

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee  
on Railroads, Committee on  
Transportation and Infrastructure, House  
of Representatives

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August 2005

AMTRAK

Improved  
Management and  
Controls over Food  
and Beverage Service  
Needed



G A O

Accountability \* Integrity \* Reliability

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### Abbreviations

Amtrak	National Railroad Passenger Corporation
Gate Gourmet	Gate Gourmet International
VIA Rail	VIA Rail Canada

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United States Government Accountability Office  
Washington, D.C. 20548

August 24, 2005

The Honorable Stephen LaTourette  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Railroads  
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Because of the importance of food and beverage operations to the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak) and the continued interest of Congress in Amtrak's financial performance, you asked us to review Amtrak's food and beverage costs. We examined the following three areas: (1) the provisions written into Amtrak's contract with Gate Gourmet International (Gate Gourmet) to control costs, (2) the types of management controls Amtrak exercises to prevent improper payments, and (3) the information Amtrak collects and uses to monitor the service and to report to stakeholders such as its Board of Directors. To gain background information on how other passenger transportation companies conducted their food and beverage services, we also talked with three other passenger transportation providers. We also collected supplemental information from Amtrak and information on the food and beverage operations of VIA Rail Canada (VIA Rail) and Alaska Railroad—two other providers of intercity passenger rail. We also contacted two major U.S. air carriers—Northwest Airlines and American Airlines.

On June 9, 2005, we presented our statement in a hearing to the Subcommittee on Railroads of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.<sup>1</sup> Appendix II contains the statement we presented at that time. The information in this letter and in our statement was based on completed work done in the course of our ongoing review of Amtrak's management and performance, which we will report on later this year.

Food and beverages have been served on board Amtrak trains since Amtrak was created. Amtrak's 11 commissaries, located around the country, are responsible for receiving, warehousing and stocking food, beverages, and other items for Amtrak's on-board dining and café service.

<sup>1</sup>GAO, *Amtrak: Management and Accountability Issues Contribute to Unprofitability of Food and Beverage Service*, [GAO-05-761T](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 9, 2005).

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Until January 1999, Amtrak ran these commissaries with its own employees. Since then, Amtrak has contracted out the responsibility for the commissaries and for ordering and stocking all food, beverage, and related items under a contract that expires in September 2006.<sup>2</sup> Gate Gourmet,<sup>3</sup> the contractor, is also a supplier of food and beverages to several major airlines. During fiscal years 2002 through 2004, the period we focused on in our audit work, Amtrak paid Gate Gourmet between \$59 million and \$64 million a year in reimbursements and fees.<sup>4</sup> Gate Gourmet personnel operate Amtrak-owned commissaries and order, receive, store, and stock trains with food, beverages, and other related items, such as table linens and napkins. Food and beverage supplies are charged to Amtrak employees who provide on-board food and beverage service and account for the food and beverages en route. When a train arrives at its final destination, all remaining stock items are returned to a commissary. Gate Gourmet charges Amtrak for the items used, as well as for labor, management, and other fees.

Since Amtrak started operations in 1971, Amtrak has struggled financially and has depended on a federal subsidy of more than \$1 billion a year since fiscal year 2003 to remain solvent. For fiscal years 2002 through 2004, Amtrak's food and beverage expenses were about \$487 million—or only about 5 percent of the company's total expenditures. However, during that same time period, Amtrak's food and beverage service earned about \$243 million in revenue.<sup>5</sup> This means that Amtrak spends about \$2 to earn \$1 in food and beverage revenue.

We conducted our work from May 2004 through June 2005 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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## Results Summary

**Little incentive to reduce costs.** The provisions of the contract for food and beverage services provide little incentive for Gate Gourmet to reduce

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<sup>2</sup>There is an option for a 5-year extension.

<sup>3</sup>Gate Gourmet International was known as Dobbs International prior to 2001.

<sup>4</sup>Gate Gourmet has contracts with food and nonalcoholic beverage suppliers for Amtrak's food and beverage service. Gate Gourmet purchases alcoholic beverages from distributors, but Amtrak is directly billed as Amtrak holds the liquor license to serve alcohol on its trains.

<sup>5</sup>All 2004 figures are unaudited.

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or contain the costs of food and beverages. The contract is a cost reimbursable contract, and under it, the contractor can charge for the costs of items purchased, in addition to management and other fees. Given the way Amtrak is managing the contract, none of the contractor's profit is tied to controlling costs. Although the contract included a discussion of performance standards, these standards and related measures were never created, even though they were required 45 days after the contract was signed in January 1999. Performance standards would have allowed for performance incentives and penalties. If these incentives had been developed, they could have been used to pay Gate Gourmet based on such things as finding lower-priced food products of similar quality. In addition, another agreement to supply Amtrak's Acela train service for food and beverage items from Gate Gourmet's flight kitchens was made verbally between Amtrak's former president and the president of Gate Gourmet. Amtrak does not have documentation for the contract terms for this service.

**Poor control over costs.** Amtrak is not fully exercising prudent management techniques to control its food and beverage costs and prevent potential improper payments. We found three examples of this mismanagement at Amtrak. First, Amtrak has never required the contractor to submit an annual report (that would be independently audited) of budget variances for key line items, even though the contract requires such a report. Such a report could detect improper payments by Amtrak to Gate Gourmet for food and beverage items. Second, Amtrak has not implemented processes to ensure that rebates and discounts received directly from suppliers or indirectly through its contractor are accurate and complete. Amtrak has not established formal procedures to review and verify the amount of rebates and discounts actually received from either its suppliers or to determine whether there are other rebates that Amtrak is entitled to from the contractor.

Finally, Amtrak does not adequately monitor purchase prices reported by the contractor to identify variances or products with high costs. Although Amtrak had some processes that compare prices, the process was not robust enough to include a record of price trends or follow-up actions taken. Using data mining<sup>6</sup> and other audit techniques, we selectively

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<sup>6</sup>Data mining applies a search process to a data set, analyzing for trends, relationships, and interesting associations. For instance, it can be used to efficiently query transaction data for characteristics that may indicate potentially improper activity.

