

Proposed Port MacKenzie Rail Extension Summary of Scoping Comments

The STB's Section of Environmental Analysis (SEA) received 130 scoping comments (with approximately 1,330 total signatures). Comments from the public and agencies are summarized below.

Public Comments

Public commenters raised issues about the following topics:

- Safety. Commenters expressed concerns over rail and highway safety related to hazardous materials transport, at-grade crossings, and fire hazards. In addition, commenters were concerned about the safety of potential rail crossings at recreational trails. For example, commenters noted that Willow Creek State Recreation Area (WCSRA) is bisected by a proposed alignment and that there are already safety concerns with an existing rail trestle in WCSRA used for fishing. Commenters also expressed concern about the safety of potential rail crossings in residential areas. They requested that the EIS address potential safety impacts associated with increased rail traffic that would occur on the existing rail line because of the proposed project.
- Land Use. Commenters expressed concerns about impacts to private properties as well as Federal, state and borough public lands. For example, a commenter expressed concern about a proposed alignment that bisects his agricultural property and another individual noted that one of the proposed alignments bisects an airstrip.
- Recreation. Commenters requested that the EIS address the potential impacts on recreation areas and access to these areas, stating that much of the project area contains trails that could be bisected depending on alignment location. Concerns specifically addressed the potential loss of recreational trail access for snowmachining and dog mushing, especially for the Iditarod, Junior Iditarod, and Iron Dog trails. Commenters noted that many trails are unmarked through most recreation areas. Concerns were also raised about proposed rail alignments in relatively undisturbed state and Federal parks.
- Birds. Commenters raised concerns about the destruction or disturbance of nesting waterfowl and eagles. Commenters were also concerned about migrating waterfowl, including cranes and grebes.
- Moose. Commenters stated that moose strikes by trains are an important concern and that the railroad could pose a threat to moose habitat, calving and concentration areas, and travel corridors. Commenters also indicated that other mammals that reside in the area could be affected and these potential impacts should be considered in the EIS.
- Fish. Commenters were concerned about the possible destruction of salmon, trout and grayling spawning and breeding habitats. Concerns about the negative effects on

anadromous fish streams specifically referenced Willow Creek and the Little Susitna River, which provide habitat for five salmon species.

- Water Resources. Commenters requested that the EIS evaluate the potential loss of wetland habitat. Other commenters listed concerns regarding the potential project impacts on watersheds, such as rail embankments disrupting natural drainage systems. Commenters stated that unique hydrological systems exist in the area of the Houston routes and need to be taken into consideration in the EIS. These commenters recommended that the EIS study the impacts of the Little Susitna River overflowing its banks and the compounded effect of a possible spill on this interconnected hydrologic system.
- Geology and Soils. Commenters expressed concern about the Castle Mountain fault, which is crossed by one of the proposed rail alignments.
- Noise. Commenters stated concerns over noise pollution near private residences as well as wilderness areas such as Willow Creek State Recreation Area.
- Socioeconomics. Commenters recommended that the EIS consider impacts of the proposed project on property values, quality of life, land access and use (i.e., agriculture and recreation). Commenters also stated that recreational tourism provides a large source of income for the Willow area and tourism could be negatively affected by the proposed project.
- Cultural Resources. Commenters stated concerns over potential impacts to known and unidentified cultural resources. Commenters stated that the absence of archeological sites was not definitively eliminated along several potential alignments and recommended ground research be conducted by archeologists in these areas. Known historic trail systems in the project area were cited, including the West Gateway, Haessler-Norris and Emil-Stancec trail systems. Commenters also stated concerns over loss of subsistence resources, such as resources collected by trapping and ice fishing.
- Alignment Routes. Commenters proposed new routes or modifications to existing routes to avoid impacts to private property. Most commenters stated their preference for one alignment over the others. The two most common positions taken were either support for the Willow route to avoid impacts to private property or to avoid the Willow route to reduce impacts to pristine wilderness and recreation areas. Commenters also recommended considering the planned Regional Transportation Planning Organization which was proposed in a 2003 Matanuska-Susitna Borough (MSB) Planning Department document.

Agency Comments

Agencies that commented on the draft scope include the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS), Alaska Department of Natural Resources (ADNR) and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The following provides an overview of these scoping comments.

- EPA recommended identifying a commodity that would be shipped over the rail line to create a stronger Purpose and Need statement. EPA also stated that (1) the proposed project would have to comply with the Clean Water Act and that water quality should be protected by limiting disturbance activities; (2) air quality should be assessed based on the possible impacts from construction and operation of the proposed project; (3) the EIS should evaluate known fish and wildlife corridors and effects on plants, fish and wildlife from habitat removal and alteration; and (4) the EIS should evaluate impacts to threatened and endangered species and consider management practices to control noxious weeds. Comments from EPA also included setting up a monitoring program for designated resource areas, protecting recreation and access to public lands, analyzing cumulative and indirect impacts, discussing mitigation options, and considering the proposed project's effects on climate change. EPA also indicated that consultation with tribal governments including obtaining traditional ecological knowledge and an analysis of environmental justice should also be considered in the EIS.
- NMFS recommended that Essential Fish Habitat be avoided. NMFS emphasized that the Matanuska-Susitna Valley consists of a diverse and complex hydrologic system. NMFS recommended that the proposed project be located to avoid wetlands, streams and rivers that support fish populations, especially anadromous fish, and consideration be given to design and engineering practices that avoid negative impacts to aquatic life including the use of elevated bridges and other best management practices.
- ADNR stated that a permit would be required for all actions that could potentially impact anadromous fish streams or block the free passage of fish. ADNR recommended fieldwork to determine fish habitat conditions and recommended design considerations for the proposed project including that all bridges be built to span the 100-year floodplain. Impacts to wetlands, especially those of 'high value,' need to be taken into consideration especially at gravel extraction and placement sites. ADNR stated that since the proposed project is in the coastal zone it would need to be sited and designed to minimize impacts to coastal uses and resources including public access to, from and along coastal waters; traditional access routes; commercial, recreational, or subsistence use areas; wildlife transit routes; and other special management areas. ADNR also stated that the alignments could affect moose habitat and movement corridors. ADNR recommended that a study be completed prior to construction to identify measures to minimize moose impacts. ADNR also proposed design considerations to avoid impacts to moose.

ADNR highlighted important recreation and wilderness areas, recommended that the proposed project maintain access, and generally avoid particular sites including Willow Creek State Recreation Area, Nancy Lake State Recreation Area, and Little Susitna State Recreational River and Public Use Facility. ADNR emphasized the use of trails in the Willow area for recreation, tourism and transportation and the need to avoid negative impacts to these trails, especially the Iditarod National Historic Trail. ADNR stated that overpasses and underpasses of the rail line for selected trail crossings would not be sufficient to mitigate the impacts to recreational-use trails. ADNR stated that cultural resources sites could be affected along the proposed Willow alignment and further archaeological surveys would be required for any chosen alternative as well as evaluating specific sites for eligibility in the National Register of Historic Places.

ADNR stated their preference for the Houston South, Houston, Connector 3, and Mac East alignments to avoid the habitat and recreations area in and around Willow.

- USFWS expressed concern about habitat fragmentation specifically along the Willow alignment. USFWS also expressed concern about cumulative impacts and compensatory mitigation. The agency noted the need to limit negative impacts to freshwater aquatic habitats; migratory, wetland and upland bird habitat; and bald eagles protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. In addition, USFWS stated the need to analyze the potential for fuel and hazardous waste spills. USFWS emphasized the need for comprehensive land use and watershed planning as well as green infrastructure planning in conjunction with this proposed project.