

# Railway Age Names 2026 Short Line, Regional Railroads of the Year

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Railway Age proudly recognizes Union County Industrial Railroad (UCIR), a North Shore Railroad Company affiliate, and Georgia Central Railway (GC), a Genesee & Wyoming subsidiary, as our 2026 Short Line and Regional Railroads of the Year, respectively. Sierra Northern Railway (SERA) has earned Short Line Honorable Mention, and R. J. Corman Railroad Company's Nashville & Eastern Railroad (NERR) has earned Regional Honorable Mention.

All four small roads will receive specially designed award plaques; UCIR and GC executives will be presented with them at the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association (ASLRRA) 2026 Conference & Exhibition, to be held April 12-14 at the Minneapolis Convention Center in Minneapolis, Minn.

"Our Honorees and Honorable Mentions are not only achieving growth through strategic investment, a collaborative approach to industrial development, and a commitment to service excellence, but also positioning themselves as technology innovators delivering value to the industry, their partners and customers, and the communities they serve every day," Railway Age Executive Editor Marybeth Luczak said. "All of us at Railway Age congratulate them on their outstanding achievements and thank all 20-plus finalists who were part of this year's strong program."

## SHORT LINE HONORABLE MENTION

### Sierra Northern Railway (SERA)

The last Interstate Commerce Commission-approved short line transaction was Mike Hart's 1995 acquisition of what is now Sierra Northern Railway (SERA) in California. Widely expected to fail, its 600 carloads were operated over 49 excepted miles of broken ties and rusty rail. Derailments were common and a lone Baldwin locomotive was firing on five cylinders.

Through an innovative "take-or-pay" agreement with Sierra Pacific Industries, freight traffic was stabilized and rebuilt by lowering rates to those charged when the railroad was constructed in 1897. Over the next 31 years, the railroad expanded, adding the Yolo Short Line Railroad (YSLR), Mendocino Railway's "Skunk Train" (MRY), operations at the Port of West Sacramento, the Riverbank Industrial Complex, and the former Fillmore & Western trackage in Ventura County. Parent company Sierra Railroad Company also added excursion services, developed electric-assisted rail-bike operations, and maintained SERA's reputation as the "The Movie Railroad" with more than 400 films recorded on site.

SERA, Sierra Railroad Company's freight division, began to accelerate in 2015 under Kennan H. Beard III's leadership. It now moves more than 15,000 carloads annually and has materially expanded system capacity through new sidings, interchanges, storage tracks and transload facilities.

Sierra Railroad Company in 2020 acquired and developed a 116-acre inland port and unit train transload facility that serves Union Pacific and BNSF and now handles more than 7,000 carloads annually, and in 2024 constructed a West Sacramento transload that exceeds 3,000 carloads per year.

Last fall, the first of four HFC (hydrogen fuel cell)-powered, ZE (zero-emission) four-axle switchers entered service on SERA. Developed with Railpower Technologies (now a SERA subsidiary), the locomotive is described as "the first [of its type] in the United States built specifically for freight rail." The project was made possible through a P3 (public-private partnership). The California Energy Commission awarded \$4 million to design and demonstrate the prototype. In 2023, the California State Transportation Agency and the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District provided \$19.5 million for three additional locomotives. In addition to Railpower, technology partners include GTI Energy, OptiFuel Systems LLC, Ballard Power Systems, and the University of California, Riverside. Sierra Railroad Company's energy division, founded in 2003, is producing hydrogen for the locomotives using waste feedstocks.

In December 2025, SERA completed a 5-1/2-year FRA CRISI project installing 90,000 new ties and eight miles of 115-pound rail, and upgrading ten highway-rail grade crossings. With RRIF financing, SERA built more than six miles of new main line sidings, including an 8,000-foot unit-train interchange and fully utilized storage tracks.

SERA represents a turnaround story—from near-abandonment to sustained growth, infrastructure renewal, and technical innovation. This ASLRRRA Environmental Award winner is now entering into a new phase with the sale of a majority interest to Ridgewood Infrastructure.

"Thank you to Railway Age magazine for recognizing Sierra Northern Railway with an honorable mention, a testament to our team's dedication and innovative spirit," said Kennan H. Beard III, President and CEO of SERA. "This acknowledgment celebrates our remarkable growth in services, from expanded freight capabilities and sustainable initiatives to enhanced customer partnerships across California. We are inspired to continue our expansion, building on this momentum to deliver even greater value to our communities and the rail industry."