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reviewed more than \$80 million of purchase order information for fiscal years 2002 and 2003 and found that the contractor was generating purchase orders with significant variances in unit prices. For example, purchase order and payment support provided to us by Amtrak's contractor in March 2005 show that Amtrak ordered 12-ounce bottles of Heineken beer and received and paid \$3.93 per bottle. Though Amtrak believed this was a data entry error, no supporting documentation was provided prior to the hearing. However, based on information Amtrak provided to us after our June 9, 2005, testimony, it appears that Amtrak purchased 10 half-kegs of Heineken beer rather than 10 cases, as indicated on the original documentation. In another instance, the purchase order price of a 10-ounce strip steak ranged from \$3.02 to \$7.58. Amtrak officials testified that the strip steak examples were "emergency purchases." However, following our request for documentation to support this claim, an Amtrak official told us on June 29, 2005, that documentation to support the assertion that these were emergency purchases does not exist. The establishment of internal control procedures that ensure the documentation of the identification and correction of errors and approval for emergency purchases would ensure that adequate documentation is readily available for review by internal and external parties.

**Insufficient data for monitoring costs.** The level of information Amtrak collects and uses to monitor its food and beverage service and report results to stakeholders inhibits accountability for its performance. Amtrak does not report food and beverage expenditure information in its monthly performance reports or its annual consolidated financial statements. While Amtrak reports the combined revenue of its food and beverage services in its monthly performance reports, it does not do so for its food and beverage expenses. By combining revenue, it is difficult for managers to determine the amount of revenue attributable to food services compared with beverage services. By not reporting expenses, it is difficult to determine how much is spent on food and beverage service. This lack of information inhibits Amtrak's ability to assign accountability for performance internally or allow for any external accountability to key stakeholders. Other transportation companies we studied have a different accountability structure for their food and beverage service. Because VIA Rail has a fixed subsidy from the federal Canadian government, VIA Rail's management has an inherent incentive to control its costs in all areas of its operation, including its food and beverage service. The Alaska Railroad receives biweekly reports from its contractor detailing its labor and food costs that show, among other things, contractor performance against the contractual cost caps.

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## Conclusions

Amtrak's food and beverage service may represent a relatively small part of the company's operating budget, but it speaks volumes about Amtrak's need to get its operations in better order. In administering this contract, basic steps for good management have been ignored or otherwise set aside. Omissions include not completing agreed-upon provisions of the contract, not carrying through with basic oversight called for in the contract, and not ensuring that the organization was getting products at the most reasonable price. A stronger effort is required, beginning with carrying out steps that, under the contract, should have been taken all along. Amtrak needs to take immediate steps not only to curb the losses in this program, but also to help convince the public it is acting as a careful steward of the federal dollars that continue to keep it operating.

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## Recommendations for Executive Action

To improve Amtrak's management of its food and beverage operations, we are making the following four recommendations. We recommend that Amtrak

- better contain its food and beverage costs by following its own procedures for ensuring proper contracts and payments and enforcing key provisions of the current Gate Gourmet contract, including issuing annual reports that are independently audited by an outside auditing firm and certified by Gate Gourmet officials, and conducting regular audits of discounts and rebates;
- prepare a written contract for food and beverage service on Acela trains that specifies the service to be provided, includes incentives to ensure efficient and effective contractor performance, and includes regular annual reports and audits;
- create separate revenue and expenditure reporting metrics and other basic food service metrics to allow for internal and external accountability for its food and beverage service and create incentives to reduce costs and increase revenue; and
- comprehensively review the revenue and cost structure of its food and beverage service to determine the most cost-effective solution that can increase the financial contribution of its food and beverage function.

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## Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to Amtrak for its review and comment. In its response, Amtrak did not take a position on our recommendations but reiterated that it has initiated a number of reforms to lower costs and achieve greater efficiencies in managing its food and beverage service. These include such actions as closing the commissary in Albany, New York, eliminating food and beverage service on its New York City to Albany trains, and reducing the number of attendants on Acela and Metroliner trains. Also, to further lower costs, Amtrak said it is currently renegotiating its contract with Gate Gourmet and is in the process of identifying other providers who could offer either localized or regional food arrangements.

While not being specific, Amtrak disputed our findings on certain aspects of Amtrak's food and beverage purchasing oversight and said that Amtrak officials are taking "every reasonable step to ensure that prices we pay are equitable and correct." While we acknowledge that Amtrak has made some improvements in this area, we do not think they have gone far enough in managing and overseeing its food and beverage service. In line with our recommendations, further efforts are needed to enforce the contractual requirement for an annual report from Gate Gourmet, to audit discounts and rebates, and to implement a robust process for monitoring of product purchase prices.

Amtrak also contends that despite improvements it has made or could make, it would still lose money on its food and beverage service, mainly because of high labor costs. Amtrak said that we failed to address this issue in our report. To the contrary, we identified in our report that Amtrak's labor costs made up about 52 percent of its total food and beverage expenditures, a figure substantiated by Amtrak's Inspector General. Amtrak contends that changes it has recommended to the Railway Labor Act, if adopted by Congress, would greatly enhance its ability to reduce labor costs and hence the overall costs of its food and beverage service. We have not evaluated the potential impact of Amtrak's recommended changes to the Railway Labor Act on labor costs for its food and beverage service. However, while we acknowledge that labor costs are a major cost element in its total food and beverage expenditures and that lowering these costs is not easy, this does not obviate the need to develop effective internal controls and oversight—in full compliance with our recommendations—as a way of reducing food and beverage costs and providing greater accountability and transparency.

