

The Railroad Dilemma

By Nadananda

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Are trucks bad and freight trains beneficial for the environment? That's what the North Coast Railway Authority (NCRA) wants the public to think. They want the public to believe that restarting freight service along the old Northwest Pacific Railway line that parallels Highway 101 in Humboldt, Mendocino and Sonoma counties is a great opportunity to remove those nasty, congestion-causing, diesel trucks from the roads; that restarting freight in this region would be an environmental benefit.

However, the facts show that freight carries significant negative environmental impacts, of which the most notable in this case would affect the Wild and Scenic Eel River, and homes and businesses within a half-mile of the tracks throughout the length of the line. It is also questionable how many trucks would be removed from the highway and how many more freight trains that would represent.

The specter of reopening Island Mountain Quarry, adjacent to the Eel River in Humboldt County, is a prime example of how this freight line can create an environmental disaster. The entire canyon of the mainstem Eel is prone to sliding and river siltation.

Freight Rail Service in the U.S.

Freight rail service in the United States is a huge industry, serving the demand for transportation of raw materials and manufactured goods across the country, with four very large freight rail companies providing most of the services.

Freight trains operate throughout most of California, serving all major urban areas. In the San Francisco Bay Area, a major trunk line serves the Port of Oakland and runs through Richmond, California.

So, if the trains are already there, why don't companies such as Southern Pacific run freight on pre-existing tracks that stretch from Richmond, through Napa, across the Petaluma River, into Novato and north through Sonoma, Mendocino and Humboldt counties?

The answer is economics, the costs outweigh the profits, as past attempts to run a railway here have shown. And that's with the railroad not even covering most of its damage. Now they want taxpayers (and the local environment) to bear this burden, while a few benefit from the rail service. The Northwest Pacific Railway (NWPR) freight line has always had economic problems.

Maintaining the line is expensive and there isn't a high demand for freight services in this region (other than a few vocal special interests, such as the mining industry). Despite claims to the contrary, reopening this freight line through the Eel River Canyon all the way to Eureka is a pipe

dream. The cost of repairing the track and then maintaining it through the Eel River Canyon is prohibitive. As described on Friends of the Eel River's website in "Ten Terrible Truths": Consultants for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) estimated that it would cost about \$642,000,000 to try to stabilize all the areas along the northern portion of the NWP and would then still require constant infusions of taxpayer funds for future repairs. 89% of the \$642,000,000, or about \$520,000,000, is the estimated cost to reconstruct the railroad between Willits and Arcata. Some areas downslope from Island Mountain are expected to cost more than \$10 million per mile (URS Greiner Woodward Clyde, 1998). When the company that formerly owned the railroad abandoned the line in 1983, the company's president stated that it was costing the company \$1 million every month to maintain the railroad from Willits to Eureka.

The tracks through this seismically active area cut the toes off very steep mountains, on the banks of a river capable of going from very little water to huge quantities in a short time—a classic flashy river system. At times there is so much water it covers the tracks. During dry season, sparks from the wheels fly into the dry grasses and brush along the tracks, igniting fires that quickly roar out of control and up steep mountainsides. The vibrations of the heavy train shake the earth, resulting in a slip here, an avalanche there. Historically trains went off the tracks at least once a week. The riverbed is currently littered with massive chunks of old railway and train debris.

The costs of maintenance and repair have kept private companies like Southern Pacific from running freight in the Eel River canyon for decades.

The NCRA Plan

The North Coast Railroad Authority knows it can't cover all these costs as a private business. They're looking for and getting public money to fix the track and trestles in order to restart freight service. On November 9, 2006, the California Transportation Commission (CTC) approved the NCRA's request for \$43.2 million in state and federal funds to initiate repairs on 142 miles of track between Lombard (South of Napa) and Willits. The CTC also approved \$3.9 million to initiate environmental review of the Eel River Canyon north of Willits, and allocated \$3.5 million to begin the engineering phase of the restoration work between Lombard and Willits.

