

Safety is his job



It's safety first as Chris Fogus, railroad car inspector for the Public Utility Commission, takes a look.

Ask Chris Fogus what is the most important thing about railroading in Oregon and he'll say "safety."

"My primary purpose is to make sure things are as safe as possible for the public and railroad employees," says Fogus, one of a two-man team of railroad car inspectors for Oregon Public Utility Commissioner John Lobdell.

Like a pair of detectives, Fogus and Lee Robertson spend their days probing, measuring and eyeballing everything from wheels to handholds to make sure nothing is cracked, loose, missing or worn out.

Fogus's territory is from Salem south; Robertson works the Portland area from the coast east to Ontario. Together they inspect about 3,200 railroad cars a month.

Fogus, who had about 13 years of experience in railroad car repair and inspection before joining the PUC staff, says he pays close attention to safety items on cars he inspects, such as handholds and steps.

When a guy steps up there he's got a right to know something is there to hold onto and that it's solid," he says.

The PUC inspectors enforce Federal Railway Administration regulations and are paid partly by the federal government.

"The railroads don't want the cars to stack up and don't want to hurt anybody," he says, so in most cases repairs are made right away. In the few cases where there is a lack of cooperation, there can be stiff fines for the railroad.

Fogus pays extra-close attention to cars carrying hazardous materials. "The thing that scares us most are hazardous materials that go through Oregon," he says.

Railroads are required to notify state officials of any rail car passing through the state with poison gas or "A" type explosives such as missiles.

Fogus keeps a separate log of inspections on those types of cars and will go out of his way to inspect cars carrying any hazardous material, such as chlorine or propane.

Most of the time defects the inspectors spot are minor -- loose bolts or lack of oil in a wheel bearing. But Fogus is always on the lookout for serious problems and occasionally gets what he calls a "good catch."

One "good catch" recently was a crack in the body bolster, the main support on a chlorine gas tanker car, a defect that could have caused a serious accident.

The car was immediately taken out of service and ordered back to the company for repairs.

"That's the kind of thing that makes this job worthwhile," Fogus says.

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