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As we agreed with your office, unless you publicly announce the contents of this report earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days from the report date. At that time, we will send copies to the congressional committees responsible for intercity passenger rail issues, the President of Amtrak, the Secretary of Transportation, and the Administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration. We will also make copies available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2834 or at [heckerj@gao.gov](mailto:heckerj@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made major contributions to this report are listed in appendix III.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JayEtta Z. Hecker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

JayEtta Z. Hecker  
Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues

# Comments from the National Railroad Passenger Corporation (Amtrak)

NATIONAL RAILROAD PASSENGER CORPORATION  
60 Massachusetts Avenue, NE, Washington, DC 20002  
tel 202 906.3400 fax 202 906.3560

William L. Crosbie  
Sr. Vice President  
Operations



August 2, 2005

Ms. JayEtta Z. Hecker  
Director, Physical Infrastructure  
United States Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Ms. Hecker:

Amtrak appreciates the opportunity to provide comments to your report number GAO-05-867 regarding Amtrak's management of its food and beverage service.

Well before this report was requested, Amtrak was aware of the need to focus on its management of food and beverage service. This was one of the areas of priority identified by David Gunn upon his arrival at Amtrak in May 2002. During the past 36 months, management's priorities at Amtrak have been largely focused on maintaining liquidity, rebuilding cars and locomotives, renewing infrastructure, and building an organization to manage the budget and control costs. Though much work is left to be done, we feel enough progress has been made so that we can now turn to other matters such as the topic described in your report. To that end management has initiated a number of reforms to lower costs and bring about greater efficiencies in the management and delivery of food and beverage service. Some of the initiatives were phased in rather quickly such as the elimination of food and beverage service on all New York to Albany trains and reducing the number of attendants in our First Class *Acelas* and *Metroliners*. Other initiatives such as rebuilding lounges to provide both dining and lounge car service are under way but take time to complete. During the July Amtrak Board of Directors' meeting, management provided the Board a list of initiatives and pilot projects that are under way or expected to be implemented in the next several months. We have outlined these initiatives to the GAO staff during the course of their review.

As significant as some of the initiatives discussed above, we are also renegotiating our contract with Gate Gourmet which we hope will increase efficiencies related to food service and result in lower costs. In the very near future, we also anticipate issuing an RFI to identify providers who could offer either localized or regional food arrangements.

Appendix I  
Comments from the National Railroad  
Passenger Corporation (Amtrak)



*Ms. Jaye Z. Hecker*  
*August 2, 2005*  
*Page 2*

Making changes in this area must be done with great sensitivity because many of our passengers travel significant distances, and the requirement for providing food and beverage is not only an added amenity but a necessity. There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to this matter. Our approach has been both focused and incremental, which we feel is the most reasonable and appropriate way to proceed.

While the GAO is critical of certain aspects of Amtrak's food and beverage purchasing oversight, which we dispute, we continue to take every reasonable step to ensure that the prices we pay are equitable and correct. At the same time, even if we were able to achieve 100 percent certainty that the amount we are charged is accurate and that the handling of food and beverage from the commissary to the train, its sale to the passenger or its return to the commissary were letter perfect, Amtrak would still lose a significant amount of money on food and beverage service. The principal reason for this is due to the high cost of labor to provide this service. Regrettably, the GAO report fails to address this and instead would lead the reader to believe that Amtrak should simply manage its food and beverage contract with Gate Gourmet more efficiently. The Strategic Reform Plan, adopted by Amtrak Board of Directors in May of this year, recommended changes to the Railway Labor Act, which if adopted by Congress, would greatly enhance our ability to reduce the cost of providing food and beverage service on our trains. While we understand that this is a very sensitive issue, dealing with this forthright is, in our minds, far more significant than what we may have paid on one occasion for a bottle of beer. This report would have been more thorough had this area been discussed in greater detail. In fact, none of the recommendations even mentions the labor costs associated with our food and beverage service.

In closing, let me assure you, and anyone who might read this report, that we are actively pursuing a number of initiatives to improve and make more efficient our food and beverage service. We believe that the approach we are taking will yield beneficial results without degrading the service to a point where we lose ridership and revenue as a result of an uneven food service offering. We will continue to keep Congress apprised of the progress of our activities in this area.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Will", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

William L. Crosbie  
*Senior Vice President, Operations*

# Testimony, *Amtrak: Management and Accountability Issues Contribute to Food and Beverage Service Losses*

**GAO**

United States Government Accountability Office

Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Railroads,  
Committee on Transportation and  
Infrastructure, House of Representatives

For Release on Delivery  
Expected at 9:30 a.m. EDT  
Thursday, June 9, 2005

**AMTRAK**

**Management and  
Accountability Issues  
Contribute to  
Unprofitability of Food and  
Beverage Service**

Statement of JayEtta Hecker, Director  
Physical Infrastructure Issues



GAO-05-761T

**Appendix II  
 Testimony, Amtrak: Management and  
 Accountability Issues Contribute to Food  
 and Beverage Service Losses**

June 9, 2005

**AMTRAK**

**Management and Accountability Issues  
 Contribute to Unprofitability of Food and  
 Beverage Service**



Highlights of GAO-05-761T, a report to Subcommittee on Railroads, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

**Why GAO Did This Study**

Amtrak has provided food and beverage service on its trains since it began operations in 1971. Amtrak has struggled since its inception to earn sufficient revenues and depends heavily on federal subsidies to remain solvent. While a small part of Amtrak's overall expenditures, Amtrak's food and beverage service illustrates concerns in Amtrak's overall cost containment, management and accountability issues.

This testimony is based on GAO's work on Amtrak's management and performance as well as additional information gained from Amtrak and other transportation providers. This testimony focuses on (1) the provisions written into Amtrak's contract with Gate Gourmet to control costs, (2) the types of management controls Amtrak exercises to prevent overpayments, and (3) the information Amtrak collects and uses to monitor the service and to report to stakeholders such as its Board of Directors.

**What GAO Recommends**

Since we did not have sufficient time to obtain Amtrak's comments, as required by government auditing standards, prior to this hearing, GAO anticipates making recommendations to Amtrak to improve its food and beverage service at a later time.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-761T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-761T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact JayEtta Z. Hecker, 202-512-8984.

