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Deadline extension sought for system to avoid train crashes

Metrolink, which is racing to install such a system in the wake of the deadly Chatsworth crash, blasts the national transit coalition's request. Feinstein and the NTSB also object.

By Rich Connell, Los Angeles Times

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The nation's leading coalition of local transit agencies wants Congress to delay a key rail safety reform prompted by the deadly Metrolink commuter disaster three years ago in Chatsworth.

Citing funding and technical challenges, the influential American Public Transportation Assn. is asking for a three-year extension on a 2015 deadline to roll out a high-tech collision avoidance system for the nation's major passenger railroads.

The request, expected to be presented Thursday at a Washington hearing, has drawn fire from California's senior U.S. senator and Southern California's Metrolink rail system, which is racing to complete the nation's first so-called positive train control system, or PTC, by the end of next year.

"I am extremely disappointed that some in the rail industry would try to delay a life-saving measure — putting cost ahead of the safety of passengers," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.). "They know the law; they know how to avoid collisions and save lives, but once again are trying to avoid responsibility."

Modern PTC systems use positioning data from satellites, computers and radio signals to keep track of trains' speed and location, and take over controls when necessary to avoid collisions and derailments.

After the Chatsworth crash, Feinstein authored a landmark mandate to deploy PTC systems nationwide. Federal investigators found that the 2008 head-on crash with a Union Pacific freight train occurred after a Metrolink engineer, distracted by text messaging, ran a red light. It was one of the costliest and deadliest train accidents in recent U.S. history, killing 25 and injuring more than 130. PTC could have prevented the collision, investigators found.

"We believe every day that goes by that we don't have PTC we see risk to the traveling public," said Deborah A.P. Hersman, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, which has pushed for automatic train control systems since the 1970s. "This is not something that is an

overnight mandate for railroads.... It's a matter of finding the will to do it."

But the transportation association said this week that "an overwhelming majority of the nation's commuter railroads" have concluded that technology issues, questions surrounding radio frequency availability and lack of federal funding "make nationwide implementation by the deadline impossible." The association's president, William Millar, said the group remained committed to deploying the safety systems when feasible and pressing for more federal funding, particularly for pioneering agencies like Metrolink.

He also said that "this important safety mandate jeopardizes other important commuter railroad safety priorities. Safety projects on older, aging systems, such as bridge and track bed improvements, cannot be ignored."

Metrolink officials fear that slippage on the national PTC deadline could lead to delays and increased costs for their \$200-million system, which is funded largely with local and state money. Federal officials could feel less urgency to resolve radio signal issues, they said. And private companies may have less incentive to swiftly develop new train control technologies needed to link the sophisticated system together. "When anyone starts talking about pushing back the deadline, that's a threat," said John Fenton, Metrolink's chief executive officer.

The agency's board chairman, Richard Katz, said the objections to the deadline are reminiscent of those raised by the rail industry for years before the Chatsworth crash. "It's business as usual," he said. PTC, used by foreign countries and on some U.S. urban transit networks, is "probably the most significant innovation in public safety, from a railroad perspective, that will come along in our lifetime," he said.

Metrolink shouldn't face setbacks if the nationwide delay is granted, an American Public Transportation Assn. spokeswoman said. "We think that having contractors focus on Metrolink would be good. The rest of the industry could benefit from this," Virginia Miller wrote in an e-mail.

Still, the NTSB is "very disappointed" by talk of delaying the national mandate, Hersman said. "Metrolink wasn't the first accident that could have been prevented by PTC and it won't be won't be the last, until we get [what] the law requires."

rich.connell@latimes.com

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