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SNCF and CNES innovate with new ‘Rail and Space’ technology ecosystem

French national railway operator SNCF and CNES are going to work together to devise innovative rail solutions geared to the digital era through a new Rail and Space Coordination Committee co-chaired by SNCF Chairman Guillaume Pepy and CNES President Jean-Yves Le Gall.

In areas like traffic management, onboard Internet connectivity or geolocation, the space and rail sectors share much common ground. On the back of recent actions engaged by its Directorate of Innovation, Applications and Science, CNES has set up with SNCF a joint Rail and Space Coordination Committee to identify avenues for cooperation and put their relationship on a formal footing. This committee will be co-chaired by SNCF’s Chairman and CNES’s President and will meet once a year.

At the committee’s first meeting in February this year, several avenues were identified:

- modernization of the control-and-command system, which could benefit from the advantages afforded by Europe’s Galileo satellite navigation system;
- on-train fast-broadband connectivity delivered by new K_a-band satellites;
- rail network safety enhanced by optical satellite imagery;
- use of radar imagery for surveillance of tracks and their immediate vicinity.

Technical trials in some of these areas are already underway. The two partners are also working together in the field of the data economy, seeking to pool their expertise in processing and adding value to the wealth of data that they generate.

To organize discussions on these topics, working groups will be formed comprising specialists from SNCF and CNES. The Coordination Committee will subsequently review the groups’ progress and areas for cooperation identified.

CNES President Jean-Yves Le Gall commented: *“This new collaboration and committee are a perfect illustration of what CNES’s new Directorate of Innovation, Applications and Science is setting out to achieve. CNES must be everywhere that its technologies and the benefits of space can improve results and create synergies, and the avenues we have identified with SNCF are looking precisely in that direction. It is also a great honour for CNES to be working with SNCF, whose heritage and prestige are inextricably linked with those of France.”*

SNCF Chairman Guillaume Pepy commented: *“SNCF is today accelerating its adoption of new rail technologies to meet the major security, capacity and competitiveness challenges facing it, with a view to continue improving the quality of services we provide to our customers. We must broaden our ecosystem, and in this respect the signature of this framework agreement establishes a new collaborative relationship between SNCF and CNES in the priority areas we have identified. I firmly believe in the value that space technologies can bring to the rail industry. We must now adapt them and optimize their costs by making the transition to industrial-scale solutions. Our teams will be working towards this goal together.”*

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