**What GAO Found**

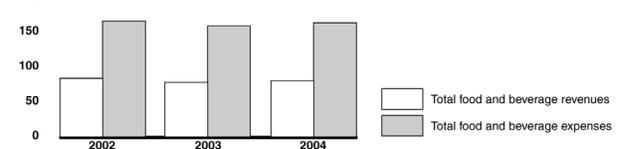
Amtrak's financial records show that for every dollar Amtrak earns in food and beverage revenue, it spends about \$2—a pattern that has held consistent for all 3 years GAO reviewed. In GAO's estimation, Amtrak has lost a total of almost \$245 million from fiscal year 2002 through fiscal year 2004 on food and beverage service. Since 1999, Amtrak has contracted out the responsibility to Gate Gourmet International (Gate Gourmet) for managing commissaries and for ordering and stocking all food and beverages and related items managing under a contract that expires in September 2006.

Amtrak's current cost reimbursable contract with Gate Gourmet creates, if anything, an incentive to increase Amtrak's costs unless properly monitored. Gate Gourmet can charge Amtrak for the cost of the food and beverage items, as well as management, labor, and other expenses. Without defined controls and management, this type of contract structure provides little incentive for a contractor to reduce or contain costs to provide better value to its customer.

GAO found five different management controls that Amtrak did not fully exercise regarding oversight of its food and beverage service. These controls include: (1) requiring an independently audited financial report, (2) auditing for all applicable rebates and discounts that Gate Gourmet could have applied to food and beverage items purchased for Amtrak, (3) adequately monitoring purchase price information for its food and beverage items, (4) not considering Amtrak's food and beverage labor costs, as a part of product markups, and that (5) not utilizing Amtrak's procurement department in negotiating the current contract.

Information that could provide both internal and external accountability for the food and beverage function is limited. Amtrak does not include any information about its food and beverage expenses in any of its internal or external reports, including its monthly performance reports, its internal quarterly progress reports or its annual consolidated financial statements. This lack of information makes it difficult for internal and external stakeholders to gauge the profit or loss of the operation as well as to assign accountability.

**Amtrak food and beverage revenues and expenses, fiscal years 2002 to 2004**  
 Dollars in millions



Source: GAO analysis of Amtrak data.

United States Government Accountability Office

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**Appendix II**  
**Testimony, Amtrak: Management and**  
**Accountability Issues Contribute to Food**  
**and Beverage Service Losses**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on issues concerning the National Railroad Passenger Corporation's (or Amtrak) food and beverage service, which will clearly illustrate Amtrak's challenges in controlling its costs. Since Amtrak started operations in 1971, Amtrak has struggled financially, and has depended on a federal subsidy of more than \$1 billion a year since fiscal year 2003 to remain solvent. For fiscal years 2002 through 2004, Amtrak's food and beverage expenses were about \$487 million—or only about 5 percent of the company's total expenditures. However, during that same time period, Amtrak's food and beverage service earned about \$243 million in revenue. This means that Amtrak spends about \$2 to earn \$1 in food and beverage revenue. Of Amtrak's total food and beverage expenditures, about 53 percent was for labor costs for Amtrak employees serving the food, about 38 percent was for food costs and fees to Gate Gourmet International (Gate Gourmet)—the contractor for food and beverages and operation of Amtrak commissaries—and about 9 percent for other Amtrak costs.

At your request, my statement today relates primarily to the contractor's portion of this expense, as well as Amtrak's oversight and control over its food and beverage service, and what Amtrak is doing to oversee and control contract costs. I will specifically address what we have learned in examining three major types of cost controls: (1) the provisions written into Amtrak's contract with Gate Gourmet<sup>1</sup> to control costs, (2) the types of management controls Amtrak exercises to prevent improper payments, and (3) the information Amtrak collects and uses to monitor the service and to report to stakeholders such as its Board of Directors. We also talked with three other passenger transportation providers to get background and comparison information on their food and beverage services. The information I will present is based on completed work done in the course of our ongoing review of Amtrak's management and performance which we will report on later this year. We also collected supplemental information from Amtrak, and on the food and beverage operations of VIA Rail Canada (VIA Rail) and the Alaska Railroad, two other providers of intercity passenger rail, and two major U.S. air carriers—Northwest Airlines and American Airlines.

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<sup>1</sup>Gate Gourmet International was formerly known as Dobbs International prior to January 1, 2001.

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**Appendix II**  
**Testimony, Amtrak: Management and**  
**Accountability Issues Contribute to Food**  
**and Beverage Service Losses**

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In summary, we found that:

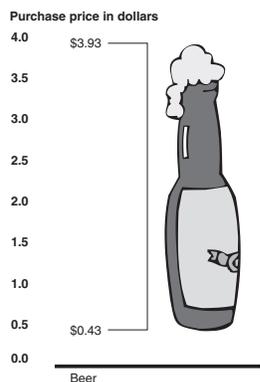
- The provisions of the contract for food and beverage services provide little incentive for Gate Gourmet to reduce or contain the costs of food and beverages. The contract is a cost reimbursable contract, and under it, the contractor can charge for the costs of items purchased, in addition to management and other fees. Given the way Amtrak is managing the contract, none of the contractor's profit is tied to controlling costs. Although the contract included a discussion of performance standards, these standards and related measures were never created, even though they were required 45 days after the contract was signed in January 1999. Performance standards would have allowed for performance incentives and penalties. If these incentives had been developed, then they could have been used to pay Gate Gourmet based on such things as finding lower-priced food products of similar quality to what is being purchased now.
- Amtrak is not fully exercising prudent management techniques to control its food and beverage costs and prevent potential improper payments. We found three examples of this mismanagement at Amtrak. First, Amtrak has never required the contractor to submit an annual report (which would be independently audited) of budget variances for key line items, even though the contract requires such a report. Such a report could detect improper payments by Amtrak to Gate Gourmet for food and beverage items. Second, Amtrak has never audited the contractor's purchase data—which is allowed under the contract—to ensure that the contractor is passing along any discounts or rebates the contractor receives on items purchased. For example, Gate Gourmet reported passing along about \$550,000 in rebates and discounts on purchases for Amtrak totaling about \$6.5 million out of \$90 million total purchases for Amtrak from fiscal year 2002 through fiscal year 2003.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Amtrak does not adequately monitor purchase prices reported by the contractor to identify variances or products with high costs. To further test purchase data, we non-statistically selected 37 payment transactions and reviewed the underlying supporting documentation and found evidence of widely variable product prices. For example, Amtrak paid between \$0.43 and \$3.93 per 12-ounce bottle of Heineken beer. (See fig. 1.)

