

# NORTH COAST RAIL LINE GETS \$7.5 MILLION BOOST: STATE COMMISSION GIVING FREIGHT ROUTE MORE FOR REPAIRING CROSSINGS, SIGNALS

Published on April 27, 2007

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BYLINE: STEVE HART  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT PAGE: E1

The state's transportation agency on Thursday released \$7.5 million to repair the Northwestern Pacific **Railroad**, which could reopen for freight service in Sonoma County next year.

Together with \$1.5 million approved by the commission last month, it's the first state construction funding since the rail line closed in 2001, said Mitch Stogner, director of the North Coast **Railroad** Authority, which controls the route.

The money will be used to rebuild **railroad** signals at 54 street and road crossings from Napa to Windsor, including 13 in Santa Rosa. Work will take place this summer, Stogner said.

The rail authority is seeking additional funds for repairing bridges and tracks, with the 62-mile route south of Windsor targeted to open in mid-2008.

There's demand for rail service from North Bay shippers of wood products, rock, animal feed and other bulk commodities, according to the authority. Sonoma County also is considering shipping its garbage by rail, now that its landfill has closed.

Freight cars will reduce the number of trucks on Highway 101, the authority said.

Last year, the authority approved a lease agreement with a private company, Northwestern Pacific **Railroad** Co., to operate the freight trains.

Cargo service was halted in 2001 after federal rail authorities deemed the line unsafe. The 316-mile route between Napa and Eureka has a long history of disasters, including fires that destroyed tunnels and floods that wiped out miles of track.

Southern Pacific Co. tried to abandon the line in the early 1980s and a subsequent owner declared bankruptcy.

In 1989, state lawmakers created the rail authority to keep it open as a transportation alternative to Highway 101, but it continued to be plagued by closures.

At a meeting Thursday in San Luis Obispo, the California Transportation Commission released \$7.5 million from the state's traffic congestion relief program, which is funded by gasoline sales taxes.

Last year, the commission approved \$7.4 million for environmental and engineering work on the rail line.

So far, the state and federal governments have pledged \$50 million to restore a 142-mile stretch of the **railroad** from Napa to Willits, Stogner said.

The segment from Windsor to Willits is scheduled to reopen by the end of 2008, he said.

There's no firm timeline for repairing the heavily damaged route between Willits and Eureka.

The cost is expected to reach \$100 million.

You can reach Staff Writer Steve Hart at 521-5205 or [steve.hart@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:steve.hart@pressdemocrat.com).

**Infobox:** COSTLY REPAIRS FOR RAIL LINE

\* \$7.5 million given Thursday to repair **railroad** signals at 54 street and road crossings from Napa to Windsor. An additional \$1.5 million was approved last month by the state transportation commission.

\* Last year, the group gave \$7.4 million for environmental and engineering work.

\* \* The heavily damaged route between Willits and Eureka is expected to cost \$100 million.