

RAILROAD WEEK IN REVIEW

February 20, 2026

“Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern each earned coveted spots on the 2026 Fortune’s World’s Most Admired Companies list as the only railroads in the Trucking, Transportation and Logistics category. The achievement underscores the shared values, operational excellence, and forward-looking commitments fueling the proposed Union Pacific-Norfolk Southern combination to create America’s first transcontinental railroad.” — UP Presser, Feb 6

“Montana Grain Elevators Association believes that Union Pacific and Norfolk Southern’s proposed merger presents significant risk for businesses like ours and the U.S. economy. We are concerned the merger will harm shippers and their customers by eliminating competition, disrupting service, weakening the U.S. supply chain, and increasing transportation rates. This would lead to higher costs for American businesses, making it harder for America to compete in global markets and harder for everyday Americans to afford basic necessities.” — MGEA letter to BNSF, Feb 2

“The railroads have been a hugely successful system, in terms of a regulated business. If you stop to think about it, the railroads of America have essentially been totally rebuilt in the last thirty to forty years. They’ve improved the tracks, changed the size of the tunnels, and improved the bridges. The average train can be more than twice as long and twice as heavy. You can hardly imagine a business that’s done a better job in adapting to the needs of the rest of us than the railroad industry.” — Charlie Munger, 2010 Berkshire Hathaway Annual Meeting

An eastbound Norfolk Southern manifest train from Conway to Enola derailed approximately 65 cars at about 0100 Friday, February 6, descending the east slope of Horseshoe Curve near Altoona, Pa.—an incident causing no injuries but underscoring once again the unforgiving physics of mountain-grade freight operations. There are two take-aways — operational and cultural.

Operationally, the incident illustrates the degree to which Norfolk Southern’s east-west franchise remains dependent on uninterrupted fluidity over a small number of mountain corridors. Horseshoe Curve is not merely symbolic geography; it is the functional artery linking Conway’s western classification complex with Enola’s eastern distribution node and onward connections into the Northeast.

Horseshoe Curve's service interruption serves as a reminder that the credibility of *any* railroad rests not on uninterrupted operation, but on the robustness and transparency of its recovery under stress. In that sense, the significance of the February 6 derailment lies less in the cars on the ground than in what the episode reveals about the present operating posture—and institutional self-awareness—of Norfolk Southern.

The multi-day blockage at this location predictably propagated congestion outward in both directions, delaying merchandise flows, straining yard balance, and disrupting interchange timing for connecting carriers. That Amtrak service was annulled underscores the extent to which the line was rendered temporarily unavailable as a transportation corridor, not simply impaired as a freight route.

Culturally, the railroad's notably restrained public posture following the incident marks a departure from prior practice, when service advisories and customer guidance would accompany disruptions of this magnitude. Norfolk Southern's relative silence suggests an institutional communications discipline shaped less by the operating event itself than by the broader regulatory and reputational environment in which the company now finds itself. With merger proceedings and post-East Palestine scrutiny continuing to frame perceptions of operating resilience, the railroad appears to be managing not only service recovery but also narrative exposure.

NS — and PRR/Conrail before them — always treated The Curve as needing no introduction. So what we have here is something more durable than a mere incident report. We now have a character study under load—the physical railroad tested by gravity and steel, and the institutional railroad tested by scrutiny and consequence.

Regular WIR readers will recognize both, especially those who have dispatched trains, managed interchanges, or sat across from regulators who listen as closely for what is not said as for what is. And I've tried to reframe it at exactly the right scale. Not overwrought. Not accusatory. Just observant.

Consider: Horseshoe Curve is not just another main line segment. It is the Keystone Corridor between Conway and Enola, carrying everything NS handles between Chicago and the Harrisburg/Northeast markets. A multi-day plug there is equivalent to a temporary severing of NS's eastern arterial system. Which makes the silence odd.

Most worrisome of all, I found the absence of any press release on the incident quite telling. Usually, the PR folks are busily churning out pressers describing the event, minimizing the damage done, and outlining the steps/timeline NS has adopted to set things to right. Coverage of the East Palestine incident is instructive.

Since East Palestine, NS has adopted a markedly more cautious public posture around incidents. The lessons learned internally were not operational—they already knew how to re-rail trains—but reputational and regulatory. To me, the silence seeks to avoid triggering national media amplification; avoid providing adversarial ammunition to regulators; and avoid creating discoverable public statements usable in litigation. And so pressers are now risk-managed through a legal lens first, operating lens second.

This only reinforces my suspicion that NS is in hunker-down mode, and, if so, the silence speaks for itself. Railroads do not go radio silent over a multi-day blockage at Horseshoe Curve — unless the communications calculus has shifted.

Fact is, merger proceedings have put the railroad in a quasi-public-utility mode. Every derailment becomes politically relevant, not merely operationally relevant. In that environment, the communications objective shifts from transparency to narrative containment. And the evils of financialization firmly take hold.

In this, NS is already behaving like a railroad under merger adjudication. That means communications to the outside world have become centralized with the narrative tightly controlled and public disclosure minimized. As a result, we're seeing shipper groups arguing service fragility and critics claiming systemic vulnerability.

To sum up: In ordinary times, a derailment at Horseshoe Curve is an operating problem to be fixed. In the present moment, it is also something more: a reminder that Norfolk Southern's performance is now being measured not just in tonnage moved, but in confidence sustained. Will UP say, "Oh well, never mind," at some point?

Note: ChatGPT assisted with certain operational background and historical framing. The analysis and opinions expressed are entirely my own.

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