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<sup>2</sup>Fiscal year 2004 audited financial information was not available when we conducted our analysis.

**Appendix II  
Testimony, Amtrak: Management and  
Accountability Issues Contribute to Food  
and Beverage Service Losses**

**Figure 1: Amount Amtrak Paid for a 12-Ounce Beer, Fiscal Years 2002 and 2003**



Sources: GAO analysis of Amtrak data; Corel (clip art).

- The level of information Amtrak collects and uses to monitor its food and beverage service and report results to external or internal stakeholders inhibits accountability for its performance. Externally, Amtrak does not report food and beverage expenditure information in its monthly performance reports or its annual consolidated financial statements. While Amtrak reports the combined revenue of its food and beverage services in its monthly performance reports, it does not do so for its food and beverage expenses. By combining revenue, it is difficult for managers to determine the amount of revenue attributable to food services compared to beverage services. By not reporting expenses, it is difficult to determine how much is spent on food and beverage service. This lack of information inhibits Amtrak's ability to assign accountability for performance internally or allow for any external accountability to key stakeholders. Other transportation companies we studied have a different accountability structure for their food and beverage service. Because VIA Rail has a fixed subsidy from the federal Canadian government, VIA Rail's management has an inherent incentive to control its costs in all areas of its operation, including its food and beverage service. The Alaska Railroad receives bi-weekly reports from its contractor detailing its labor and food costs that show, among other things, contractor performance against the contractual cost caps.

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**Appendix II  
Testimony, Amtrak: Management and  
Accountability Issues Contribute to Food  
and Beverage Service Losses**

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**Background**

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**How Does Amtrak Operate  
Its Food and Beverage  
Service?**

Food and beverages have been served onboard Amtrak trains since Amtrak was created. Amtrak's eleven commissaries are located around the country and are responsible for receiving, warehousing and stocking food, beverages, and other items for Amtrak's onboard dining and café service. Until January 1999, Amtrak ran these commissaries with its own employees. Since then, Amtrak has contracted out the responsibility for the commissaries and for ordering and stocking all food, beverages, and related items under a contract that expires in September 2006.<sup>3</sup> Gate Gourmet (the contractor), is also a supplier of food and beverages to several major airlines. During fiscal years 2002 through 2004, the 3-year period we focused on in our audit work, Amtrak paid Gate Gourmet between \$59 and \$64 million a year in reimbursements and fees.<sup>4</sup> Gate Gourmet personnel operate Amtrak-owned commissaries and order, receive, store, and stock trains with food, beverages, and other related items such as table linens and napkins. Food and beverage stock are charged to Amtrak employees who account for the food en route. When a train arrives at its final destination, all remaining stock items are returned to a commissary. Gate Gourmet charges Amtrak for the items used, as well as for labor, management, and other fees. The contract requires that Gate Gourmet provide Amtrak an independently audited annual report within 120 days following the expiration of each contract year.

Amtrak's model for handling its food and beverage service is similar to other passenger transportation companies, with some important differences. Northwest Airlines has outsourced their kitchen and commissary operations and have food and beverages delivered to each airplane before each flight. VIA Rail Canada, Canada's national passenger railroad, serves food on most of its trains and owns and operates its own commissaries. Food and other items are delivered to each train, consumed during the train's run and restocked at the destination. The Alaska Railroad, however, has a private contractor that orders, stocks, delivers, prepares, and serves all of its food and beverages on its trains using their

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<sup>3</sup>There is an option for a 5-year extension.

<sup>4</sup>Gate Gourmet has contracts with food and non-alcoholic beverage suppliers for Amtrak's food and beverage service. Gate Gourmet purchases alcoholic beverages from distributors but Amtrak is directly billed as Amtrak holds the liquor license to serve alcohol on its trains.

**Appendix II  
Testimony, Amtrak: Management and  
Accountability Issues Contribute to Food  
and Beverage Service Losses**

own labor force. With certain exceptions and limits, all food and beverage revenues and expenses are the responsibility of the contractor.<sup>5</sup>

**How Much Is Amtrak  
Losing on Food and  
Beverage Operations?**

Amtrak's financial records show that for every dollar Amtrak earns in food and beverage revenue, it spends about \$2—a pattern that has held consistent for all 3 years we reviewed. (See table 1 and fig. 2.) Amtrak's financial records also indicate that Amtrak has lost a total of almost \$245 million for fiscal year 2002 through fiscal year 2004 on food and beverage service. Section 24305(c)(4) of Title 49, United States Code, states that Amtrak is not to operate a food and beverage service whose revenues do not exceed the cost of providing such service. About half of the total food and beverage expenditure is labor cost for Amtrak staff who prepare and serve the food aboard the trains. About 38 percent is reimbursements and fees to Gate Gourmet, representing the cost of food and other products in addition to other fees paid to Gate Gourmet. About 9 percent is for other Amtrak costs. While Amtrak's labor costs for its food and beverage service are significant, these costs are part of Amtrak's overall labor cost structure, and as such, are beyond the scope of work we did for this testimony. However, a recent Amtrak Inspector General report suggested that Amtrak could save money on its food and beverage labor if the cost of this labor was similar to that of the restaurant industry.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Under the Alaska Railroad contract, the contractor is guaranteed a 5 percent profit margin. If food and beverage sales do not provide this 5 percent margin, then Alaska Railroad makes up the difference. If margins exceed 5 percent, then the contractor and Alaska Railroad split the excess amount.

