



# On Board!

## Surface Transportation Board Initiates NEPA Review Process

The Surface Transportation Board (STB), the lead federal agency responsible for approving the proposed Northern Rail Extension Project, initiated the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) environmental review process on November 1, 2005. Scoping meetings with state and federal agency representatives and with the general public were held in early December in North Pole, Delta Junction, and Anchorage; individuals and agencies were invited to submit comments about the draft Scope of Study through January 13, 2006. The STB will use these comments to develop a final Scope of

Study for the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). (See *The NEPA Process* on page 2 for more information.)

A number of federal agencies have agreed to serve as cooperating agencies, including:

- Bureau of Land Management
- Federal Railroad Administration
- U.S. Air Force 354th Fighter Wing Command
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- U.S. Coast Guard
- U.S. Department of Defense Alaska Command



The STB is also coordinating with state agencies under Alaska's large project permitting program.

\*\*\*\*\*

Comments received by the STB are available on the STB's web site, [www.stb.dot.gov](http://www.stb.dot.gov). Click on E-Library, Correspondence, Environmental, and scrolling to FD\_34658\_0.

## Alternative Route Update

An issue heard repeatedly by the ARRC project management team is concern for private property. ARRC is currently in the process of responding to these important landowner questions by developing refinements to existing alignments for consideration by the STB.

The Chena River overflow structure near North Pole remains the starting

point of the Northern Rail Extension Project. At ARRC's request, engineers developed new, more easterly alignment options. These parallel the Richardson Highway more closely than the previously proposed eastern route and minimize impacts to the Eielson Road farming community.

In the southern half of the corridor, ARRC is exploring an additional possible

river crossing location on the Delta River near Big Delta. ARRC remains sensitive to avoiding private property wherever possible, and alignment options will continue to be refined as the evaluation process continues. ARRC anticipates providing the STB with revised maps, which will also be posted on the project web site ([www.northernrailextension.com](http://www.northernrailextension.com)), later this spring.

ISSUE 3

MARCH 1, 2006

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

The NEPA Process	2
Field Notes	3
Freight Services	3
Frequently Asked Question	4
Get Involved	4

### WHAT IS...?

**Cooperating Agency:** Cooperating agencies are Federal agencies invited to participate in the NEPA process by the lead federal agency. Cooperating agencies have a special expertise or interest in a project, or have legal jurisdiction.

**Federal Action:** A federal action is the trigger for starting the NEPA process. Actions might include receiving federal funding, applying for a permit, or needing approval for a project.



## The NEPA Process

### What is NEPA?

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) was signed into law in 1969. In passing NEPA, Congress declared that it is the policy of the Federal Government, in cooperation with State and local governments, "to foster and promote the general welfare, to create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can exist in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans." NEPA requires the preparation of detailed Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) when projects requiring federal action are determined to have potential for significant impacts to historic, cultural, or natural aspects of our national heritage.

### The NEPA Process

All Federal agencies have developed processes for conducting environmental impact analysis. NEPA sets forth a framework for how government agencies and project proponents conduct environmental reviews, although how those procedures are carried out varies from agency to agency. Generally, the NEPA process occurs in a number of well-defined stages:

- Define purpose and need
- Scoping
- Analyze Reasonable Alternatives
- Prepare a Draft EIS
- Public Comment on Draft EIS
- Prepare a Final EIS
- Record of Decision

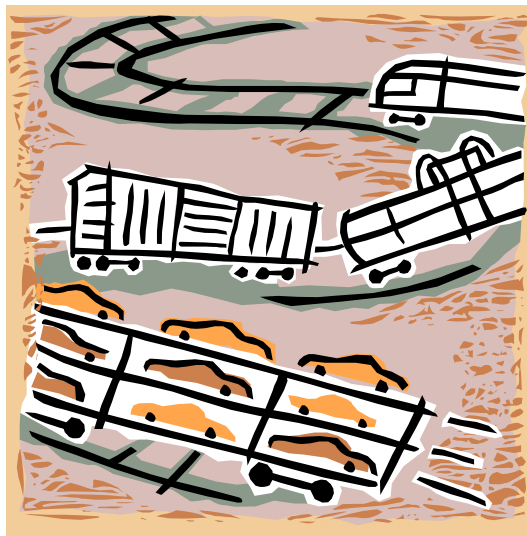
The process can take as little as a year and a half, but some projects can take five years or longer.

For the Northern Rail Extension Project, the Surface Transportation Board's (STB) Section for Envi-

ronmental Analysis (SEA) is the lead federal agency charged with ensuring compliance with NEPA and related environmental statutes. The Alaska Railroad Corporation (ARRC) anticipates the process may take approximately two years.

### Define Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for a project provides the basis for developing



reasonable alternatives, establishing project objectives, and helping to define criteria for assessing alternatives, including the option of not doing the project at all (often called the no build alternative). Purpose and need helps agencies to prepare a Notice of Intent (NOI), which formally announces that the agency intends to prepare an EIS.

### Third Party Process

While responsibility for the NEPA process belongs to the federal agency, some federal agencies employ independent, third-party contractors to prepare the environmental documentation necessary to comply with NEPA requirements. In a voluntary third-party contracting arrangement, the applicant pays for an approved agency-selected contractor to assist the agency. The

SEA selected ICF Consulting as its third-party contractor for the Northern Rail Extension Project's NEPA process.

### Scoping

In December 2005, the SEA hosted a series of scoping meetings with agency representatives and with the public (see story on page 1). These meetings help to determine what issues would need to be assessed in the EIS. STB is reviewing the scoping comments and defining the final Scope of Study, which will serve as the work plan for preparing a Draft EIS.

