



## ASLRRA SAFETY AWARD WINNERS

### Former Cop Thrives in Safety Beat at Texas Short Line



Photo Courtesy of OmniTRAX

**Sam Cotton**  
**SAFETY PERSON**  
**OF THE YEAR**  
Panhandle Northern's Sam Cotton Receives Safety Honor from ASLRRA. He took railroad's safety performance from worst to first in OmniTRAX corporate family.

Sam Cotton, General Manager of the Panhandle Northern Railroad in Borger, TX, has won the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association Safety Person of the Year award, given each year to the individual member who best exemplifies safety practices and supports safety initiatives in the workplace.

Cotton, age 42, first became involved in the railroad industry 13 years ago, working for Alliance Terminal Railroad as a grounds man for intermodal loading and unloading before transferring over to the switching side shortly thereafter. In 2007, he was recruited by the Panhandle Northern Railroad to assist in the overhaul of their procedures in order to improve the railroad's safety record. Mainly handling the transportation of chemicals and petroleum products, the Panhandle Northern runs 31 miles of main tracks and 35 miles of additional track between Panhandle and Borger, where it serves the world's largest inland refinery.

Cotton remembers how railroad performance and safety [at Panhandle Northern] were in "horrible shape" and that he was offered the position of General Manager at the railroad because Alliance Terminal had gone accident and injury free for several years. Cotton made safety his primary priority and soon conditions and procedures at Panhandle Northern began to improve. OmniTRAX, Inc. Senior Vice President Darcy Brede observed the positive changes put in place by Cotton begin to change the ways in which employees interacted and addressed safety issues. He mentioned how Cotton began an employee mentoring program in which every employee was responsible for every other employee, and that such an environment brought to light safety issues that needed to be addressed and instances in which a successful employee would be more likely to gain recognition for good work. With Cotton's new safety practices in place, Panhandle Northern Railroad soon moved from the OmniTRAX railroad with the worst record for safety to the one with the best.

Cotton's commitment to safety began while working as a police officer years before he entered the railroad industry. During his years in law enforcement, he worked patrol, narcotics, canine and investigations and was eventually promoted to lieutenant. Cotton recalls his time as a police lieutenant as when he learned the administrative skills that he later put to work in the railroad industry, in addition to developing an attention to safety that would characterize his career. Cotton noted that this internalization of safety is important because, "If you don't believe it, you won't make the employees believe it. You have to carry yourself away from work the same way you do during work – it's a lifestyle." Brede echoed this attitude in Cotton, saying, "To say that he's everything you want in a safety manager is an understatement. He is consistent with both employees and managers and people respect him because even if he disagrees, he is speaking on behalf of their safety."

Brede also mentioned that taking on a difficult task and producing positive results is one of Cotton's many strengths. Cotton said that such complex undertakings prove to be one of the best parts of his job. When asked about the highlights of his work, he replied, "probably the challenges I face every day, striving for continuous improvement. I love to be challenged." Cotton recalls how, upon first arriving at Panhandle Northern, "We worked 18 hours a day,



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seven days a week to make changes to the railroad. Now we're working on maintaining that standard."

In addition to winning the ASLRRA Safety Person of the Year, Cotton previously won the BNSF Contractor of the Year Award in 2006. Panhandle Northern also won OmniTRAX's Railroad of the Southern Division for Safety award in 2009, as well as a Jake Award in 2007, and a Jake Award with Distinction in both 2008 and 2009. Brede said that being able to recognize an employee and a railroad for their commitment to safety brings a great deal of pride to the organization. He continued, "it [the award] helps reinforce what

we're trying to do internally and gets us off to an amazing start this year [...] When you can celebrate safety in your organization, that's when you start making moves in a positive direction." Brede sees that Cotton and the Panhandle Northern have set the precedent for safety in the OmniTRAX organization and anticipates other railroads to reflect the same success in the coming year. The success of Cotton and the PNR, according to Brede, "gives everyone a shot in the arm."

The award holds a special meaning for Cotton as it reflects not only his work, but also the efforts of every employee he oversees on a daily basis. "My name is on the award

but everyone [at the railroad], it was their efforts that made it happen. I oversee things, but these guys are the ones who do the work," he said. Brede shared the pride that his organization feels for Cotton's success, saying, "We are so proud of Sam. He's always been a very positive role model. Not only that, he's our program. We have to develop the entire company program around what Sam does." With a proven record for safety and strong leadership skills, Sam Cotton exemplifies what the ASLRRA Safety Person of the Year Award is all about. We congratulate him on his fine work.

*By Eileen Keane*



John K. Fiorilla, Esq.  
jfiorilla@capehart.com

Christopher J. Hoare, Esq.  
choare@capehart.com

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