

The News-Gazette

Railroad execs discussing sustainability, environmental issues in Urbana

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URBANA — Representatives from top railroads are gathering on the University of Illinois campus in Urbana this week for the 19th annual Railroad Environmental Conference, where they discussed remediation, sustainability, how to reduce emissions and other topics.

"We are constantly trying to improve our fuel efficiency," said Robert Fronczak, assistant vice president for the Association of American Railroads. He spoke about the environmental issues facing North American railroads, and some of the regulations they face.

Despite a perception of derailments and spills, industry leaders at the conference said the industry has a nearly half-century history of taking environmental and sustainability issues seriously.

The American Railway Engineering association "formed their first environmental engineering committee in 1968," said Christopher Barkan, executive director of the University of Illinois' Rail Transportation and Engineering Center. "That was the first, in my opinion, formal recognition at an industry level that there were these environmental responsibilities."

That committee helped create standards and recommended practices for the railroad industry.

This week's two-day conference, which is expected to bring in about 500 attendees, coincides with meetings of the environmental committees of the Association of American Railroads and the American Railway Engineering and Maintenance-of-Way Association.

The event features exhibits from companies that create materials that capture hazardous chemicals, others that specialize in cleaning up oil and hazardous chemicals, consultants who help railroad companies navigate regulations and firms that help railroads clean up after a derailment.

Tuesday's keynote speaker, Highlander Innovation President Tim Lindsey, spoke about his work with railroads and companies in other industries to improve their sustainability.

He said companies need to move from reacting to problems and regulations to making sustainability a core part of their company.

"The future of this field is to be more on the proactive side," he said. "A lot of the work that's been done to date has been focused on reacting to problems, reacting to regulations to address the problems. I think the future will be focused on engineering problems out of the system, preventing them, so you don't have waste left over and then we don't have pollution, and then our systems interact more effectively."