

Regulating Idaho's railroads

More than 900 miles of railroad track in Idaho have been abandoned since 1976. Federal law governs rail line abandonments. The federal Surface Transportation Board decides the final outcome of abandonment applications. Under Idaho law, however, after a railroad files its federal notice of intent to abandon, the IPUC must determine whether the proposed abandonment would adversely affect the public interest. The commission then reports its findings to the STB.

In reaching a conclusion, the commission considers whether abandonment would adversely affect the service area, impair market access or access of Idaho communities to vital goods and services, and whether the line has a potential for profitability.

The Idaho Public Utilities Commission also conducts inspections of Idaho's railroads to determine compliance with state and federal laws, rules and regulations concerning the transportation of hazardous materials, locomotive cab safety and sanitation rules, and railroad/highway grade crossings.

Hazardous material inspections are conducted in rail yards and at shipping facilities. In 1994, Idaho was invited to participate in the Federal Railroad Administration's State Participation Program. IPUC has a State Program Manager and one FRA certified hazardous material inspector.

The number of inspections decreased this year from previous years because the rail inspector position was vacant during most months of the year.

The IPUC inspects railroad-highway grade crossings where incidents occur, investigates citizen complaints of unsafe or rough crossings and conducts railroad-crossing surveys.

Railroad Activity Summary 2006

Inspections	229
Rail cars inspected	1799
Violations	6
Rail cars with defects	319
Crossing accidents investigated	270
Crossing complaints	3
Locomotives Inspected	147
Defects within locomotives inspected	192

Operation Lifesaver

Idaho Operation Lifesaver is a non-profit state organization dedicated to increasing public awareness of the potential dangers that exist at highway/rail grade crossings and around trains in general.

Volunteers from various sponsoring groups and other interested individuals staff the organization. Volunteer staff members talk to about 130,000 people each year at presentations and safety booths. Because of the IPUC's railroad safety oversight, it has taken a leading role in sponsoring and supporting Operation Lifesaver. IPUC staff members participate by making presentations to groups, manning safety booths and serving on the board and various committees.

It is the intent of the program to achieve its goal by using:

Education – Educate the public about trains by providing safety presentations and by operating informational booths.

Engineering – Work with government entities, businesses and railroads to improve highway/rail intersections.

Enforcement – Work with law enforcement agencies and railroads to enforce traffic laws pertaining to highway/rail intersections.

Railroads in Idaho

Palouse River Railroad

709 N. 10th St, Walla Walla, WA, 90362
509.522.1464
Idaho track miles: 2

Great Northwest Railroad

PO Box 116, Lewiston, ID, 83501
208.743.2559
Idaho track miles: 118

Idaho Northern & Pacific

PO Box 715, Emmett, ID, 83617
208.365.6353
Idaho track miles: 102

St. Maries River Railroad

318 N. 10th St., St. Maries, ID, 83861
208.245.4531
Idaho track miles: 71

BG&CM Railroad, Inc.

PO Box 1759, Orofino, ID, 83544
208.476.7938
Idaho track miles: 75

Burlington Northern Railroad

176 E. Fifth St., St. Paul, MN, 55101
208.263.2016
Idaho track miles: 194

Eastern Idaho Railroad

618 Shoshone St. West, Twin Falls, ID, 83301
208.733.4686
Idaho track miles: 267

Montana Rail Link

PO Box 8779, Missoula, MT, 59807
406.523.1500
Idaho track miles: 34

Union Pacific Railroad

1416 Dodge St., Omaha, NE, 68179
208.343.1771
Idaho track miles: 1,096

Consumer Assistance

The Consumer Assistance staff responded to 2,804 consumer complaints, comments or inquiries in calendar year 2005, of which 92 percent were from residential customers. **The total number of complaints is decreased from 2004, when complaints totaled 3,321.**

Breakdown of complaints by type of utility

Complaints regarding telecommunications companies:	46 percent
Complaints regarding energy (electric, gas) companies:	37 percent
Complaints regarding water companies:	6 percent
Non-utility related complaints:	12 percent
<i>(Qwest Communications had 38 percent of telecommunication complaints; Idaho Power had 44 percent and Intermountain Gas 33 percent of energy utility complaints and United Water had 38 percent of water complaints.)</i>	

Summary of service quality issues:

Disputed billings	28 percent
Credit and collection issues	25 percent
Miscellaneous	23 percent
Utility rates and policies	14 percent
Telecommunications issues	6 percent
Line extensions and service upgrades	4 percent

While dispute resolution remains an important task, it is hoped that by working with consumer groups, social service agencies, and utilities, persistent causes of consumer difficulties can be identified and addressed.

Consumer complaints present an opportunity for utilities and the commission to learn the effect of utility practices and policies on people. For example, the unintentional and perhaps unfair impact of a rule or regulation might be discovered in the course of investigating a complaint. In such cases an informal, negotiated remedy may not be possible, and formal action by the commission would be required. The Consumer Assistance Staff's participation in formal rate and policy cases before the commission is the primary method used to address these issues.

The Consumer Assistance Staff is able to respond to many consumer contacts without extensive investigation. **About 57 percent of consumer contacts required investigation by the staff. About 55 percent of investigations resulted in reversal or modification of the utilities' original action.**

Toll-Free Complaint Line

The commission, in January 1992, established a toll-free telephone line for receiving utility complaints and inquiries from consumers outside the Boise area. The toll-free line **(1-800-432-0369)** is reserved for inquiries and complaints concerning utilities.

Consumers may also file a complaint electronically via the commission's Website at www.puc.idaho.gov. Although the majority of customers still contact the PUC via telephone, 6 percent contacted us through our Website to ask a question or file a complaint.