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'All they can do is pray'

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CHAMPAIGN — Spotting an oncoming train and crossing the tracks anyway can be fatal — especially in Illinois.

The state faces rail-safety issues many states don't because it has so many crossings and so many miles of track. It is second only to Texas in the number of crossings and track miles, ranking in the top five states for railway accidents and fatalities, said Chip Pew, coordinator of Illinois Operation Lifesaver.

"We have a higher probability for something to happen," he said.

Pew was at a gathering of rail-safety experts this week who discussed risks and possible solutions for the thousands of railway crossings on private land in Illinois.

The session was part of the week-long Global Level Crossing Safety and Trespass Prevention Symposium at the University of Illinois, which also included such topics as driver behavior at crossings, safety initiatives, preventing railway-crossing suicides, findings of accident investigations and detecting obstacles for vehicles.

About 95 percent of the time in train/vehicle crashes, it's the vehicle drivers who are at fault, oftentimes due to a poor judgment call, experts said.

A 100-car freight train moving 55 mph can take a mile to stop, Pew said, and engineers who see vehicles in their path can only brake and do one more thing.

"All they can do is pray: Get out of the way, get out of the way, get out of the way," he said.

While most accidents and deaths in the state involve public crossings, there are 3,867 rail crossings on private property and they also can be crash sites, said Steve Laffey, railroad-safety specialist at the Illinois Commerce Commission.

In a recent 21-year period, there were 485 crashes at some of those private crossings resulting in one to two deaths a year, he said. Most of those private-crossing collisions have been on industrial rather than agricultural land.

Farmers tend to know the crossings are on their land, but warning signs or lights could be helpful for employees and contract workers who aren't so familiar with the property, said Kevin Rund, senior director of local government for the Illinois Farm Bureau.

Informational signs at those crossings that include the name of the railroad and numbers to call would also be helpful, he said.

Of the 2,362 rail crossings on private agricultural land, 1,959 don't have any warning indicators of any kind, Rund said.

Whether the crossing is public or private, experts say a lot of the safety at rail crossings is in the driver's own hands, and that means always being aware that a train could be on the tracks at any time. Operation Lifesaver's new public safety campaign is: "See tracks? Think train!"

Pew said education for all age levels is important to understand rail-crossing risks. So is keeping grade crossings safe and continuing to identify passive crossings — those that don't have lights or gates — for upgrades.

The Illinois Commerce Commission uses a piece of motor-fuel tax revenue each year to improve 100 to 150 public crossings in cooperation with railroads and municipalities, he said.

Safety enforcement to keep drivers on their toes is also important at rail crossings, he said. More than half of all train/vehicle crashes at active crossings — those with gates, bells and lights — involve people driving around the barriers.

For those thinking they can beat a train, Pew encouraged thinking of it this way: The impact and weight of a train hitting a car is comparable to a car hitting a soda can, and you're in the soda can.

"Even in a tie, you lose," he said.

Rail safety: By the numbers

3,867: Rail crossings on private property in the state of Illinois

485: Crashes at some of those properties in a recent 21-year period

95: Percent of all train/vehicle crashes in which the vehicle driver's at fault