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OEA

SERVICE DATE – JULY 24, 2026

**SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD
WASHINGTON, DC 20423**

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Docket No. AB 497 (Sub-No. 8X)

**Minnesota Northern Railroad, Inc. – Abandonment Exemption – In
Norman and Polk Counties, Minn.**

BACKGROUND

In this proceeding, Minnesota Northern Railroad, Inc. (MNN) filed a notice of exemption with the Surface Transportation Board (Board) under 49 C.F.R. § 1152.50 seeking exemption from the prior approval requirements of 49 U.S.C. § 10903 in connection with the abandonment of approximately 11.14-miles of railroad, extending from milepost 40.20 at approximately the north end of the Marsh River Bridge south of Shelly, to milepost 51.34 at approximately the north side of Golf Course Lane, north of Climax, in Norman and Polk Counties, Minnesota (the Line). A map depicting the Line in relationship to the area served is appended to this Draft Environmental Assessment (Draft EA). If the notice becomes effective, the railroad will be able to salvage track, ties and other railroad appurtenances and to dispose of the right-of-way.

DESCRIPTION OF THE LINE

According to MNN, the Line was built by the St. Paul Minnesota and Manitoba Railway around 1896, and ownership has changed hands many times over the years. MNN acquired the Line from Burlington Northern Railroad, Inc. in 1997. The Line runs parallel to state highway 75, which predominately traverses rural agricultural areas and small towns and zip codes 56581, 56568, and 56523. MNN indicated that there are four bridge crossings, and satellite imagery shows several public roadway crossings along the route. The width of the right-of-way varies along the track centerline.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

MNN submitted a combined environmental and historic report (E&H Report) that concludes that the quality of the human environment would not be affected significantly as a result of the proposed abandonment of the Line, including salvage. MNN served the E&H Report on appropriate federal, state, and local agencies as required by the Board's environmental

rules [49 C.F.R. § 1105.7(b)]¹ implementing the National Environmental Policy Act. The Board's Office of Environmental Analysis (OEA) has reviewed and investigated the record in this proceeding.

Diversion of Traffic

According to MNN, no local traffic has moved over the Line, which is stub-ended, for the past two years. Therefore, the proposed abandonment would not result in the diversion of rail traffic to truck traffic that could result in significant impacts to air quality or the local transportation network. Nor would the proposed abandonment adversely impact the development, use and transportation of energy resources or recyclable commodities or the transportation of ozone-depleting materials.

Salvage Activities

Impacts from salvage and disposal of a rail line typically include removal of tracks and ties, removal of ballast, dismantling of any bridges or other structures that may be present on the rail right-of-way, and regrading of the right-of-way. Salvage may be performed within the right-of-way, or, if necessary, via the construction of new access points to the right-of-way. In this case, MNN has stated that their plan is to salvage the remaining rail and other ferrous metals, along with ties and ballast using existing access points along the right-of-way. Salvage activities would not include removal of bridge structures.

MNN requested comments from the United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) regarding the potential impact of the proposed abandonment to prime farmland. To date, NRCS has not provided comments. Because MNN would use existing access points along the railroad right-of-way to conduct salvage activities, OEA believes no prime farmland would be impacted.

MNN requested comments from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) regarding the potential impact of the proposed abandonment to protected wildlife, including federally listed threatened and endangered species. To date, USFWS has not provided comments.

To identify protected species in the project area, OEA conducted a search of the USFWS Information for Planning and Construction (IPaC) system.² Three insect species identified in the

¹ The E&H Report is available for viewing on the Board's website at www.stb.gov by clicking "Search STB Records;" selecting "Filings" in the "Search for" dropdown menu; entering "AB" "497" "8" "X" sequentially in the four boxes for "Docket Number," then selecting "Search." The E&H Report was filed on June 30, 2026.

