

Q&A:

What Port Operators and Short Line Railroads Need to Know About the FY 2025–26 CRISI Grant Program

Insights from PraxiChain's Port & Rail Experts



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Federal capital is moving fast — and the **CRISI NOFO (Notice of Funding Opportunity)** was announced on 04/20/26, combining the FY25–26 NOFO in Q1 2026. This cycle is bringing approximately \$2 billion to the table, combining FY25 and FY26 funds into a single NOFO. **Applications are due June 22, 2026.** Our Ports team has secured nine-figure federal awards for port and rail clients. Here's what we are telling them right now.

- Applications are due June 22, 2026.
- This cycle combines FY25 and FY26 funding into a single NOFO, with approximately \$2 billion available — the second-largest CRISI round on record (the FY23–24 NOFO totaled \$2.478 billion).
- FRA priorities include 286K car weight upgrades, bridge projects tied to 286K, and diesel locomotive purchases. Rolling stock is not a priority this cycle.
- There is a big focus on technology in this round.
- Port authorities are eligible applicants — but must apply directly, not through a holding company structure.
- Organizations that are scoped, matched, and stakeholder-aligned will have a decisive advantage over those that wait.



What is CRISI, and why does this cycle matter more than previous ones?

CRISI — the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements program — is the FRA’s primary federal grant program for freight rail infrastructure and safety. It funds track rehabilitation, bridge work, grade crossing improvements, locomotive acquisition, intermodal connectors, and more. It was significantly expanded under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, making it one of the most consequential freight rail funding streams in U.S. history.

What makes this cycle distinct is the combination of scale and urgency. FRA is combining FY25 and FY26 funding into a single NOFO, bringing the total to approximately \$2 billion. On top of that, USDOT is under a mandate to obligate all remaining IIJA funds by the end of FY26 — which is compressing timelines across every program.

A 63-day application window has been announced, compared to the 60 days applicants have historically had. The organizations that are ready when the NOFO publishes will have a meaningful advantage.

What kinds of projects are eligible, and are there specific priorities for this cycle?

CRISI’s project scope is broad: track rehabilitation, bridge replacements, grade crossing improvements, locomotive acquisition, intermodal connectors, and workforce development. But FRA’s priorities for this cycle are coming into clearer focus.

The emphasis is on short line railroads and straightforward infrastructure. 286,000-pound (286K) car weight upgrades are a particular area of interest, especially where existing track is not currently 286K-capable. Bridge projects tied to 286K upgrades are receiving increased favorable consideration. Diesel locomotive purchases remain viable. Rolling stock — railcars — does not appear to be a funding priority this cycle.

For port operators, 286K capability is directly relevant. Ports with rail connections that cannot handle heavier car weights are at a competitive disadvantage with shippers. **A CRISI-funded 286K upgrade, potentially paired with bridge work, can address both the infrastructure gap and the business case in a single application.**



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Stakeholder and political support carry real weight. Engage your state DOT, elected officials, and shippers before the window opens, not during it.”

Who can apply? Are port authorities eligible?

Yes — and this is one of the most common misconceptions about the program. **Eligible applicants include freight railroads of all sizes, state and local governments, rail safety associations and labor organizations, universities and research institutions, and port authorities, provided the project involves freight rail infrastructure and is in partnership with a railroad.**

One important clarification for this cycle: advanced appropriations funding does not permit holding company applications. Individual railroads and public entities — including port authorities — must apply directly. If your organization is structured as a holding company, confirm the correct entity is named as the applicant before the window opens.

Joint applications are permitted and can strengthen the submission. A short line and a port authority collaborating on a shared rail upgrade is a compelling combination — and the FRA has historically viewed it favorably.

We’ve heard the application may be simpler this cycle. Is that true?

Potentially, yes. It is worth understanding what is being discussed. To accommodate the compressed timeline, FRA is considering modifications to applicant requirements, including the possible elimination of certain required attachments.

Scope and schedule may be folded into the project narrative. Budget details and performance measures may not be required at the application stage.

The benefit-cost analysis requirement may also shift toward a more qualitative approach, though this remains uncertain. Applicants should not assume it will be dropped entirely.

If these changes hold, they will provide meaningful relief for smaller and first-time applicants who have found the documentation requirements daunting. But the simpler the application, the less competitive it is. The organizations that win will still tell a clear, well-supported story.

What should port directors be thinking about specifically?

Port operators are an underrepresented applicant pool for CRISI, and that is an opportunity. **If your facility has freight rail connections or needs them, project types worth considering include on-dock rail improvements, new rail-to-terminal connections, intermodal connector upgrades, and switching infrastructure that reduces dwell time and improves throughput.**

The strategic framing matters as much as the project itself. Applications that demonstrate alignment with freight commodity flows, domestic supply chain priorities, and regional economic impact perform well with FRA. Port operators are positioned to make the case — the challenge is translating operational realities into federal grant application language.



What is the cost share requirement?

The statutory minimum non-federal match is 20%.

This cycle, however, there is a renewed emphasis on higher match levels where feasible. If your organization can demonstrate a match above the floor, it is worth doing — it signals commitment and improves cost-effectiveness, a factor FRA weighs explicitly.



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What should organizations be doing right now?

Advance your project scoping.

Get clear on what you're building, what it will cost, and how you'll make the public benefit case. Even if the BCA requirement is simplified, you still need a credible project story.

Secure your matching funds.

Identify your non-federal match and confirm those commitments now. Last-minute scrambles on cost share undermine otherwise strong applications.

Build your stakeholder support.

Engage your state DOT, elected representatives, and key shippers. A 30-to-60-day window is not enough time to build these relationships from scratch.

What's your advice for a port or short line that has never applied for CRISI before?

Don't let the process keep you on the sidelines. CRISI is designed to be accessible to smaller applicants, and a potentially simplified process this cycle makes that more true than usual. The investment in preparation typically pays for itself many times over at this funding scale.

Our practical advice: don't go it alone if you don't have to. Bringing in someone with CRISI experience can meaningfully improve the quality and competitiveness of your submission. If you're unsure whether your project is a good fit, reach out early. A brief conversation can tell you quickly whether you have a real opportunity — and what it will take to pursue it.

Request a complimentary CRISI opportunity assessment. In 30 minutes, we'll identify your highest-leverage federal funding opportunities and what it will take to pursue them. [Contact PraxiChain](#) for more information and to connect with our experts.

