

RAILROAD WEEK IN REVIEW

October 7, 2022

“When there is a significant difference in level of experience between operating crew members... A less experienced employee may be reluctant to question the actions of a more senior employee or intervene in the operation of the train even when it may be critical to do so.” — Trains, September, 2022, re CN accident in January, 2019

“By allowing for more efficient transfer of cargo directly between ships and rail, the Barstow International Gateway will maximize rail and distribution efficiency regionally and across the U.S. supply chain and reduce truck traffic and freeway congestion in the Los Angeles Basin and the Inland Empire,” — Katie Farmer, BNSF President and CEO

“The September ISM Manufacturing Index dropped to 50.9 from 52.8 in August. A number above 50.0 is indicative of expansion, yet the lower reading versus August points to a deceleration in overall manufacturing activity. September marked the 28th consecutive month of expansion in the manufacturing sector, yet it was the lowest reading since May 2020.” — Briefing.com, October 3

We spend so much of our time on railroad matters from carloads to customers to locomotives and finance that we tend not to think about the up-and-comers who will keep today’s trains running tomorrow. The 2022 “Rising Stars” featured in the September *Progressive Railroading* recognizes 25 men and women in their thirties who have chosen the railroad for their careers.

They count among their employers shortline operating companies with multiple properties, Class Is, public transit authorities, Amtrak, and suppliers of everything from freight cars to project management. There are track supervisors, lawyers, marketeers, financiers, and business analysts. And their profiles include a few remarks on Why I Joined the Railroad as well as Advice for Others New to Railroading.

The common thread in the Advice category is one of getting out on the railroad, learning from the old heads, and mentoring others new to the business. Adjusting to the 24/7 environment can be a challenge, but it goes with the job. Clearly, these Rising Stars embrace the hours and look for ways to expand their contributions.

A young woman from the Bronx is a track maintenance manager for the Metro North New Haven Line, has a BS from Syracuse, and signed on initially as an associate engineer to learn railroad operations. At UP, an up-and-comer in metals and ores

marketing works hard to “establish solid relationships” within the organization. The Director of Business Analytics at KCS has a master’s degree from Rockhurst University and uses her skills in analysis and problem-solving to identify new areas of opportunity.

These are only three picked at random. There are 22 more in the *Progressive* story — imagine how fortunate we are to have these relative youngsters and their many peers across North America working on the railroad.

BNSF is committing more than \$1.5 billion to construct a state-of-the-art master-planned rail facility in southern California. The eponymous Barstow International Gateway (“BIG”) will cover some 4,500 acres, consisting of a classification yard, an intermodal facility, and warehouses for transloading freight from international containers to domestic containers.

The facility will facilitate the direct first-mile/last-mile transfer of containers between the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to and from BNSF transcontinental trains out of and arriving at Barstow. The process will help keep LA/Long Beach competitive and will enhance fluidity throughout BNSF’s rail network, moving containers off the ports more quickly and improving efficiency in operations at existing intermodal hubs, particularly those in the Midwest and Texas.



“In the interim,” writes *Railway Age* Editor-in-Chief Bill Vantuono, “BNSF is making improvements to the existing San Bernardino Intermodal Facility at Barstow Yard, which opened in July 2019. This gap-closure project, slated for completion in 2024, will add approximately 4.3 miles of new fourth main track in two segments along the current BNSF corridor.”

Railway Age Contributing Editor Jim Blaze isn’t taking everything at face value. He adds, “The Barstow area is a logical location for BNSF. But is it the optimal location for California manufacturers, distributors, logisticians and State of California consumers? Challenges ahead include developing environmentally-balanced drayage services as well as the question of short-haul intermodal train operations as cost centers vs. high profit long-distance train centers for BNSF.”

Also weighing in we have intermodal guru Larry Gross: “Barstow is a strategic point in the BNSF system where the line for Northern California (Stockton, etc.) joins the main east-west Transcon route. This facility will provide a transload option for Oakland/Northern California traffic in both directions that currently largely does not exist. This creates the possibility for ‘reverse transloads,’ wherein the domestic container moves westbound with export cargo and the load is then moved into a ISO box for movement to either L.A. or Oakland for export.”

To which my long-time railroad consulting partner Chris Rooney adds, “Everyone is trying to solve the LA/Long Beach-to-elsewhere puzzle, and there are some holes nearer to the ports that need attention but are not within BNSF’s control, namely, the train staging at the ports and the spaghetti bowl at the north end of the Alameda Corridor.

“Historically, the big three for distribution, stripping, stuffing, and light processing have been Ontario, Riverside, and San Bernardino, where every square foot is spoken for. Some 70 miles east is Barstow on I-15, which basically co-occupies the rail alignment over Cajon. There, it appears BNSF wants to recycle some/all of Barstow’s massive operationally oriented division points yard.”

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