

Train horns for freight rail



Trains must always sound the horn at high risk areas like level crossings where pedestrians and road traffic cross over a railway. Train horns are used in combination with other infrastructure such as crossing bells, boom gates, pedestrian gates and mazes and flashing lights to ensure that people who are vision or hearing impaired are appropriately warned.

Sounding train horns is a critical, mandatory safety measure to warn people in or near the rail corridor that a train is approaching or about to move. Train crews must also sound the horn if their view is restricted or they perceive a hazard on or near the railway.

All freight trains are fitted with a horn which creates a distinctive sound that is loud enough to hear over other sources, such as personal music players and car stereos. This is important as it allows the warning to be differentiated from other warning and alert tones so people immediately associate the sound with train movement, even when a train is not visible.

Maintenance staff regularly review all horns to ensure they are operating correctly and the sound level is at the required setting.

Why horns are important

A fully loaded freight train can take more than two kilometres to come to a stop. That's the equivalent length of 12 Optus Stadiums. Unlike vehicles, trains cannot swerve to avoid a collision. The sounding of the horn is therefore intentionally loud and above ambient noise to effectively warn of and to attract attention of an approaching train, even if it isn't immediately visible.

When horns are used

The Public Transport Authority's Safeworking Rules and the Arc Infrastructure Network Safeworking Rules and Procedures, which must be followed by every train driver, state that train horns must be used in the following situations:

1. Approaching a level crossing.

This applies 24 hours a day, seven days a week and even if a level crossing has other warning devices like boom gates, flashing lights or bells.

2. If the train driver sees a person near the train tracks.

3. In an emergency (for example, if a person or vehicle is on the tracks).

4. When trains move from a stationary position.

Freight train operators regularly remind their drivers to be attentive of the impacts from horn noise on communities near the rail corridor and not to sound the horn beyond the safety requirements.



Frequently asked questions

Must freight train horns be sounded at all times of day, even in the middle of the night?

Yes. Safety regulations and rules require the driver to sound the horn regardless of the time of day, the traffic at the time, the frequency of train movements or any other factors. It is not up to the train driver to decide when or if they should sound the horn. Drivers are trained to meet this requirement particularly if they perceive a hazard at a level crossing given the heightened risks of potential collisions at these road/rail interfaces. Drivers endeavour to limit the use of the locomotive horn to be respectful of the environment, while still meeting rail safety requirements.

I've heard the horn sounded for longer than other times. Why is this?

Freight rail operators require their locomotive drivers to sound the horns on approach to level crossings for at least three seconds. If they perceive a potential hazard at the level crossing, they may sound the horn for longer or more often as a warning.

Do freight train horns need to be as loud in the middle of the night when there is likely a lower risk of pedestrians and vehicles at level crossings?

Safety regulations and rules require the driver to sound the horn regardless of the time of day. The freight rail industry also understands that short duration noise associated with train horns and level crossing warning signals can be disruptive, especially late at night and in the early hours of the morning.

Any change to current practice would require amendments by the national governing bodies to the rail safety regulations and rail operators' rules. The industry has identified some ways in which noise impacts of train horns could be reduced without compromising safety. One of these could be implementing a quieter train warning horn for pedestrian crossings. Due to the complex regulatory and safety implications this will not be a short-term fix, however it is something the industry believes, in consultation with community, may have a lasting and positive impact.

The industry is committed to working with government and relevant authorities to ensure an efficient, safe network that meets regulatory and legislative requirements while being respectful to the environment.

For more information and a list of contacts please visit www.transport.wa.gov.au/Freight-Ports/freight-rail