<sup>6</sup>*Evaluation Report: Food and Beverage Financial Performance*, Report E-05-03, Amtrak Inspector General.

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**Table 1: Amtrak's Estimated Food and Beverage Revenue and Expenses (by Major Category), Fiscal Years 2002 to 2004**

	2002	2003	2004 <sup>c</sup>	Total	Percent of Total Expense (%)
<b>Total food and beverage revenues<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>\$ 84,100,000</b>	<b>\$ 78,400,000</b>	<b>\$ 80,400,000</b>	<b>\$ 242,900,000</b>	
Expense Category					
Amtrak Labor Costs	\$ 83,768,416	\$ 83,257,574	\$ 89,162,529	<b>\$ 256,188,519</b>	52.6
Payments to Gate Gourmet	\$ 63,754,973	\$ 59,769,085	\$ 61,893,852	<b>\$ 182,422,910</b>	38.0
All Other Amtrak Food and Beverage Expenses <sup>b</sup>	\$ 16,961,343	\$ 15,775,092	\$ 13,123,348	<b>\$ 45,859,910</b>	9.4
<b>Total Food and Beverage Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 164,489,732</b>	<b>\$ 158,801,751</b>	<b>\$ 164,179,729</b>	<b>\$ 487,471,212</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Profit or (Loss)</b>	<b>\$ (80,389,732)</b>	<b>\$ (80,401,751)</b>	<b>\$ (83,779,729)</b>	<b>\$ (244,571,212)</b>	

Source: GAO analysis of Amtrak data.

Notes

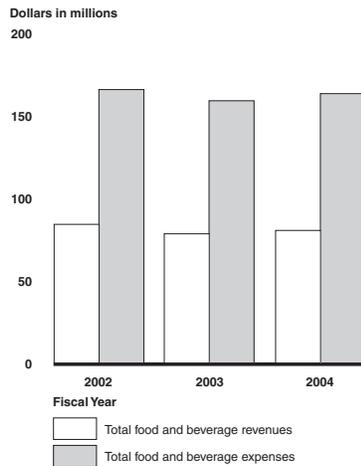
<sup>a</sup>Revenues include a portion of first class ticket revenue dedicated toward food and beverage revenues.

<sup>b</sup>"All Other" expenses include such items as utilities, office supplies, crew meals, and reusable support items such as crockery and glassware.

<sup>c</sup>All 2004 figures are unaudited.

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**Figure 2: Amtrak Food and Beverage Revenues and Expenses, Fiscal Years 2002 to 2004**



Source: GAO analysis of Amtrak data.

Amtrak has responded to these continued losses with some incremental reductions in food and beverage service. On July 1, 2005, Amtrak plans to discontinue food and beverage service on its routes between New York City and Albany, New York, which would allow Amtrak to close its commissary in Albany. An official in Amtrak's Office of Inspector General stated that Amtrak lost between \$6 to \$8 per person on food service on those routes and that closing the commissary will save Amtrak about \$1 million per year. However, achieving additional savings by closing commissaries could be limited, as Amtrak's other commissaries serve multiple Amtrak trains that would continue to offer food and beverage service. In other words, closing a commissary could affect multiple trains on multiple routes. According to an Amtrak procurement official, a team consisting of members of Amtrak's procurement, legal, financial and

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transportation departments is currently working to identify ways to reduce Amtrak's costs in its next commissary contract.<sup>7</sup>

Other transportation companies have taken actions to better control their food and beverage costs in recent years. For example, Northwest Airlines officials stated that they pay particular attention to food and beverage expenses. Since 2002, Northwest has reduced its food costs by 4 percent. This has been achieved by reducing or eliminating complimentary food service for coach passengers on domestic flights (even to the point of eliminating pretzels on these flights), aggressive pricing of food products and flexible budgeting that adjusts each month to reflect increases or decreases in ridership.<sup>8</sup> VIA Rail officials told us they have considerable flexibility in hiring its onboard service personnel to adjust its labor force to respond to peak and off-peak tourist seasons for its long-distance trains. In addition, VIA Rail officials said they have considerable flexibility in how onboard service staff are used; in essence, all onboard service staff can be used wherever and whenever needed. The Alaska Railroad restructured the contract with its food and beverage service provider to allow for food price fluctuation within defined limits.

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**Current Contract  
Does Not Provide  
Incentives to Reduce  
or Contain Costs**

One way to control costs is to build provisions into a contract that motivate a contractor to keep costs as low as possible. Amtrak's current cost reimbursable contract with Gate Gourmet creates, if anything, an incentive to increase Amtrak's costs unless properly monitored. Under the contract, Gate Gourmet receives a number of reimbursements, including commissary, labor, and insurance costs, in addition to an operating fee. The operating fee is defined in the contract as 5 percent of the total actual cost of the onboard food and beverage items. This fee is an incentive for the contractor to increase Amtrak's food and beverage costs. These costs can change in each yearly operating budget. This operating budget is subject to review by Amtrak and is mutually agreed to by both Amtrak and Gate Gourmet.

Incentives can also be written into a cost reimbursable contract to control costs and enhance performance. Although the contract included a

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<sup>7</sup>The current contract expires on September 30, 2006.

<sup>8</sup>Northwest officials noted that in lieu of complimentary food service for coach passengers they have instituted a "Buy On Board" program which offers certain food items for sale to passengers.

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discussion of performance standards, these standards and related measures were never created, even though they were required 45 days after the contract was signed in January 1999. Performance standards would have allowed for performance incentives and penalties. If these incentives had been developed, then they could have been used to pay Gate Gourmet based on such things as finding lower-priced food products of similar quality to what is being purchased now, or identifying ways the food and beverage service could be operated more economically or efficiently.

