

VRE may shut down if Congress doesn't extend safety mandate deadline

BY SCOTT SHENK/THE FREE LANCE-STAR | Posted: Friday, October 23, 2015 12:00 am

The New Year's resolution of thousands of Fredericksburg-area commuters might be to find a new way to get to work.

The railroad industry is painting a bleak picture if Congress doesn't extend a mandate requiring a positive train control system by the end of the year. And part of that picture would include about 9,000 Virginia Railway Express commuters having to find another mode of transportation come the first of the year.

Railroad officials say they can't implement the system by the deadline date of Dec. 31, and if the mandate takes effect, everything from commuter rail lines such as VRE to freight trains will stop running.

VRE, CSX and Norfolk Southern are among those in the railroad industry preparing to cease operations on Jan. 1.

"Safety is VRE's top priority and we are fully committed to implementing PTC," VRE Chief Executive Officer Doug Allen said in a prepared statement. "Despite the hard work and dedication by all involved, more time is needed."

The issue at hand is the 2008 Rail Safety Improvement Act, which requires upgraded warning systems for passenger trains and some types of freight trains. Positive train control is designed to automatically warn engineers of problems and stop trains if engineers don't act.

Industry officials say progress has been made, but the expensive and highly technical system is years from completion.

The Association of American Railroads said 60,000 miles of railroad need to be upgraded with new equipment. So far, \$5 billion has been spent on the upgrades to the rails and train cars.

VRE said it is spending \$10.5 million to add the technology to its trains, and they should be ready by the end of the year. But the rest of the rail infrastructure won't be ready by then.

VRE's Fredericksburg line trains run on CSX owned rails. The Manassas line runs on Norfolk



VRE

Virginia Railway Express commuters get off the train at the Fredericksburg station.

Southern rails. Neither of those two lines will be ready by the deadline.

CSX needs to install 7,500 miles of signal system. Some 4,700 miles of signal systems have been replaced, but it likely will be 2018 before all of it is installed.

Officials say that without an extension of the mandate, it would be illegal to run certain trains after Dec. 31.

According to CSX, more than 100 commuter and Amtrak passenger trains run each day on the tracks that run through the Fredericksburg region. VRE trains account for an average of 17,900 passenger trips a day.