### Draft EIS

The purpose of a Draft EIS is to present the purpose and need for the project, describe the project area and the social and natural features, and evaluate potential direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts that may result from the project. As the SEA evaluates potential impacts, they may request that ARRC submit additional engineering and design elements, as well as operational procedures intended to avoid, minimize, or mitigate potential impacts. Upon completion, the Draft EIS will be made available for review and comment by the public, government agencies, and other interested parties.

### Final EIS

The Final EIS will be based on SEA's independent analysis, consultation with agencies, and review of comments on the Draft EIS. It will then recommend a preferred alternative to STB, as well as the basis for choosing that alternative, mitigation measures,

*(Continued on Page 3)*



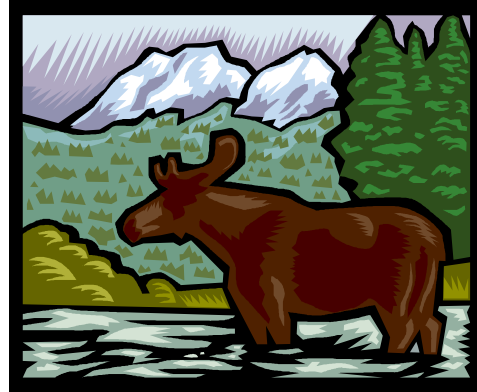
## Field Notes

Willows and birch within the Northern Rail project corridor provide substantial winter forage for moose, while aquatic vegetation offers a summer smorgasbord. This healthy habitat supports a vibrant moose population.

A vital section of the Northern Rail Environmental Impact Statement will address biological resources, such as moose populations. Vegetation and wildlife will be inventoried, along with proposed measures that would mitigate, minimize, or avoid impacting those resources.

The Surface Transportation Board's (STB) consultants are conducting winter moose surveys in the project corridor, particularly in the south side of the Tanana River. By estimating the number of moose in the area, the project will be able to assess the potential impact to moose from a new rail line. The information will also help the Alaska Railroad (ARRC) identify potential mitigation measures. These may include scaring moose off the tracks during heavy snow winters, reducing the

amount of brush alongside the tracks, and plowing snow to eliminate berms that prevent moose from leaving the tracks.



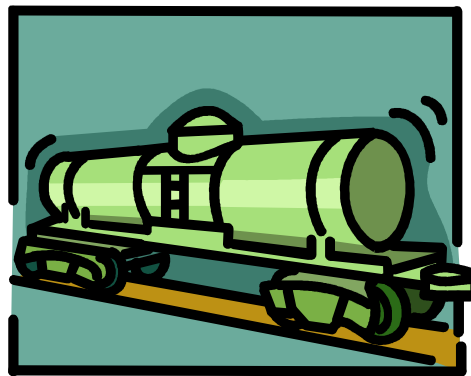
## Freight Services

Freight services are the backbone of the ARRC's operations. In 2005, the ARRC moved more than eight million tons of freight over its more than 525 miles of track.

Efficient freight service on the proposed rail extension would compliment current freight services by supporting existing industry and agricultural activities in the area between North Pole and Delta Junction. As an alternative to commercial trucking, rail transport can provide greater capacity and efficiency for some commodities. Bulk materials such

as fuel, agricultural products and equipment, and construction materials could be shipped to and from West Coast ports via marine barges, and then rail directly to customers along the rail line.

In addition to providing services to farm businesses, industries, and communities along and near the rail extension, the proposed extension could also provide alternative transportation for fuel and other supplies to military training areas. This would provide a safer alternative to truck and convoy transportation of materials along the Richardson Highway. This would also reduce the volume of military vehicles and equipment on the road system, as well as wear and tear on the roadway.



*(Continued from Page 2)*

and other environmental compliance findings. The Final EIS will be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency, which will then publish a notice of its availability in the Federal Register.

### Final Decision

The STB will consider the recommendations of the entire environmental record, including the Draft and Final EISs, as part of its decision-making process. If the STB were to approve the proposed project, construction could begin when the decision became effective.

*The Alaska Railroad is committed to providing the best possible service to its customers.*

**The Newsletter of the  
Northern Rail Extension  
Project**



**Alaska Railroad  
Corporation  
PO Box 107500  
Anchorage, AK 99510**

**Phone: 907-265-2538  
Fax: 907-265-2365  
Public\_comment@akrr.com**

*ARRC—Building a  
Great Railroad  
Across the Great  
Land*



We're on the web!  
[www.northernrailextension.com](http://www.northernrailextension.com)



Mailing Address Line 1  
Mailing Address Line 2  
Mailing Address Line 3  
Mailing Address Line 4  
Mailing Address Line 5

## Frequently Asked Question

### How fast would the trains run?

The Federal Railroad Administration establishes design and construction standards for several “classes” of track. The class designation establishes maximum allowable operational speeds over a given section of railroad. The Northern Rail Extension

would be a Class 5 track. Class 5 provides for a maximum design speed of 79 miles per hour (mph) for passenger trains (70 mph for freight) and establishes maximum grades, sharpness of curves, and the type of materials used in construction. A project design speed does

not necessarily mean that trains will travel at that speed over the entire length of the rail line. Actual operational speeds will vary based on the number and spacing of road crossings, proximity to developed areas, and overall safety.

## Get Involved!

General project comments may be sent via e-mail to [public\\_comment@akrr.com](mailto:public_comment@akrr.com), faxed to 907-265-2365, or mailed to:

Alaska Railroad Corporation  
Attn: Stephenie Wheeler  
P.O. Box 107500  
Anchorage, AK 99510-7500

