

MRH

Questions, Answers and Tips



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q. When building a yard, how wide should be the track spacing? What about mainlines?

A. What years are you modeling? The railroads have increased their track spacing over the years, for better accessibility and greater safety.

When Ray Lerner posed the question, he said he tried 2" spacing on HO scale mainline tracks and experimented with 89' freight cars to set his curves at 2-1/2" spacing.

Steam-era yard tracks in North America could be as close as 12 feet apart, and main lines were frequently at 13 feet. Track built since the 1940s will have often 15 feet or so spacing on the main track. Any "new"

construction must be a minimum of 15' track centers.

Union Pacific uses 20' track centers on new construction, and Burlington Northern Santa Fe is using 30' track centers in some cases. If track workers are on an adjacent track that is spaced less than 25 feet away, federal regulations require trains passing the workers to reduce speed. If the tracks are 25 feet or more apart, there are no speed restrictions.

Some modelers prefer to work to prototype specs. But modelers also like to save space where they can, and strictly following prototype practices is not always efficient. Some modelers select wider-than-prototypical spacings to reduce the number of derailments caused by fat fingers handling small cars.



1: The Willamette Model Railroad Club chose a 2" spacing (14-1/2 scale feet) for Lebanon Yard on its 1979-era HO scale layout. Coupling and uncoupling, as well as reading car numbers, are done as the switch crews pull and push cars along the classification tracks.

Don Andrews says, "You are right-on with 2" mainline spacing. That is fairly standard in HO. Curve spacing is determined in actual conditions with your intended rolling stock, exactly as you have done. I tried yard spacing of 1-3/4" and 1-7/8". It looks OK, but both are too narrow for my fingers. I settled on 1-7/8", knowing that any re-railing or adding rolling stock to the layout has to be done on the yard lead or drill track."

Can you establish safe clearances on curves without tacking down track and pushing cars around? Sure. NMRA Standard S-8 shows how center spacing on curves will

vary according to the type and era of equipment run, and radius.

For instance, it shows 2-1/2" minimum centers for 32" radius when using the most modern equipment with its larger clearance profiles and greater lengths. For older, smaller equipment operating on 18" radius, it recommends 2-3/16". If you run broad minimum-radius curves, the centers can become 2-3/8" on a 40" curve for large modern equipment like autotracks or Trailer Train flats.

The NMRA chart of suggested spacings for various length equipment on a variety of scales and curves is found at nmra.org/standards/sandrp/s-8.html.