



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance
1689 C Street, Room 119
Anchorage, Alaska 99501-5126



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PEP/ANC

January 29, 2009

David Navecky
STB Finance Docket No. 34658
Surface Transportation Board
395 E Street S.W.
Washington, DC 20423-0001

Dear Sir:

The U.S. Department of the Interior has reviewed the December 2008 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the proposed construction and operation of the Northern Rail Extension by the Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC). The Draft EIS analyzes potential environmental impacts if ARRC were to construct and operate the proposed action, an approximately 80-mile long rail line from North Pole, Alaska, to Delta Junction, Alaska. We request that the following comments be taken into account in the Final EIS. These comments are submitted in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, and the Council on Environmental Quality guidance for providing technical expertise on water, biological, and geological resources.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Route Alignment to Mitigate Impacts to Fisheries

Much of the preferred placement of the new rail line appears to be within the immediate Tanana River floodplain in order to take advantage of dryer, ice-free soils. While this approach has the benefit of more stable rail/road beds, it may result in adverse impacts to fisheries. We believe further investigation is necessary to identify and address the potential impacts of the rail/road beds on groundwater transport. This is important since a number of fisheries in this area, including anadromous and resident species, depend on upwellings of groundwater for spawning and overwintering habitat. It is important that flow of subsurface water to streams all along the proposed route not be disrupted. This additional investigation needs to include general groundwater flow and an examination of spring-fed streams. For example, it may be important to locate the rail/road beds further away from spring-fed streams, such as Five-mile Clear Creek, and streams with known or suspected spawning and over-wintering habitat, than is currently proposed. We recommend that additional studies of hydrology and instream habitat to address these questions be completed and the results included in the final EIS. We further recommend

that additional proposed routes be identified and analyzed in the final EIS, if necessary, based on the results of these additional investigations.

Fish and Wildlife Mitigation Agreement

Due to the unavoidable loss of both aquatic and upland habitat associated with the proposed action, we recommend that a mutually-acceptable agreement between the applicant, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Army Corps of Engineers, be developed that specifically identifies how the loss of these habitats will be compensated, and that the agreement be included in the Mitigation chapter of the Final EIS. Having such an agreement in place would ensure compliance with the Clean Water Act, Executive Order 11990 (Protection of Wetlands), the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and Executive Order 13186 (The Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds). In addition, we believe the agreement would streamline the compensation process for wetlands and migratory bird and habitat resources for both the applicant and all involved agencies.

Migratory Birds

We believe the potential for impacts to birds may be more significant than is currently described in the Summary and Environmental Consequences. We recommend that the information on potential impacts be reassessed and revised in the Final EIS, focusing on and incorporating the following information:

- The Tanana River Valley is one of Alaska's major corridors for migratory bird migration. Hundreds of thousands of waterbirds, passerines, and raptors move along this corridor seasonally. Significant changes within this corridor have the potential of affecting large numbers of birds. As climate change alters wildlife habitat in North America, this corridor may become even more important for species whose ranges are shifted northward.
- The linear nature of the project bisects large areas of undeveloped habitat, thus fragmenting that habitat and creating a great deal more "edge" than would occur with a comparably sized project that is "concentrated." While this would impact species using both aquatic and upland habitats, it is of particular concern for forest dwelling species that need large unaltered blocks of habitat. Some of these species, such as the gray-cheeked thrush and Townsend's warbler, are already in decline and are listed by the USFWS as Birds of Conservation Concern.
- In much of the area, the proposed rail line follows, and stays in close proximity to, the Tanana River, an area that supports sizable stands of mature floodplain forests. These well-drained stands of large timber are not abundant on the landscape. As a result, the stands are critically important for a number of raptors such as northern goshawks and bald eagles, cavity nesters such as three-toed woodpeckers, and forest nesting passerines.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Chapter 20, Section 20.2.2, pages 20-4 to 20-5. The applicant's preferred alternative would cross 27 fish-bearing streams. A number of these streams are critically important to anadromous fish populations in the Tanana and Yukon River Basins. While this issue is addressed in the Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences sections of the document, we believe there is need for additional standards for the placement of culverts and bridges in the Mitigation chapter. For example, the applicant's voluntary mitigation includes a standard (VM-9) for culverts to meet or exceed 125 percent of stream width at Ordinary High Water. However, according to the Mitigation chapter, this standard is not applicable if the stream is equal to or greater than 15 feet in width. The Mitigation chapter in the Final EIS needs to provide specific standards for crossing streams of all sizes, including those greater than 15 feet in width. Prior to revising information on those standards in the Final EIS, we recommend that the applicant sponsor a fish passage mitigation workshop for all involved agencies to review existing standards as they relate to the proposed rail line and to develop a consensus on a single, comprehensive approach. Furthermore, it should be noted that the USFWS is drafting guidelines for culvert placement in fish-bearing streams and is available for further collaboration on fish passage.

Chapter 17, Section 17.4.1, pages 17-3 and-4. On page 17-3, the Draft EIS notes the interest in securing year-round access to the Tanana Flats and the potential for expansion of training and the system of roads and facilities. We believe the Final EIS needs to include additional evaluation of the potential cumulative affects from the possible expansion of military training facilities in the Tanana Flats Training Area once the proposed bridge is constructed across the Tanana River. On page 17-4, the Draft EIS describes the TransCanada Alaska and Denali gas pipeline projects in the context of the railroad expansion. We also believe that the Final EIS needs to include updated information on the status of these two pipeline proposals, in addition to a description of the proposal by the Alaska Natural Gas Development Authority for a pipeline, which would generally parallel the railroad extension.

If you have questions concerning our comments, or if we may be of further assistance, please contact Jim Ducker at 907-271-3130 (jducker@blm.gov) regarding gas pipeline analysis and Larry Bright at 907-456-0324 (Larry_Bright@fws.gov) for all other questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pamela Bergmann". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pamela Bergmann
Regional Environmental Officer – Alaska