

SA's R600 million train blunder

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Johannesburg - South African railways officials imported brand new locomotives from Europe worth hundreds of millions of rand despite explicit warnings that the trains are not suited for local rail lines.

In what may be the country's largest and most expensive recent tender blunder the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa) has to date received thirteen new diesel locomotives that are too high for the long-distance routes they were intended for.

Senior railways engineers and sources with first-hand knowledge of the issue told Rapport Prasa had been warned that the new diesel locomotives it ordered from Spanish manufacturer Vossloh España are too tall for local use.

The locomotives exceed the height restrictions for diesel locomotives on the long distance lines Prasa intended using them on.

R3.5bn order

The thirteen Afro 4000 diesel locomotives that have so far been delivered to Prasa are worth R600 million and form part of a larger R3.5 billion order for 70 new locomotives.

The locomotives have a roof height of 4 264mm while the maximum height for diesel locomotives may not exceed 3 965mm, senior rail engineers with firsthand knowledge of the saga told Rapport.

Prasa intended using the locomotives for its long distance Shosholoza Meyl passenger service.

The locomotives were revealed to the media at an event in Cape Town in January, where Prasa and transport minister **Dipuo Peters** stated the locomotives would undergo three months' testing before entering operations in April.

"Prasa was warned the locomotives were too high even before they started arriving in the country. They carried on with the contract despite our warnings," said a senior Transnet engineer.

Another Transnet engineer said Transnet initially didn't want Prasa to move the locomotives even on the short track distance between the Cape Town docks and the nearby Salt River train depot.

The engineers say the locomotives could damage the overhead electrical cables on the country's rail lines.

Tender regulations flouted

The auditor general last year announced Prasa had flouted its own tender regulations when it awarded the contract to Swifambo Rail Leasing.

The South African Institute of Electrical Engineers (SAIEE) confirmed it was aware of the height issue and that it was working on finding "technical solutions".

Transnet and Prasa "engage on a frequent basis on any matter that affects us in whatsoever way through the designated channels and forums established between the two companies," said Transnet Freight Rail spokesperson Sandile Simelane. "Transnet Freight Rail is therefore not at liberty to engage Prasa through the media," he added.

Moffet Mofokeng, Prasa's spokesperson, did not respond to the newspaper's queries beyond stating in an e-mail that "you are at liberty to write what you want".

Case Analysis

What could be considered possible root cause of these problems?

Would a systems analysis have helped to avoid this problem?