Columbia Grain
CULTIVATING GROWTH

313004

ENTERED
Office of Chief Counsel
November 18, 2026
Part of
Public Record

1300 SW 5th Avenue
29th Floor
Portland, OR 97201-5636

tel 503 224 8624
fax 503 241 0296

columbiagrain.com

Surface Transportation Board
Finance Docket 36873
Comments of Columbia Grain International, LLC

To the Members of the Surface Transportation Board:

Columbia Grain International, LLC (Columbia Grain) respectfully submits these comments opposing the proposed combination of Union Pacific Railroad (UP) and Norfolk Southern Railway (NS) before you in Finance Docket 36873.

Columbia Grain owns and operates over 50 facilities across the northern tier of the United States in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, North Dakota and Nebraska. We service over 8,000 farmers from whom we originate, process, and ship nearly five million metric tons of grain, oilseeds and pulse products annually. Except for one barge loading facility, we are entirely dependent on efficient, consistent and competitive rail service to ship these products domestically and for export. Any interruption in service or loss of competitive gateway pricing can have profound impacts on the local pricing farmers receive as well as the ability of the United States to remain a competitive exporter in global markets.

The Members of the Surface Transportation Board will receive numerous comments regarding the application in question. The comments in opposition will cite the fact that this merger was never requested by industry, is not in the public interest and fails to provide for improved customer service or increased competition. All these points are true and will be well documented in the numerous comments you receive. Another point, which the Board has already addressed, was the naked threat of retaliation made by UP CEO Jim Vena to the Southwest Association of Rail Shippers for any shippers with the audacity to consider opposing the merger application. That is not how business gets done in the United States; rather it speaks to the character and the intent behind this merger application. This is not a merger designed to bring improved service or in any way increase competition. The intent of the merger is the opposite. It is to increase efficiency and pricing power solely for the benefit of the surviving entity.

I would like to address another aspect of the proposed merger that may not meaningfully be addressed by the comments of others. That is the prospect of failure, and the incredible damage it would cause. With over 33 years in the agricultural handling, shipping and export industry, I'm old enough to remember the UP acquisition of Southern Pacific and the disastrous operating results it produced. For more than a year after the merger, service was disrupted or at times outright unavailable. Standard corridor shipments of 100-car unit trains of wheat from the Central Plains to the Pacific Northwest, which were previously completed in five to seven days, required over 30 days to complete during that period. A single train impacts a single vessel, but when the pattern is consistently repeated, the financial damages explode.

Mr. Vena also gave a presentation to the Annual Meeting of the Transportation, Elevator & Grain Merchants Association on January 28, 2026, in Scottsdale, Arizona. After his presentation, Mr. Vena took questions from the audience and I asked him simply, "What if you're wrong? What is your plan to mitigate damages for customers if your plan fails?" He didn't have an answer to the question. His only response was to the effect that the plan won't fail and that customers will be well served. I followed up with a question asking why industry should trust the UP after the disastrous results of previous rail mergers, including the UP-SP merger. His response was that technology was much better these days and that a repeat of those problems wouldn't be possible.

I thought about these comments last Friday night, November 13, 2026, as I was stranded in Minneapolis overnight. My connecting flight was cancelled after an eight hour delay caused by the nationwide FAA ground stop. While the cause of that system failure is still being fully investigated, the brief reason explained to date seems to be "transitioning old technology to new technology" and that a single router in Arkansas was able to cripple the entire nation's inter-airport air traffic control system. It makes me wonder if we are willing to trust half of the nation's rail traffic to an entity with a history of merger failures, a history of threatening statements and one without a plan for mitigation of failure when it inevitably occurs. As the leader of an organization responsible for bringing the production of 8,000 farmers to market, I'm not willing to make that bet on the simple assurance of "don't worry about it, it'll be fine."

Columbia Grain respectfully requests that the Surface Transportation Board reject the UP-NS merger application in its entirety.

Respectfully submitted,

Kurt Haarmann
President & CEO
Columbia Grain International, LLC

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that on this 18th day of November, 2026, I served a copy of the foregoing document by electronic mail upon all parties of record on the official service list for Docket No. FD 368763.

Kurt Haarmann