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Action clears way for work to proceed in high-priority Chicago rail network

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A formal accord between the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Illinois DOT clears the way for that state to begin spending a \$100 million federal grant on projects to help untangle congestion points in the nation's key rail hub area of Chicago.

The agreement the two departments signed follows a grant award in February under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act for the Chicago Region Environmental and Transportation Efficiency program.

That is a multi-year and multi-billion-dollar plan to sort out the maze of freight and passenger tracks and rail yards that sprang up in Chicago over the course of more than 100 years and which can slow cross-country freight moves to a time-wasting crawl once they enter that metropolitan area.

Railroads, the state and the city are contributing to the construction costs of projects that separate tracks and build road and rail overpasses, but they are depending on this and other federal awards for much of the funding.

"We are using Recovery Act dollars to create jobs for breaking up freight bottlenecks that will help get our economy moving," said Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. "These projects are vital building blocks in America's continuing economic recovery." The freight rail industry has labeled CREATE as the nation's single most important set of construction projects to improve shipment flows.

About 25 percent of U.S. rail traffic moves through Chicago, and sometimes takes longer to get through the city than to reach it from either seacoast. Federal Highway Administrator Victor Mendez said the CREATE program also supports President Obama's National Export Initiative to double U.S. exports in five years.

CREATE's most important improvements are road-rail grade separations and new rail-to-rail connections, the DOT said, to benefit both transport modes.

The \$100 million grant covers five projects,[<http://www.dot.gov/affairs/2010/dot14210.html>] including a highway-rail grade separation for the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad and CSX Transportation.

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