



The Palouse River and Coulee City (PCC) Rail System

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WSDOT purchased the rights of way and rail in the P & L Branch and PV Hooper Branch of the PCC in November 2004. Purchase of the CW Branch and the remaining rights in the other two branches was completed in May 2007.

For questions about doing business with the PCC rail system, please contact Bob Westby at 509-324-6086 or Bob.Westby@wsdot.wa.gov

Why does WSDOT own the PCC rail line?

WSDOT purchased the Palouse River and Coulee City rail line in 2004-2007 to protect the lines for wheat farmers and other shippers in Eastern Washington. We remain committed to enabling national and international market access, and the PCC line is a vital part of that effort. In 2013, the rail line carried 20 percent of wheat grown in Washington State, saving 37,000 truckloads on Washington state roadways.

Why is the segment between Colfax and Pullman not operating?

The 19-mile segment between Colfax and Pullman ceased as a through rail route when a fire destroyed one of the bridges just east of Colfax in 2006. A WSDOT study in January 2009 concluded that a business case did not exist to rebuild the bridge. Since then, all rail customers have retained rail service through alternate routing of shipments. The PCC Rail System Strategic Plan, completed in March, 2015 did not identify any commercial need for the segment and suggested that materials along the corridor could be repurposed on the PCC as a way to reduce the overall cost of rehabilitation of those sections of the PCC currently in use.

What is WSDOT currently considering on the segment between Colfax and Pullman?

We're starting to review two unused sections of the PCC rail line near Pullman. WSDOT, along with rail line operators Washington & Idaho Railway and WATCO, will file with the federal Surface Transportation Board for a Discontinuance of Service. This allows WSDOT to continue our evaluation, but does not mean rail banking or rail abandonment has been sought or approved. The designation also allows us to turn off signals and pursue other cost savings measures on the unused rail lines.

Why is WSDOT doing this evaluation?

As stewards of taxpayer investments, we're required to evaluate the rail lines and their future uses as part of our strategic plan for the rail line.

What is rail abandonment?

Rail abandonment permanently releases the right-of-way and the land not owned in fee by the railroad. The property may revert back to previous or adjacent owners. This is often done when there's not expectation the rail line will be needed in the future.

What is rail banking?

Rail banking protects the rail right-of-way for possible future rail use but also allows the land to be used for other transportation purposes in the meantime, including trails. This is how the Bill Chipman Trail was established.

WSDOT contracts with private railroads to operate each of the branches. The Palouse River and Coulee City Railroad operates the PV Hooper Branch; the Eastern Washington Gateway Railroad operates the CW Branch; and the Washington and Idaho Railway operates the P & L Branch.

WSDOT oversees the facilities and regulatory portions of the operating leases. The PCC Rail Authority - an intergovernmental entity formed by Grant, Lincoln, Spokane, and Whitman counties - oversees the business and economic development portions of the operating leases.

Considering rail banking or abandonment, which option does WSDOT prefer?

WSDOT has not made any decisions on rail banking or abandonment for the segment between Colfax and Pullman, and has no preference at this time. More study is needed before any next steps are taken.

What's the timeline for making a decision on the segment between Colfax and Pullman?

This is a long process and we're just beginning. We don't expect to have any decisions made about next steps - such as a discontinuance of service - until 2016. We are also still determining if legislative action is needed.

What about the Port of Whitman's vote for rail abandonment?

While the Port of Whitman commissioners voted to support rail abandonment, it was only an advisory vote to the four-county PCC Rail Authority. The Rail Authority has not taken a stance as a whole. We work closely with the Rail Authority, but only WSDOT - as the rail line owner - can seek either rail banking or abandonment.

Who makes the final call?

Should WSDOT seek rail banking or rail abandonment, the federal Surface Transportation Board will rule on that application.

Is WSDOT trying to shut down the Bill Chipman Palouse Trail?

No. WSDOT strongly values multimodal transportation options, including walking and biking trails. We are not seeking any action that would endanger the existing trail.

Besides the segment between Colfax and Pullman, what other under-used rail segment was identified in the PCC Rail System Strategic Plan?

WSDOT has also identified a segment just south of Fallon, WA through Pullman to the Idaho State line; this segment currently does not have any customers. A former rail customer is evaluating their need for future rail service on this segment. As a result, this track segment is not being considered for Discontinuance of Service at this time.

Where can I learn more information?

Our PCC rail line website, www.wsdot.wa.gov/freight/pcc, will have information about an upcoming open house meeting once the time and location is finalized. You may also want to read our PCC Rail System Strategic Plan, also available on the website.

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