

# Train Whistling in the Wind

*By Nandananda*

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Trains on the plain and trains through scenic wild canyons along rivers give us magnificent sights, but trains through fragile canyons are a nightmare of problems. Here on the Eel River we have had railroad experts and business entrepreneurs try for almost one hundred years to keep the North Coast Railroad operating through the most tenuous of circumstances. You see, the Eel River Canyon is part of the Gorda Plate, the plate that is newly extruding upward from the brutal forces of the Pacific Plate and the North American Continental Plate sliding past each other. Although this has gone on for thousands of years the Gorda Plate is considered young, with lots of on-going movement in the form of earthquakes, while rocks and soils are a *mélange* that easily comes apart. Most quakes are low in strength and deep, but they shake upward, causing persistent slides and avalanches, creating an unstable situation. Coupled with the tremendous vibration created by the train itself, it is no wonder how problematic a train is through the Eel River Canyon.

Historically, even when the railroad was well maintained it still went off the track on an average of once a week. When it was operated for the benefit of the timber industry there was about \$1 million per month spent for the on-going repair of the ever sliding track, easily giving this rail system the dubious designation of being the most expensive rail system in the country. To keep the system operating it took workers living along the tract and going out during storms to repair and maintain the tracks. It was not unusual for someone to walk ahead of the train to make sure it was stable enough and clear of debris for the next trainload of lumber to get through. What a nightmare for engineers to drive the train with minimum speed when the tracks ahead were moving like a snake from the on-coming load! Once the timber value peaked and the cost of doing business continued to increase, the commercial operation ceased, only to be bought by the politically motivated North Coast elected officials. Did they really think the state was wealthy enough to absorb the costs of maintaining this rail system? Or did they realize what a cash cow this would become for retired politicians? Funny how a politician can get away with fleecing the taxpayers by stating they do not know where the money went — it was the bookkeeper's fault and then walk away.

Now we see an attempt to restart the railroad as a public-private joint venture, supported by politicians, and private business. The newly appointed group to operate the north coast rail is really the same group that was running the rail when it was closed by slides during winter storms in 1997/98. This operating group paid themselves off with the remaining funds and walked away. Now almost ten years later this same group returns with a scheme to develop a mine at Island Mountain in the Wild and Scenic Eel River canyon. They claim they are world experts in knowing how to fix the problems the canyon faces, yet answers we have gotten on how they plan their fixes are not only questionable, but not good for the river or fish. When I talked to Fish and Game personnel about one of the fixes, to armor the banks of the Eel with rock from a more developed mining operation at Island Mountain, I was told that it is now realized how damaging that kind of fix is and that Fish and Game have been removing that type of work where it was done. With all the talk of fixes, they continue to ignore the impacts the train vibration itself causes on the hillsides, especially where the toe of the mountain has been cut off. Of course they never mention the fires the train set off on its run through the steep inner gorge of the canyon. The ensuing fire suppression was paid for by taxpayers.

Being billed as the economic cure for North Coast failing businesses, the new operators are espousing a scenario where the port of Humboldt will be deepened to accommodate large container ships and then, with no value added, shipped via rail through the canyon and Mendocino, Sonoma and Marin counties to hook up with the national lines. It is a grand scheme with lots of moving parts, many questions and few answers that hold up under close inspection. Lumber derailed into the river is one thing. Garbage and other goods is quite a different story.

No longer operated by a wealthy national rail company, the now state-owned system is depending on taxpayers to keep them afloat. And who will really benefit? The answer to this question comes from looking at the larger picture of what is going on in the state economically and with the continuing numbers of people coming to live in our beautiful state. The state is pushing all new comers to the north to alleviate the crowded situation in the south. This creates the need for more housing, which needs water, which needs farm land with water rights and local political will. Remember the economy of the state is predicated on the number of housing starts.

The latest news update: Not only is the Trinity County application to open and expand the mine incomplete, but both the mine and railroad will need to do both NEPA and CEQA (national and state) environmental studies. Additionally, we find out that the seven-and-a-half-acre mine at Island Mountain the railroad used to obtain rock for repairs along the rail line was never permitted or the rock sold. It was not necessary since the rock came from land owned by the railroad and only used on land they owned. Now the new (old) railroad operators and mine developer (also one of the operators) want to expand the mine to 325 acres on the contiguous piece of property, and then mine at a rate of 6 million tons per year which translates to 40,000 car loads per year. Add to that the number of car loads the anticipated new port at Humboldt would bring in at 1,000 containers a day, 5 days a week. This would be 10 trains a day with 100 containers a day double-stacked since railroad operators claim they can get through the tunnels. Just how this would fit into the SMART rail plan for Marin and Sonoma remains a very big question, since that plan calls for only one freight train a week. Or was that a day, or is it really going to be per hour during the night time off hours of commuter trains? And just where and how will the freight get across the upper bay to Richmond? Ah, if only putting this all together were as easy in reality as in their dreams.

If this issue concerns you at all, please stay tuned via our website at <http://www.eelriver.org>, and become a member of Friends of the Eel River, (see membership form on the back page) and get on our email alert list. Second, become involved by writing a letter asking to be notified for the scoping session of the compulsory environment studies - (NEPA) (CEQA) for the North Coast Railroad and the Island Mountain Mine - addressed to the North Coast Railroad Authority, attn. Mitch Stogner, 419 Talmage Rd. Suite M, Ukiah, CA 95482. Write also to The Trinity County Planning Department, Attn: John Jelichich, P. O. Box 2819, Weaverville, CA 96093-2819. Please send a copy to us.