

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-367T](#), a testimony before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Forty-one railroads including 29 commuter railroads are required by statute to implement PTC. Commuter railroads unable to implement a PTC system by December 31, 2018, may receive a maximum 2-year extension if they meet certain statutory criteria.

GAO was asked to review commuter railroads' PTC implementation. Among other objectives, this statement discusses (1) commuter railroads that may not be positioned to meet the PTC deadline or to qualify for an extension, and factors affecting their progress, and (2) the extent to which FRA's management and oversight approach has helped ensure that commuter railroads meet the deadline or qualify for an extension.

GAO analyzed commuter railroads' most recently available quarterly progress reports and collected information on planned implementation schedules, interviewed 19 commuter railroads—including 14 FRA identified as at-risk and 5 others further ahead with implementation—and interviewed FRA officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends FRA identify and adopt a method for systematically communicating information to railroads and use a risk-based approach to prioritize its resources and workload.

DOT concurred with the recommendations. The agency also provided technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-18-367T](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or [flemings@gao.gov](mailto:flemings@gao.gov).

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## POSITIVE TRAIN CONTROL

### Many Commuter Railroads Still Have Significant Additional Implementation Work and Opportunities Exist to Provide Federal Assistance

## What GAO Found

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is responsible for overseeing railroads' (including commuter railroads') implementation of positive train control (PTC) by December 31, 2018. PTC is a communications-based train control system designed to prevent certain types of accidents and involves the installation, integration, and testing of hardware and software components. For example, railroads must install equipment on locomotives and along the track, and complete field testing, including revenue service demonstration (RSD)—an advanced form of testing that occurs while trains operate in regular service.

GAO's analysis of commuter railroads' PTC scheduled milestones for two key activities necessary to meet the 2018 deadline or qualify for an RSD-based extension (one of the statutory options) found that as many as two-thirds of the 29 commuter railroads may not have allocated sufficient time to complete these milestones. Specifically, in comparing the commuter railroads' schedules to FRA's estimates of the time required to complete these milestones and the experiences of railroads that have already completed them, GAO's analysis found that from 7 to 19 commuter railroads may not complete the milestones before the 2018 implementation deadline or qualify for an RSD-based extension. For example, FRA estimates that field testing (one of the milestones) takes at least one year, but GAO found that 14 commuter railroads plan to start this testing less than a year before the 2018 deadline, increasing the potential risk that this milestone will not be completed. However, FRA has the authority to establish alternative criteria for an extension not based on RSD, and several other factors can affect commuter railroads' planned and future progress. As a result, the number of commuter railroads at risk of not meeting the deadline or qualifying for an extension could increase or decrease in the coming year.

FRA's PTC management and oversight includes monitoring commuter railroads' progress, reviewing documentation, and sharing information with them, but the agency has not systematically communicated information or used a risk-based approach to help these railroads prepare for the 2018 deadline or qualify for an extension. GAO found that FRA has primarily used informal assistance, meetings with individual railroads, and participation in industry-convened groups to share information with commuter railroads, and in some cases the information conveyed has been inconsistent according to industry representatives. Some commuter railroads also told GAO that clarification about the agency's planned process for reviewing and approving extension requests would be helpful. Federal internal control standards state that management should externally communicate the necessary quality information to achieve its objectives. While FRA officials have said they are working to identify additional ways to convey extension-related information, they have not yet done so. Moreover, although FRA receives information from commuter railroads on their progress in implementing PTC, it has not used this information to prioritize resources using a risk-based approach. With the year-end 2018 deadline approaching, and an anticipated significant increase in FRA's workload, targeting resources to the greatest risk can help better ensure that FRA effectively fulfills its oversight responsibilities and provides commuter railroads the information they need to prepare for the 2018 deadline or seek an extension.