² U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Information for Planning and Consultation Tool (IPaC), <https://ipac.ecosphere.fws.gov> (OEA accessed on July 9, 2026).

area include: the Monarch butterfly (*Danaus Plexippus*, Proposed Threatened), the Western regal fritillary (*Argynnis idalia occidentalis*, Proposed Threatened), and Suckley's cuckoo bumble bee (*Bombus suckleyi*, Proposed Endangered). The western prairie fringed Orchid (*Platanthera praeclara*, Threatened) has also been identified in the area. No critical habitat or wildlife refuges were identified within the area of the proposed abandonment. OEA concludes that the proposed abandonment would have no effect on these species because salvage activities would not include any subsurface ground disturbance, or any removal of trees, grassland, shrublands, or forested habitat, and no critical habitat is present. OEA is providing a copy of this Draft EA to the USFWS, Minnesota-Wisconsin Ecological Services Field Office, and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources-NW Region, (MN DNR) for their review.

MNN notified the National Park Service (NPS), Midwest Region of the proposed abandonment and requested assistance in identifying any potential effects on wildlife sanctuaries or refuges, National or State parks, or forests. To date, NPS has not provided comments. OEA believes that no such area would be affected by the proposed abandonment because the Line does not cross any wildlife sanctuaries or refuges, National or State parks or forests. OEA is providing a copy of this Draft EA to NPS, Midwest Region for its review.

OEA has determined that the Line is not located within a coastal zone. Accordingly, no further consultation is necessary.

MNN requested assistance from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), St. Paul District in identifying whether permits under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act (CWA) (33 U.S.C. § 1344) would be required for the proposed abandonment. To date, OEA has not received a response from USACE. MMN has no immediate plans to undertake in-stream work or dredge and/or fill any materials in connection with the proposed abandonment. Therefore, OEA believes a permit under Section 404 of the CWA would not be required for abandonment-related salvage activities. OEA is providing USACE, St. Paul District and MN DNR with a copy of this Draft EA for their review.

MNN requested assistance from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), Region 5 in identifying whether permits under Section 402 of the CWA would be required for the proposed abandonment. To date, USEPA has not provided any comments. MMN has no immediate plans to undertake in-stream work or dredge and/or fill any materials in connection with the proposed abandonment. Therefore, since there is no in-water work planned, OEA believes a permit under Section 402 of the CWA would not be required. OEA is providing USEPA, Region 5 with a copy of this Draft EA for its review.

OEA believes that any air emissions associated with abandonment-related salvage activities would be temporary and would not have a significant impact on air quality. Similarly, any noise related to abandonment-related salvage activities would also be temporary and should not have a significant impact on the area surrounding the proposed abandonment.

Based on all information available to date, OEA does not believe that the proposed abandonment would cause significant environmental impacts. In addition to the parties on the Board's service list for this proceeding, OEA is providing a copy of this Draft EA to the following agencies for review and comment: USEPA Region 5; USFWS, Minnesota and Wisconsin Ecological Field Office; MN DNR, NW Region; NPS, Midwest Region; and USACE, St. Paul District.

HISTORIC REVIEW

MNN served the E&H Report on the Minnesota Department of Administration, State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), pursuant to 49 C.F.R. § 1105.8(c).³ In a letter dated June 11, 2026, the SHPO stated that the Line was previously evaluated in 2023 and found to be not eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. SHPO also stated that the proposed abandonment would result in a finding of No Historic Properties Affected.

Pursuant to the Section 106 regulations of the National Historic Preservation Act at 36 C.F.R. § 800.5(b), and following independent research and consultation with the SHPO, OEA has determined that no historic properties would be affected as a result of the proposed abandonment. The documentation for this finding, as specified at 36 C.F.R. § 800.11(e), consists of MNN's historic report, all relevant correspondence, and this Draft EA, which have been provided to the SHPO and made available to the public through posting on the Board's website at www.stb.gov. Guidance regarding the Board's historic preservation review process is available on the Board's website at <https://www.stb.gov/resources/environmental/historic-preservation-overview>.

Pursuant to 36 C.F.R. § 800.2, OEA conducted a search of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Tribal Directory Assessment Tool (TDAT) to identify federally recognized Tribes that may have ancestral connections to the project area.⁴ The database indicated that the following federally recognized tribes may have knowledge regarding properties of traditional religious and cultural significance within the right-of-way (the APE) of the proposed abandonment: Apache Tribe of Oklahoma; Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes,

³ Applicants seeking authority from the Board to abandon railroad lines may act on behalf of the Board when complying with the Section 106 regulations of the National Historic Preservation Act. Applicants are authorized to initiate the Section 106 review process and carry out some of its steps, but the Board retains overall responsibility for the Section 106 review. See 36 C.F.R. § 800.2(c)(4); 49 C.F.R. Part 1105; Delegation Letter (Dec. 9, 2009). The Delegation Letter can be found at a link on the bottom of the Board's website overlooking historic preservation at <https://www.stb.gov/resources/environmental/historic-preservation-overview>.

