restrictions with the Crews, the reporter noted that the limits were correct; however, line numbers given were incorrect, and the reporter was focused on making sure the limits were correct. The reporter stated it was a busy day, especially with the added workload of the Temporary Speed Restrictions due to the weather…

Train Sequence Matters

In the following report, several freight trains departed a yard with little time between their departures. The Dispatcher and the Computer Aided Dispatching System (CAD) did not have the correct sequence of train departures.

■ *Yard X sent out six freight trains back-to-back with little space between them. The symbols track over my territory automatically by the use of the CAD. After traversing fifty miles on Subdivision X, [the] CAD planned for an east bounder and west bounder to meet at the siding at Location X. Once the trains were at the location anticipating the meet, they toned me up on the radio to tell me neither one of them would fit between the switches. I confirmed their lead locomotive number and discovered that upon departing Yard X, two train symbols had switched places. What CAD and I understood to be a meet between a 6,000 foot and 9,000-foot train was in fact an 8,000 foot and 9,000-foot meet that would not be possible in the 7,600-foot siding. The west bound train then had to shove back three miles to get to a location where the meet could be possible.*

C³RS Expert Analyst's Callback Summary:

The reporter, a Dispatcher, stated a Manager asked the reporter to reset the CAD and remained in the cubicle until it was complete…The reporter stated one of the symbols…fell off the screen. The reporter further explained that since several trains were coming out of the yard back-to-back, the reporter didn't realize the symbol had dropped off the screen, which had never happened before. The reporter then moved the next logical train symbol to the track indication. The reporter stated that when it was determined that the symbol fell off the CAD it was relayed to the reporter that this is a known issue with the CAD that has been ongoing for a long time. The reporter suggested fixing known issues with CAD or at least letting dispatchers know of the issue if it cannot be fixed.

Did You Know?

NASA C³RS has mobile friendly report forms so you can submit your report from your mobile device! Also, when you submit a C³RS report, a NASA C³RS Expert Analyst may call you to get more information or to better understand the safety issues you are sharing. It is very important that you return our call as soon as possible so that your identification (ID) strip (sent by the U.S. Mail) can be returned to you quickly.

The incoming call on your phone will not say NASA, but will be from **area code 650 or 217**. Remember, the more information you include in your report, the faster the ID strip can be returned to you!

Report Intake By Craft January through December 2025	
Transportation	4,605
Engineering	203
Mechanical	193
Not Specified	1

C³RS
Inside The Rail
Issue 31
January 2026
https://c3rs.arc.nasa.gov

Monthly Report Intake Previous 3 Months	
October	412
November	358
December	414