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 agressively 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-Inlsee 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 former 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 11-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 Island 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 Rypar, Idaho.

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 barge, would need to be modified to host three round trips per day, and even more if it utilizes its 1.4 mile siding in Rypar, Idaho. 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 barge, would need to be modified to host three round trips per day, and even more if it utilizes its 1.4 mile siding in Rypar, Idaho.

Investing in Rail Now Could Save Money & Salmon
by Bill Moyer and Nick Gerhardt

Investing in rail now, leveraging federal resources from the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, will both save the public money over the long term and keep 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, generating benefits by accelerating repair, rehabilitation, and transit projects, and to work with county ports, co-ops and others to leverage the bipartisan IIJA to ask Congress to fully fund these projects. SR also calls for the repair and restoration of the Clearwater River and the 1.4 mile siding in Rypar, Idaho.

Making improvements now in rail and other transport modes is a better value than the current system. Rail transport reduces trucking expenses to farmers. They would also reduce the costly impacts of trucks on public infrastructure, improve road safety and lower emissions.

Washington state also owns the excellent railroad along and north of the Snake River that is currently used for the lower-utilized Clearwater Rail Trail (CPT). Returning a portion of the CPT – a former Burlington Northern line – to farming and public use 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 transport assets is essential for creating a truly resilient rail transport system that reduces truck miles, expands price competition, and boosts new local, rural, and 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 Clearwater would 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.

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 SR 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.

For more information see: www.SolutionaryRail.org