⁴ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Tribal Directory Assessment Tool, <https://egis.hud.gov/tdat> (last accessed July 6, 2026).

Oklahoma; Fort Belknap Indian Community of the Fort Belknap Reservation of Montana; Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians of Michigan; Leech Lake Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe; Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin; Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians, Minnesota; Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians of North Dakota; Upper Sioux Community, Minnesota; and White Earth Band of Minnesota Chippewa. Accordingly, OEA is sending a copy of this Draft EA to these Tribes for review and comment.

CONDITIONS

OEA recommends that no conditions be imposed on any decision granting abandonment authority.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the information provided by all sources to date, OEA concludes that, as currently proposed, abandonment of the Line will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, the environmental impact statement process is unnecessary. Alternatives to the proposed abandonment would include denial (and therefore no change in operations), discontinuance of service without abandonment, and continued operation by another operator. In any of these cases, the existing quality of the human environment and energy consumption should not be affected.

PUBLIC USE

Following abandonment and salvage of the rail line, the right-of-way may be suitable for other public use. A request containing the requisite four-part showing for imposition of a public use condition (49 C.F.R. § 1152.28) must be filed with the Board and served on the railroad within the time specified in the Board's Federal Register notice of the proposed abandonment. The Federal Register notice is also issued as a Board decision and is available on the Board's website.⁵

TRAIL USE

A request for a notice of interim trail use (NITU) is due to the Board, with a copy to the railroad, within 10 days of publication of the notice of exemption in the Federal Register. Nevertheless, the Board will accept late-filed requests as long as it retains jurisdiction to do so in a particular case. This request must comply with the Board's rules for use of rights-of-way as

⁵ Board decisions are available for viewing on the Board's website at www.stb.gov by clicking "Search STB Records;" selecting "Decisions" in the "Search for" dropdown menu; entering "AB" "497" "8" "X" sequentially in the four boxes for "Docket Number," then selecting "Search."

trails (49 C.F.R. § 1152.29). The Federal Register notice is also issued as a Board decision and is available on the Board's website.⁶

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

The Board's Office of Public Assistance, Governmental Affairs, and Compliance responds to questions regarding interim trail use, public use, and other reuse alternatives. You may contact this office directly at (202) 245-0238, or mail inquiries to Surface Transportation Board, Office of Public Assistance, Governmental Affairs, and Compliance, Washington, DC 20423.

COMMENTS

OEA encourages interested parties to submit their comments on the Draft EA electronically through the Board's website at <https://www.stb.gov/>. From the Board's homepage, scroll down to the blue "How to File" box. Select the "E-Filing (recommended)" button. From the E-Filing page, select "Environmental Comments" under "Select your E-Filing Type. Log-in accounts are not needed to file environmental comments electronically. Brief comments can be typed in the comment field, and lengthier comments can be attached as Word, Adobe Acrobat, or other file formats.

Alternatively, comments submitted by mail should be addressed to: Andrea Poole, Surface Transportation Board, 395 E Street SW, Washington, DC 20423-0001, Attention: Environmental Filing, Docket No. AB 497 (Sub-No. 8X). If you have any questions, please contact Andrea Poole by email at andrea.poole@stb.gov or by phone at 202-245-0305.

Date made available to the public: July 24, 2026.

Comment due date: August 7, 2026.

By the Board, Danielle Gosselin, Director, Office of Environmental Analysis.

Attachment

⁶ Id.



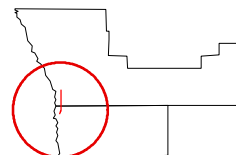
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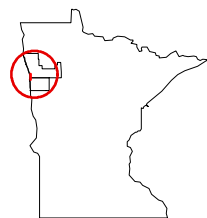
Legend

— the Line

Note: Maps produced by the STB's Office of Environmental Analysis are based on information provided by the applicant and are for reference purposes only.



Norman and Polk Counties



Minnesota