

Surface Transportation Board Begins Final Environmental Impact Statement Preparation After Close of Public-Comment Period and Preliminary Review of More Than 8,500 Comments Received on "Dakota, Minnesota & Eastern's" Proposed Powder River Basin Rail Expansion Project

Surface Transportation Board Chairman Linda J. Morgan announced today that the Board's Section of Environmental Analysis (SEA) has completed its initial review of comments submitted on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS) for the Dakota, Minnesota and Eastern Railroad Corporation's (DM&E) proposed Powder River Basin Expansion Project, and has begun preparation of a Final Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS). The period for submitting comments on the Draft EIS closed on March 6, 2001. So that SEA may focus its efforts on completing the environmental review process as quickly as possible, additional comments on the Draft EIS will not be accepted.

In accordance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, on September 27, 2000, SEA, in coordination with five cooperating Federal agencies, issued a 5,000-page Draft EIS for the proposed project. SEA then conducted 12 public hearings on the Draft EIS and on wetland permit applications that DM&E had filed with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for the project.

During the Draft EIS's public-comment period, SEA received over 8,500 submissions. Comments were submitted by federal, state, and local agencies; various interest groups; affected communities; Indian Tribes; and members of the public, largely from the States of Minnesota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, but also from locations throughout the United States. The majority of comments raised concerns involving:

-Mitigation of environmental harm, such as which mitigation measures should be required and who should be responsible for implementing mitigation measures.

-Adverse safety impacts, such as potential delays in emergency vehicle response times because of blocked rail-highway crossings and the safety of such crossings.

-Route alternatives, particularly those associated with proposals to bypass certain concerned communities in Minnesota and South Dakota.

In addition, the comments raised such issues as: potential impacts from train noise and vibration; quality of life issues from increased train traffic; potential impacts to air quality relating to coal dust and diesel emissions during train operations; changes in land use patterns from rail line construction and upgrades; possible effects from rail line construction and upgrades on wetlands and water quality; and potential impacts to Indian Tribes.

The Final EIS that SEA is now preparing will respond to the comments, and will include additional analysis, as appropriate, and SEA's final environmental mitigation recommendations to the Board. SEA anticipates issuing the Final EIS no later than late Fall of this year. While the Board has yet to make a final decision concerning the proposed DM&E project, pending completion of the environmental review process, it has already found that the Powder River Basin Project meets the transportation merits criteria of the ICC Termination Act. After consideration of the entire environmental record, which will include all public and agency comments, the Draft EIS, and the Final EIS, the Board will make a final decision in this case.

The Powder River Basin Expansion Project is DM&E's proposal to construct approximately 280 miles of new rail line in South Dakota and Wyoming and to upgrade approximately 600 miles of existing rail line in South Dakota and Minnesota. The project would allow DM&E to extend its existing system westward to access coal mines in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming. Interested parties may obtain additional information by calling the SEA toll-free Environmental Hotline at **(877) 404-3044** or by visiting the Board's Website at <http://www.stb.dot.gov>.

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