Other factors may not provide the needed incentives for Gate Gourmet to aggressively seek to reduce Amtrak's food costs. Under current contract provisions, Gate Gourmet can charge Amtrak for food prepared in Gate Gourmet facilities and delivered to Amtrak's commissaries. The contract provides considerable pricing flexibility to Gate Gourmet for these items with no detailed definitions or price caps. This makes it difficult to determine whether or not Amtrak is being charged a reasonable price. In addition, the contract also provides that Gate Gourmet deduct any trade or quantity discounts on items purchased for Amtrak either immediately from Amtrak's invoices or retroactively based on the proportion of Amtrak's purchases. Discounts applied retroactively are to be applied by Gate Gourmet in "good faith" and retroactive payments are "an approximation and that [Gate Gourmet] cannot guarantee exactness." The contract stipulates these payments are subject to an audit by Amtrak. However, these audits have never been conducted.

In contrast, while Northwest Airlines has cost plus contracts with its largest food and beverage contractors (including Gate Gourmet), Northwest's management of them is different. Northwest's caterer contracts have labor and other rates specified in the contract. According to Northwest's food and beverage officials, they know quickly if they change their menu, how much their suppliers will charge them—even to the addition or subtraction of a leaf of lettuce served as part of an entree. In addition, Northwest officials stated that each price charged by its contractors is checked and invoices are audited.

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**Management Controls  
Over Food and  
Beverage Operations  
Not Fully Exercised**

We identified five types of management controls that Amtrak did not fully exercise regarding oversight of its food and beverage service. These include the following:

- **Requirement for an annual report has never been enforced.** Amtrak's contract requires Gate Gourmet to provide an independently audited annual report within 120 days following the expiration of each contract year; this report must also be certified by Gate Gourmet officials. This report is to provide actual and budgeted amounts for key line items and to provide a narrative explanation for any actual to budget variance greater than one percent in the aggregate for all commissaries. However, Gate Gourmet has not provided this report during the five completed years the contract has been in place. Amtrak food and beverage officials could not provide us with a reason as to why they had decided not to enforce this provision. They told us that they relied on contractor-provided monthly operating statements and on reports from Amtrak's Inspector General instead. Our review found that the monthly operating statements lacked critical information that was to be included in the annual report, were prepared by the party seeking reimbursement, and, perhaps more importantly, were not independently reviewed or audited. By contrast, the annual report was to be certified by contractor officials and audited by an independent certified public accountant. The Inspector General's reports, while providing management with information on some aspects of Amtrak's food and beverage service activities, should not be viewed as a substitute for a comprehensive audit and report.
- **Audits of discounts and rebates were not conducted.** The contract provides that Amtrak audit Gate Gourmet's allocations of trade and quantity discounts received from purchases of food and beverages. However, Amtrak has never conducted an audit of the discounts credited to it, nor has it requested that the contractor certify that all of the discounts that Amtrak should receive have been credited to its account.

Information we reviewed indicates that such audits may yield savings for Amtrak. For example, Amtrak officials advised us that discounts and rebates totaling over \$550,000 for fiscal years 2002 and 2003 had been credited on gross purchases of about \$6.5 million.<sup>9</sup> However, total Gate Gourmet purchases exceeded \$90 million for the 2-year period—roughly 13 times the amount of purchases the contractor reported as being subject to discounts and rebates. Because Amtrak did not require an independent

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<sup>9</sup>Audited 2004 financial information was not available during our analysis.

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audit or otherwise analyze the trade and quantity discounts received, Amtrak does not know whether or not it received all of the discounts and rebates to which it was entitled. Amtrak could not provide us with reasons supporting its decision or its consideration of this issue.

- **Adequate monitoring of purchase price information needs improvements.** Amtrak did not adequately monitor its purchase price information for food and beverage items purchased by Gate Gourmet. Amtrak officials said they monitored contractor purchases using daily price reports that listed unit prices for purchases ordered the previous day and the price the last time the item was ordered. However, given the importance of purchase orders in a food and beverage operation, internal controls need to be developed to systematically monitor and analyze purchase information. These controls should then be monitored on a regular basis to assess the quality of performance over time.<sup>10</sup> For example, controls should include processes to identify unit price variances over established or pre-set amounts and actions taken to document follow-up work performed. Although Amtrak had some processes that compare prices, the process was not robust enough to include a record of price trends or follow up actions taken such as corrections of amounts billed. Our testing of this control showed that if Amtrak had approached this review in a more rigorous manner, it may have identified discrepancies warranting further investigation. For example:
  - *Monitoring of Purchase Order Pricing:* Using data mining<sup>11</sup> and other audit techniques, we selectively reviewed more than \$80 million of purchase order information for fiscal years 2002 and 2003 and found that the contractor was generating purchase orders with significant variances in unit prices. For example, in 2003, the purchase order price of a 10-ounce strip steak ranged from \$3.02 to \$7.58.
  - *Monitoring of Actual Product Price Charged by Gate Gourmet:* When Amtrak officials told us that purchase order information did not always

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<sup>10</sup>GAO, *Internal Control Standards: Internal Control Management and Evaluation Tool*, GAO-01-1008G (Washington, D.C.: Aug.1, 2001).

<sup>11</sup>Data mining applies a search process to a data set, analyzing for trends, relationships, and interesting associations. For instance, it can be used to efficiently query transaction data for characteristics that may indicate potentially improper activity.

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reflect actual amounts paid,<sup>12</sup> we tested actual prices paid by Amtrak to Gate Gourmet. To test purchase order data, we nonstatistically selected 37 payment transactions and reviewed the underlying supporting documentation and found evidence of widely variable product prices. For instance, in fiscal years 2002 and 2003, payments of over \$400,000 for 12-ounce Heineken beer varied from \$0.43 to \$3.93 per bottle.

