

Investing in Rail Now Could Save Money & Salmon

by Bill Moyer and Nick Gerhardt

The replacement of freight transportation on the lower Snake River poses a significant issue for those farmers who currently barge their grain to lower Columbia River ports. Fortunately, replacing this service appears relatively easy using the existing rail system, with some minor improvements. But we can do better than that. The bipartisan Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act (IIJA) provides the opportunity to aggressively invest in capacity and connectivity to deliver a truly robust, resilient, and competitive rail system that will serve the region for generations to come.

Shipping costs for farmers are a legitimate concern when considering changes in transport modes. The recent Murray-Inslee Report listed a range of transportation costs and options related to shipping grain. Depending on the assumptions used and subsidies involved, shipping grain by rail may not actually cost farmers more than shipping by barge.

Solutionary Rail (SR) advocates for policies and investments that utilize U.S. railroads to better serve public and national interests. Last spring, SR turned its focus to the Lower Snake River's grain transport and surrounding rail capacity to determine whether trains can play a role in saving salmon. It examined the current state of wheat transport by barges and trains, including the connectivity among the four short line railroads serving the area, their connections to Union Pacific (UP) and Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) main lines, and their potential for reaching Columbia River barge facilities.

On average, 2.4 million tons of grain is moved annually on barges; this volume represents the equivalent of approximately five additional 110-car unit trains per week. The current rail system, anchored by the Great Northwest Railroad (GRNW), has the capacity to rapidly pivot from barge to rail. The GRNW was reconstructed to modern standards when the lower Snake dams were built. Its track from Lewiston to Ayer currently hosts one train per day, but it has the capacity to host three round trips per day - and even more if it utilizes its 1.4 mile siding in Riparia.

A rapid mode shift would rely heavily on that railroad, as it would require few if any track improvements. Barge loading facilities at the Port of Lewiston, Port of Wilma, and Central Ferry Terminal, all of which are currently served by the GRNW, would require some improvements to their bulk loading capacity. Similar adaptations and the extension of the rail siding at Columbia Pulp to the Lyon's Ferry elevator would give that facility access to rail service as well. These relatively minor investments would

ensure the continued viability of these important facilities. Shifting freight from barges to the GRNW will have little impact on the amount of wheat moved by truck. Only price and service competition from railroads operating away from the river can do that.

Solutionary Rail has prioritized and mapped a series of opportunities to repair and restore lines in order to increase rail capacity, connectivity and expand price competition. These improvements would increase local access to rail and reduce trucking expenses to farmers. They would also reduce the costly impacts of trucks on public infrastructure, improve road safety and lower emissions.

Washington state already owns the short line track on the Palouse and contracts train operations to the Palouse River & Coulee City Railroad (PCC) and Spokane, Spangle & Palouse Railway (SS&P). Important parts of that system, sections that connect each line to Pullman and beyond, are out of service. SR calls for the repair of that track and proposes additional restoration projects on the Palouse to open more options for shippers and short line railroads.

Washington state also owns the excellent railbed along and north of the Snake River that is currently the under-utilized Columbia Plateau Trail (CPT). Returning a portion of the CPT - a former Burlington Northern line - between Benge and Pasco would dramatically increase the independence of the short line railroads from BNSF and UP. Restoring rail service on the CPT would increase access to Columbia River barges, restore rail transportation between Pasco and Pullman, and open future freight, passenger, and tourist train opportunities. Restoring railbeds and improving existing track conditions south of the river to expand the reach of the Columbia Walla Walla (CWW) Railroad should also be evaluated.

Repairing, expanding, and connecting these transportation assets is essential for creating a truly resilient rail transport system that reduces truck miles, expands price competition, and breathes new life into struggling communities and local economies.

Returning rail to the Camas Prairie and along the Clearwater River is also addressed in Solutionary Rail's analysis. Though the initial cost would be high, the impact on communities in North Central Idaho would be dramatic. Repairing rail on the Camas Prairie and along the river would radically reduce truck miles, open up freight and passenger service, and loaded trains coming off the plateau could even generate electricity. Though these sections of the

former Camas Prairie Railroad are currently the least likely to receive the attention they deserve, we maintain hope that this situation will change.

There are many technical and societal challenges associated with breaching the lower Snake River dams. Replacing barge transportation with rail appears to be among the easier ones to resolve.

The current system is extremely costly. Artificially low shipping rates on barges are subsidized by the public through taxes and on their electricity bills. Our taxes pay for continual dredging and the operation of the locks. Our electricity bills pay for the ongoing and unsuccessful efforts to mitigate dam impacts on salmon and steelhead. According to Rep. Mike Simpson, the mitigation efforts alone have cost the public \$17 billion, yet wild Snake River salmon and steelhead remain on a path to extinction. Analyst Linwood Laughy calculates the current taxpayer subsidy for LSR barges to be \$42,000 per barge. Investing in a robust and resilient rail system is likely to cost far less and do far more for communities in the region.

Making investments in rail transport now, leveraging federal resources from the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, will both save the public money over the long term and help save wild salmon and steelhead from extinction.

Improving rail freight transportation requires vision, collaborative leadership, and decisive action by public and private sector leaders. SR is urging Washington State Governor Inslee to use his 2023-2025 transportation budget to immediately invest in repairing the lines it already owns, generate Benefit Cost Analyses for rail restoration projects, and to work with county ports, co-ops and others to leverage the bipartisan IIJA for greater connectivity and resilience. The governors and delegations of Washington and Idaho will also play a key role, along with many others. Solutionary Rail stands ready to help.

For more information see:
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