

Senate Bill 356
NCRA Right of Way Transfer
Senator McGuire

SUMMARY

SB 356 is a follow up bill to last year's successful SB 1029, the North Coast Railroad Authority (NCRA) Closure and Transition to Trail Act. SB 1029 set up a process to transition the 300+ mile, mostly dilapidated and largely inoperative rail line into a world class trail system that runs through some of the wildest and most scenic landscapes in the United States. The track is located in Northern California, running from San Francisco Bay in Marin County to Humboldt Bay in the north. SB 356 will transfer assets to the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART), furthering the creation of the Great Redwood Trail.

BACKGROUND

With the high cost of maintaining the tracks and the shortage of natural resources and goods to transport, privately owned freight rail service to the North Coast died a slow death in the 1970s and 80s.

In 1989, the Legislature created the NCRA in a last-ditch effort to save freight rail traffic on the North Coast. But when the governor at the time vetoed the funding mechanism for the Authority, it never had a chance. And when huge landslides covered large swaths of the track in the Eel River Canyon during the rains of 1997, the trains stopped, with most of the line ordered closed by the federal government and never reopened. Since this closure, the condition of many sections of tracks - north of the Sonoma County Airport - have become impassable or have washed out.

PROBLEM

With most of the rail line shut down for the last 20 years, NCRA virtually bankrupt, and the estimated cost of over \$1 billion dollars to get it running again, there is simply no possibility that the entire rail line will ever be back in operation. The landslides that closed the railroad in the 1990's have only gotten worse and the terrain along much of the line remains unstable.

SOLUTION

Last year's SB 1029 began the process of turning these beleaguered rail tracks into a world class trail system that will run from Marin to Humboldt County. This magnificent trail will attract millions to traverse through ancient redwoods, on top of breathtaking river-front bluffs, through the lush rows of Sonoma wine country, oak studded golden hills and along the shores of two world class bays.

This year, we have introduced SB 356 to continue the NCRA shutdown by transferring the rail assets from Willits south to SMART. It will also provide for representation from Mendocino County on the SMART Board of Directors.

SMART currently runs the public passenger commuter train from downtown San Rafael to northern Santa Rosa. The District is continuing to build out the system which will connect the Town of Windsor and the Larkspur Ferry Terminal in the coming 24 months. It is a highly efficient and modern rail line, with strong local tax support from both Marin and Sonoma County. Transferring the right of way to SMART from NCRA is the next logical step in dismantling NCRA, will help create financial stability for the line and will provide for a strong partner in building the Great Redwood Trail.

The result is a win/win for the state and North Coast communities, the local economies who are dependent on outdoor recreation, and for locals and outdoor enthusiasts alike who will flock to the Trail to enjoy a world class hiking and biking experience.

CONTACT

Jason Liles, Policy Consultant
Jason.Liles@sen.ca.gov
916-651-4002

Emily Cornett, Legislative Fellow
Emily.Cornett@sen.ca.gov
916-651-4002

