Extension of Remarks

Hon. Robert E. (Bud) Cramer
Of Alabama
In the House of Representatives

Wednesday, May 26, 1999

Mr. CRAMER. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to join my friend and colleague, Congressman Bill Lipinski to introduce the Railway Safety and Funding Equity Act of 1999, also known as RSAFE.

This legislation addresses the dangerous lack of adequate safety infrastructure, such as crossing gates, at highway and railroad grade crossings across the country. At many grade crossings, the only safety infrastructure between motorists and oncoming trains is a stop sign or a crossbuck. In my state of Alabama, only about 30 percent of the grade crossings are signalized with gates, lights, or bells. All too often, the end result of this lack of adequate safety infrastructure is a tragic accident in which someone is horribly injured or killed. Last year alone, 428 people died in accidents at railroad grade crossings. Indeed, my home state of Alabama is among the states worst in the nation in terms of vehicle train crashes.

These statistics are appalling and unacceptable, especially when we have the resources and know how to greatly reduce them. That’s why I’ve joined with my colleagues, Bill Lipinski, in introducing RSAFE. This legislation will set aside the 4.3-cent per gallon diesel fuel tax that railroads pay toward deficit reduction and transfers it into the Federal Highway Administration’s Section 130 grade crossing safety program. This will increase the monies available through this program by approximately $125 million, raising the total level from $150 million to approximately $275 million for the next 5 years.

Dedicating the monies derived from this fuel tax toward railroad safety infrastructure will have a real and tangible impact on countless communities across the country. However, while installing new crossing gates and lights will help decrease the number of tragic accidents we’ve seen so many times in the news, this alone is not enough. In addition to putting up new physical barriers at grade crossings, we also need to put more money toward educating motorists. That’s why RSAFE sets aside five percent of this new funding for education and awareness campaigns, such as those conducted by Operation Lifesaver. Operation Lifesaver is a unique, non-profit organization that works with local law enforcement officials and others to make pedestrians and motorists aware of the dangers of railroad crossings. It is through these combined efforts that we will have the most impact on communities and save the most lives.

I know that my friends in the railroad industry will argue that even the imposition of the 4.3-cents tax is unfair and punitive. They will argue that they have already invested billions of dollars in maintaining and improving their infrastructure. Well, I applaud the investment the industry has put into improving grade crossing infrastructure. But, I say to my friends in the railroad industry, more needs to be done.

RSAFE does more. Rather than using the revenue raised by this 4.3-cents tax on deficit reduction, RSAFE plows the money right back into railroads, making them safer for the public. Furthermore, after five years of increased investment in making our nation’s railroad crossings safer, RSAFE repeals the 4.3-cents tax. Therefore, with this bill, my colleague and I are not trying to penalize or unfairly burden the railroad industry. On the contrary, through this bill we are simply trying to use the funds the railroad industry is already paying wiser.

We believe it is far wiser and fairer to use this money to put toward deficit reduction. That’s why RSAFE sets aside five percent of this new funding for education and awareness campaigns, such as those conducted by Operation Lifesaver. Operation Lifesaver is a unique, non-profit organization that works with local law enforcement officials and others to make pedestrians and motorists aware of the dangers of railroad crossings. It is through these combined efforts that we will have the most impact on communities and save the most lives.

The Railroad Safety and Funding Equity Act of 1999 is a good bill which strikes a good balance between industry and public safety. I urge my colleagues in the railroad industry to join Representative Lipinski and I in moving this legislation forward. Each day we wait, is another day a life is needlessly put at risk.