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SEA

SERVICE DATE – AUGUST 25, 2006

**SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD
WASHINGTON, DC 20423**

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

STB DOCKET NO. AB-996X

**READING BLUE MOUNTAIN AND NORTHERN RAILROAD COMPANY—
ABANDONMENT EXEMPTION—IN SCHUYLKILL COUNTY, PA**

BACKGROUND

In this proceeding, the Reading Blue Mountain and Northern Railroad Company (RBMN) filed a notice of exemption pursuant to 49 C.F.R. 1152.50 to abandon the portion of its line of railroad known as the Minerville Running Track that runs from milepost 7.6 to milepost 8.8 in Norwegian and Cass Townships in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania. The line traverses United States Postal ZIP Code 17954. A map depicting the rail line in relationship to the area served is appended to this Environmental Assessment (EA). If the notice becomes effective, the railroad will be able to salvage track, ties, and other railroad appurtenances and dispose of the right-of-way.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The railroad submitted an environmental report that concludes the quality of the human environment would not be affected significantly as a result of the abandonment or any post-abandonment activities, including salvage and disposition of the right-of-way. The railroad served the environmental and historical reports on a number of appropriate Federal, state, and local agencies as required by the Surface Transportation Board's (Board) environmental rules [49 CFR 1105.7(b)]. The Board's Section of Environmental Analysis (SEA) has reviewed and investigated the environmental record in this proceeding.

According to RBMN, this line has been out of service for more than two years. Consequently, the proposed abandonment would cause no diversion of passengers or freight to other transportation systems or modes. Because the line has handled no local or overhead traffic during the last two years, the proposed abandonment would not affect the transportation of energy resources or recyclable commodities, and would not result in an increase in overall energy efficiency.

RBMN states that it is aware of no inconsistencies of the proposed action with existing land use plans. The proposed abandonment contains some areas that are mapped as Prime Farmland or Additional Farmland of Statewide Importance according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service/State Conservationist (NRCS). NRCS recommends that if these areas are to be disturbed, or if the abandonment will involve earthmoving, RBMN should consult with

appropriate county conservation districts for review of erosion and sedimentation control practices. RBMN explains in its notice of abandonment that salvage activities would not result in earthmoving or disturbance of the land on the right-of-way or surrounding the line.

In a letter of June 6, 2006, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (Water Planning Office) advised that the proposed abandonment is located outside of Pennsylvania's coastal zones, and is consistent with Pennsylvania's Coastal Resources Management Program.

RBMN maintains that any emissions associated with salvage operations would be temporary and would not have a significant impact on air quality. Noise associated with salvage activities would also be temporary and should not have a significant impact on the area surrounding the proposed abandonment. According to RBMN, the proposed abandonment should have no adverse effect on health or public safety. RBMN states that during any salvage activities, precautions will be taken to protect health and public safety laws and regulations.

On June 7, 2006, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (Northeast Regional Office) stated that they concur that the abandonment would have no significant affect on the environment as long as the two bridges over the Schuylkill River are not removed. RBMN states that it does not intend to remove the bridges. According to RBMN, there are no wildlife sanctuaries or refuges, National or State parks or forests in the vicinity of the proposed abandonment. RBMN states that the proposed abandonment would be handled in a manner that is consistent with the applicable Federal, state, and local water quality standards. To the best of RBMN's knowledge, the proposed abandonment would have no effect on wetlands or 100-year flood plains as all water-related structures would remain in place. RBMN sent the notice of abandonment in this proceeding to the United States Army Corps of Engineers (Corps). No response has been received. SEA has added the Corps to the service list in this proceeding to ensure that they receive a copy of the EA for review and comment.

HISTORIC REVIEW

RBMN submitted a historic report as required by the Board's environmental rules [49 CFR 1105.8(a)] and served the report on the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), pursuant to 49 CFR 1105.8(c). The SHPO has submitted comments stating that no historic properties listed in or eligible for inclusion in the *National Register of Historic Places* (National Register) would be affected by the proposed abandonment. We have reviewed the report and the information provided by the SHPO and concur with the SHPO's comments.

Pursuant to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's regulations for implementing the section 106 process of the National Historic Preservation Act at 36 CFR 800.4(d)(1) and 36 CFR 800.8, we have determined that the proposed abandonment would not affect historic properties listed in or eligible for inclusion in the National Register. The documentation for this finding, as specified at 36 CFR 800.11(d), consists of the railroad's historic report, all relevant correspondence, and this EA, which have been provided to the SHPO and made available to the

public.

SEA conducted a search of the Native American Consultation Database at www.cast.uark.edu/other/nps/nacd/ to identify Federally recognized tribes that may have ancestral connections to the project area. The database did not identify any Federally recognized tribes that may have an interest in the proposed abandonment.

CONDITIONS

No environmental conditions are recommended.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the information provided from all sources to date, SEA concludes that, as currently proposed, abandonment of the line would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, the environmental impact statement process is unnecessary.

Alternatives to the proposed abandonment would include denial (and therefore no change in operations), discontinuance of service without abandonment, and continued operation by another operator. In any of these cases, the existing quality of the human environment and energy consumption should not be affected.

PUBLIC USE

Following abandonment and salvage of the rail line, a portion of the right-of-way may be suitable for other public use. A request containing the requisite four-part showing for imposition of a public use condition (49 CFR 1152.28) must be filed with the Board and served on the railroad within the time specified in the Federal Register notice.

TRAILS USE

A request for a notice of interim trail use is due to the Board, with a copy to the railroad, within 10 days of publication of the notice of the class exemption in the Federal Register. Nevertheless, the Board will accept late-filed requests as long as it retains jurisdiction to do so in a particular case. This request must comply with the Board's rules for use of rights-of-way as trails (49 CFR 1152.29).

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

The Board's Office of Public Services (OPS) responds to questions regarding interim trail use, public use, and other reuse alternatives. You may contact OPS directly at (202) 565-1592, or mail inquiries to Surface Transportation Board, Office of Public Services, Washington, DC 20423.

COMMENTS

If you wish to file comments regarding this environmental assessment, send an **original and two copies** to Surface Transportation Board, Case Control Unit, Washington, DC 20423, to the attention of Phillis Johnson-Ball, who prepared this environmental assessment. Environmental comments may also be filed electronically on the Board's web site, www.stb.dot.gov, by clicking on the "E-FILING" link. **Please refer to Docket No. AB-996X in all correspondence, including e-filings, addressed to the Board.** If you have any questions regarding this environmental assessment, please contact Phillis Johnson-Ball, the environmental contact for this case, by phone at (202) 565-1530, fax at (202) 565-9000, or e-mail johnson-ballp@stb.dot.gov.

Date made available to the public: August 25, 2006.

Comment due date: September 11, 2006.

By the Board, Victoria Rutson, Chief, Section of Environmental Analysis.

Vernon A. Williams
Secretary

Attachment