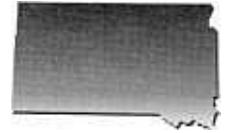




UNITED STATES SENATOR · SOUTH DAKOTA

**TIM JOHNSON**



N E W S R E L E A S E

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For Column Submission:

## **Waiting for the Train**

by U.S. Senator Tim Johnson

South Dakota farmers once again find themselves waiting on the train. Why? Our major grain-hauling railroad is days and in some cases weeks behind in delivering trains to transport this year's crop. Since storage at most grain elevators is limited, these delays eventually force grain to be stockpiled on the ground and farmers to lose marketing opportunities. Unfortunately, this is a familiar problem. In 1998, I brought representatives from Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) Corporation, the Surface Transportation Board, and then-Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman together to discuss how to prevent the types of disruptions that cost our grain elevators and hurt our farmers.

The discussions that took place were productive. BNSF and the government talked about improving communication. USDA and the Surface Transportation Board created a joint grain logistics task force to ensure the government was providing the agricultural marketplace with timely information about railcar availability and early warnings about potential bottlenecks.

At my request, BNSF launched the 'Dakota Desk,' a pilot project the railroad used to communicate directly with grain shippers in the Dakotas. The program's success led them to expand the communications desk to cover the railway's entire service area.

But some problems have resurfaced.

I was disappointed to learn that shippers in the Watertown area are now facing delays of as much as six weeks. In neighboring North Dakota, some shippers have been forced to quit purchasing from farmers because of rail car delays and limited storage.

We are all aware of the unpredictability of commodity markets. It is impossible to forecast every single problem that may arise in the transportation of grain, but the efficiency of transporting grain can be improved. And we must improve communication between shippers and rail companies. If there are to be delays, shippers and producers deserve to know why they are occurring, how long they will last, and most importantly, how the rail companies plan to correct the problem.

Pointing fingers and assigning blame is unlikely to yield results. Just as in the late 1990s, we need to work with railways to find out if the problem is a shortage of traincars and engines, an allocation of those cars elsewhere, or a breakdown in communication. We also need to ask the government agencies responsible for overseeing the railroads to examine the usefulness of tools at their disposal to ensure efficient transportation and effective communication.

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I have contacted BNSF, Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman, and the Surface Transportation Board to get answers to these questions. Specifically, I would like to know whether the communications desk created by BNSF has provided accurate information to shippers on the arrival time of rail cars and improved overall communication between BNSF and their customers—our grain elevators.

I have also learned that BNSF is planning to increase rates to grain shippers and I will be meeting with them to discuss the rationale behind that apparent decision. It seems illogical to justify a rate increase when service is unpredictable and tardy.

A bottleneck in the transportation of grain threatens the efforts of South Dakota farmers to overcome the lingering effects of consecutive drought years, but this is not an issue for producers and shippers alone. Losses in our agricultural economy threaten to drive up food prices and hurt consumers.

In the late 1990’s, we were able to work together to reduce delays. It is my hope that we can do so again. Efficient transport of grain is important for consumers, shippers, and our farmers. It is a goal worth working towards.

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