The NCRA's business plan, submitted to the CTC to qualify for the funding, calls for restarting quarry operations at Island Mountain, right on the Eel River. As a reading of their strategic plan makes clear, the economic viability of the NCRA is tied to the success of Island Mountain. The number of rail cars associated with all other potential activity pales by comparison.

The real connection between the NCRA and Island Mountain is ownership. In September 2006, the NCRA unanimously approved a five-year contract with the Northwestern Pacific Railroad Company (NWP Co.) to operate trains on the 316-mile line extending from Eureka to Novato along Highway 101. NWP Co. is comprised of Woodside Consulting Group of Palo Alto, Evergreen Natural Resources of Oroville, and Berg Holdings of Novato. The latter is owned by Skip Berg, who also owns Port Sonoma and recently received \$20 million earmarked in last year's federal

transportation bill to develop the Port Sonoma ferry terminal. Evergreen Natural Resources, Roger Green, is the company that wants to mine the Island Mountain Quarry.

In other words, the NCRA isn't just about putting goods on freight that would have otherwise been trucked. The rock from Island Mountain Quarry is not accessible by truck. The NCRA's management plan has always been about developing the largest open-pit hard rock quarry adjacent to any U.S. Wild and Scenic River. The successful mining of Island Mountain is a major component to the financial success of this railroad.

An additional concern I have is that the EIR submitted by Sonoma Marin Area Rapid Transit (SMART) to the CTC is flawed because SMART was told by NCRA there would only be one freight train a week. In order for the Island Mountain Quarry to move the projected 6,000,000 tons of rock a year they would have to have at least five trains per day, each with 25 cars, projected for five days a week per year. This of course would necessitate five additional trains returning, for a total of 10 trains per day.

This difference in the number of trains operating and when they operate is significant, especially if current truck freight is to be removed from the highway. A few trains a week operating during the day have little noise and other impacts and the NCRA knows it. Ten plus trains a day operating at night dramatically changes the impact. Trains horns and the weighted cars produce significant noise at night disturb sleeping residents and lower property values.

Passenger rail advocates are just becoming aware of this complex association. SMART owns the track in Sonoma and Marin counties. (NCRA owns track in Marin that parallels Highway 37.) SMART is required by law to negotiate an operating agreement with the NCRA and come to terms over when freight trains operate, who controls them, how much SMART must pay the NCRA for use of the tracks that the NCRA improved, and how much the NCRA must pay SMART for use of its right-of-way.

SMART proponents who want NCRA funds to fix their rail line may not be aware of the connection to number of freight-trains, noise, the Island Mountain Quarry, and the Eel River.

What You Can Do

Island Mountain Quarry has not yet received a permit from Trinity County for its operations, nor has the NCRA received all the funds it needs from the CTC to start up freight. An EIR will be required for both the freight and quarry operations.

1) If you are a supporter of SMART but do not support quarry operations that would significantly impact the Eel River, please attend a SMART meeting or write them. Insist that the NCRA address the environmental impacts of the quarry, prior to SMART signing the operating agreement. SMART has the power to make demands. If you care, this is the place to start.

2) If you are concerned about rail noise impacts, contact your local city council. Ask them to raise

these concerns during the NCRA's EIR scoping sessions. Tell your representative that you are concerned about the potential number of freight trains running at night and insist that this impact be evaluated consistent with NCRA's Strategic Plan. Also, push them to start the "Quiet Zone process" in their cities in order to reduce noise pollution associated with train horns.

3) Write letters to the editor of local newspapers in all the counties of the North Coast. State your concerns about the NCRA and ask that the newspaper investigate and inform the public about the connection between rail noise, Island Mountain Quarry, and Quiet Zones.

4) Who will safeguard the taxpayers in this outrageous public-private scheme? Write to the California Transit Commission, John Barna, Executive Director, 1120 N. St. Room 2221 (MS-52), Sacramento, CA 95814, or email him at John.Barna@dot.ca.gov.

5) Or call your local County Supervisor who sits on the NCRA Board of Directors and ask them these same questions.

6) Get involved. Contact Friends of the Eel River. They are heading up the fight against Island Mountain Quarry. Tel: 707.923.2146.