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STATE OF WASHINGTON
DEPARTMENT OF ECOLOGY

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December 8, 2008

Ms. Christa Dean
Section of Environmental Analysis
Surface Transportation Board
395 E Street, SW, Rm. 1108
Washington, DC 20423

Dear Ms. Dean:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding the Preliminary Environmental Assessment for the Northern Columbia Basin Railroad Project in Grant County, Washington, STB Finance Docket No.34936 (Sub-No.1) (Proponent- Joyce Thompson). The Department of Ecology has reviewed the documents and has the following comments:

Shorelands and Environmental Assistance Program-Wetlands

We would like to commend the Surface Transportation Board and the Department of Transportation for a thorough examination of potential effects on wetlands from the Northern Columbia Basin Railroad Project. Ecology concurs with the wetlands determinations presented in the EA, understanding that the information presented is preliminary in nature and adequate for planning purposes.

Regarding the two option routes for crossing Crab Creek and Parker horn; we request that you consider the relative functional value of the wetlands and riparian areas at each crossing, and not simply the comparative area of impact. For example; the Crab Creek (Alternative 1a) crossing option may result in a far smaller area of wetland disturbance, but the crossing site may be less disturbed than the Parker Horn crossing. We suggest further examination of the functions and values at each site before choosing your preferred alternative.

We recommend close coordination with the US Bureau of Reclamation when evaluating flows in Crab Creek. The Bureau is undertaking a supplemental feed route project whereby up to 500 cubic feet per second of water is to be released from Lake Billy Clapp into Crab Creek between April and July. This increased flow may affect engineering designs for either crossing alternative.

Impacts to wetlands on the site should be minimized to the fullest extent possible. This is best done by avoiding any work in the wetland. "Mitigation sequencing" should be applied so as to first avoid impacts, then minimize as much as possible, rectify short term impacts, and finally compensate unavoidable losses after all other attempts have been made. Due to the poor record of

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success in replacing wetlands, we recommend avoiding and minimizing wetland impacts to the fullest extent possible.

Ecology is concerned about the extent of wetland impact proposed in the segment of rail between Road 4 NE and RP3. The proposed route turns south from Road 4 NE within a large wetland complex. Permanent loss of wetland area and interactivity and temporal loss of wetland function will require significant and costly mitigation. A review of aerial photos of the area indicates that less than a half-mile to the east is a zone with no (or minimal) wetlands. The rail-line could be routed along the edge of the agricultural fields between Road K.5, and RP3. This would greatly reduce the area of impact to Wetland A by limiting those impacts to a perpendicular crossing along Road 4 NE. Wetland fragmentation would only increase incrementally since this area is already disturbed by the road crossing itself.

Mitigation measures 52 through 57 in Chapter 6 Mitigation Measures conceptually describe compensatory mitigation for unavoidable impacts. These measures seem appropriate at this stage in the project. Off-site mitigation is proposed. We encourage you to work with both the Corps and Ecology in developing any off-site mitigation strategy. Off site mitigation should only be considered in a watershed context with careful consideration of landscape position and functional equivalency.

State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA)

Ecology's comments are based upon the information provided with the SEPA checklist. As such, they do not constitute an exhaustive list of the various authorizations that must be obtained or legal requirements that must be fulfilled in order to carry out the proposed action.

Sincerely,



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