- **Amtrak product pricing excludes labor costs.** Our work revealed that Amtrak's product price to the customer does not take into account over half of Amtrak's total food and beverage costs. Amtrak's target profit margin is 67 percent for prepared meals and 81 percent for controlled beverages. These target profit margins are expressed as a percentage of sales over the item product cost charged to Amtrak. However, these target profit margins do not take into account Amtrak's on-board labor costs, which our work has determined is estimated at over half of Amtrak's food and beverage total expenditures. Amtrak's current food and beverage product pricing seems to ensure that its food and beverage service will not be profitable.
- **Available procurement expertise not brought to bear.** Finally, Amtrak's procurement department was not involved in the negotiation of the original contract.<sup>13</sup> The current contract was signed by officials of Amtrak's now defunct Northeast Corridor Strategic Business Unit.<sup>14</sup> The contract's initial period was for about 7 years (January 29, 1999, to September 30, 2006), with a 5-year extension option. In addition, another agreement to supply Amtrak's Acela train service for food and beverage items from Gate Gourmet's flight kitchens was made verbally between

<sup>12</sup>For example, a price change may have occurred between the time an item was ordered and when it was delivered. Record keeping errors may also have occurred and unit prices in the inventory system may, for example, be based on a different pack size than that received or from that used for the last purchase.

<sup>13</sup>Since the original contract, Amtrak's procurement department plans to take the lead role in any future renewal, bidding and negotiating the next iteration of the outsourced commissary contract.

<sup>14</sup>According to Amtrak, Strategic Business Units (or "SBU"s) were a method for better managing performances and differences in businesses or markets within a company and were designed to anticipate and facilitate rapid response to change, place decisionmaking close to the customer, and establish authority and accountability. Amtrak established 3 SBU's—Northeast Corridor, Intercity, and West. The SBU's were largely self-contained units that had their own chief executive officers, handled their own train service, procured their own materials and supplies, and handled their own financial management and planning.

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Amtrak's former president and the president of Gate Gourmet. Amtrak does not have any documentation for the contract terms for this service.

In contrast to Amtrak, other transportation companies we interviewed closely monitor their invoices and contractor payments through periodic audits or have given the responsibility for costs and pricing to the contractor. For example, Northwest Airlines officials stated that they conduct regular audits of "every [food and beverage] price" they are charged from their contractors and have found errors in either prices or labor charges in their contractor invoices. VIA Rail selectively audits their food supplier invoices that are attached to every billing statement they receive. Finally, the Alaska Railroad food and beverage business model gives responsibility for food and labor costs to the contractor, subject to contractual limits.

**Information for  
Accountability Is  
Limited**

Finally, information that would provide accountability over this service, both internally and externally, is limited. We noted that while Amtrak reports the combined revenue from its food and beverage services in its monthly performance reports, it does not identify for stakeholders the revenue attributable to each service. Amtrak also does not include any information about its food and beverage expenses in any of its internal or external reports, including its monthly performance reports, its internal quarterly progress reports, or its annual consolidated financial statements. Absent this information, it is difficult for internal and external stakeholders to determine the amount of expense attributable to the food and beverage service and to gauge the profit or loss of the operation. This hinders oversight and accountability.

Other transportation companies we studied have a different accountability structure for their food and beverage service. Because VIA Rail has a fixed subsidy from the federal Canadian government, VIA Rail's management has an inherent incentive to control its costs in all areas of its operation, including its food and beverage service. VIA Rail controls its food and beverage costs in many different ways including fixed fee supplier contracts, item price reports, monitoring of supplier markups and item prices, and fixed food cost budgets to VIA Rail menu planners. Northwest Airlines has a flexible monthly food and beverage budget that increases or decreases with ridership levels. In addition, each supplier contract has established markups on product prices and its contracts with food preparation and delivery providers have detailed labor rates that are all audited for accuracy. The Alaska Railroad receives biweekly reports from its contractor detailing its labor and food costs that show, among other

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things, contractor performance against the contractual cost caps. In addition, the contractor and the Alaska Railroad will conduct annual audits of its contractor's performance under the contract.

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**Conclusions**

Amtrak's food and beverage service may represent a relatively small part of the company's operating budget, but it speaks volumes about Amtrak's need to get its operations in better order. In administering this contract, basic steps for good management have been ignored or otherwise set aside. Omissions include not completing agreed-upon provisions of the contract, not carrying through with basic oversight called for in the contract, and ensuring that the organization was getting products at the most reasonable price. Prudence requires a stronger effort, beginning with carrying out those steps that, under the contract, should have been taken all along. Amtrak needs to take such steps not only to curb the losses in this program, but to help convince the public that it is acting as a careful steward of the federal dollars that continue to keep it operating.

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**Recommendations**

Based on our work to date, we anticipate making recommendations to Amtrak to improve controls over its food and beverage operations. Since we did not have sufficient time to obtain Amtrak's comments, as required by government auditing standards prior to this hearing, the recommendations remain tentative until that process is complete. At that time, we anticipate making the following recommendations that Amtrak:

1. Better contain its food and beverage costs through:
  - Following its own procedures for ensuring proper contracts and payments;
  - Enforcing key provisions of the current Gate Gourmet contract including annual reports that are independently audited by an outside auditing firm and certified by Gate Gourmet officials and conduct regular audits of discount and rebates.
2. Prepare a written contract for food and beverage service on Acela trains that specifies the service to be provided, includes incentives to ensure efficient and effective contractor performance, and includes regular annual reports and audits.
3. Create separate revenue and expenditure reporting and other basic food service metrics to allow for internal and external accountability

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for its food and beverage service and create incentives to reduce costs and/or increase revenue.

4. Comprehensively review the revenue and cost structure of its food and beverage service to determine the most cost effective solution that can increase the financial contribution of its food and beverage function.

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Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer whatever questions you or the other members might have.

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**Contacts and  
Acknowledgements**

For further information, please contact JayEtta Z. Hecker at [heckerj@gao.gov](mailto:heckerj@gao.gov) or at 202-512-2834. Individuals making key contributions to this statement include Greg Hanna, Heather Krause, Bert Japikse, Richard Jorgenson, Steven Martin, Robert Martin, Irvin McMasters, Robert Owens, and Randy Williamson.

# Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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**Staff  
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