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SERVICE DATE - JULY 24, 1998

SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD
WASHINGTON, DC 20423

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

NO. AB-545

SOUTH ORIENT RAILROAD COMPANY, LTD.
--ABANDONMENT--
BETWEEN SAN ANGELO AND PRESIDIO, TEXAS

BACKGROUND

In this proceeding, the South Orient Railroad Company, Ltd. (SORC) has filed an application seeking authority under 49 U.S.C. 10903 to abandon its railroad line located between Milepost 722, near Mertzon station south of San Angelo, and Milepost 1029.1, on the International Bridge near Presidio, a distance of approximately 307 miles, in Brewster, Crane, Crockett, Irion, Pecos, Presidio, Reagan, Tom Green, and Upton Counties, Texas. A map depicting the rail line in relationship to the area served is appended to the report. If the application is approved, the railroad will be able to salvage track, ties and other railroad appurtenances. The right-of-way underlying the track is owned by the Texas Department of Transportation (TDOT).

The abandonment application filed by SORC includes the discontinuance of trackage rights over a Union Pacific Railroad Company line between Milepost 945.3 at Alpine Junction and Milepost 956.7 at Paisano Junction.

DESCRIPTION OF THE LINE

The line traverses land which is flat to moderately hilly between San Angelo and Fort Stockton. Between Fort Stockton and Alpine, the terrain is hilly and includes scattered ranches. The segment between Alpine and Presidio includes mountains and the northern portion of the Chihuahua Desert. There are 275 bridges and 20 buildings on the line believed to be 50 years old or older. A majority of the bridges are timber trestles with ballast decks. Abandonment would eliminate over 200 public highway/rail at-grade crossings.

The line handled 2,074 carloads of traffic in 1996, 1,133 carloads in 1997, and 358 carloads in the first quarter of 1998. Most of this traffic is overhead to the line (ie., it neither

originates nor terminates at a point on the line), and according to SORC, can be moved via alternative routes. As of the first quarter of 1998, there were only three active shippers located on the line.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

The railroad has submitted an environmental report that concludes the quality of the human environment will not be affected significantly as a result of the abandonment or any post-abandonment activities, including salvage and disposition of the right-of-way. The railroad has served the environmental report on a number of appropriate Federal, state, and local agencies as required by the Board's environmental rules at 49 CFR 1105.7(b).

We have investigated the record in this proceeding. The U.S. Department of Commerce, National Geodetic Survey (NGS), has requested that, if any of 172 geodetic station markers along the line might be disturbed or destroyed by abandonment activities, NGS be notified 90 days in advance in order that plans to relocate affected markers can be completed.

Based on information available at this time, it appears that the Texas Historical Commission (SHPO) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District (the Corps), have not completed their reviews of the proposed abandonment.

CONDITIONS

In view of the NGS request and the fact that the SHPO and the Corps have not completed their reviews, we therefore **recommend that the following three conditions be placed on any decision granting abandonment authority:**

- 1. If the railroad finds that any of the 172 geodetic station markers identified by the National Geodetic Survey (NGS) may be disturbed or destroyed by abandonment activities, the railroad shall notify NGS 90 days in advance of commencement of such activities.**
- 2. The railroad shall retain its interest in and take no steps to alter the historic integrity of the line in its entirety until completion of the Section 106 process of the National Historic Preservation Act, 16 U.S.C. 470f.**
- 3. The railroad shall not undertake any salvage activities until the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Fort Worth District, (the Corps) has completed its review of the proposed**

abandonment and the Surface Transportation Board has modified or removed this condition as a result of the Corps' review.

CONCLUSIONS

Subject to the foregoing conditions and based on the information provided from all sources to date, we conclude 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 CFR 1152.28) must be filed with the Board and served on the railroad within the time specified in the Federal Register notice.

TRAILS USE

A request for a certificate of interim trail use (CITU) is due to the Board, with a copy to the railroad, within 30 days of filing of the application. 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 trails (49 CFR 1152.29).

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

The Board's Office of Public Services (OPS) responds to questions regarding interim trail use, public use, and other reuse alternatives. You may contact OPS directly at (202) 565-1592, or mail inquiries to Surface Transportation Board, Office of Public Services, Room 848, Washington, DC 20423.

COMMENTS

If you wish to file comments regarding this environmental assessment, you should send an **original and two copies** to Vernon

A. Williams, Office of the Secretary, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20423, to the attention of Harold McNulty, who prepared this environmental assessment. **Please refer to Docket No. AB 545 in all correspondence addressed to the Board.** If you have questions regarding this environmental assessment, you should contact Mr. McNulty at (202) 565-1539.

Date made available to the public: July 21, 1998.

Comment due date: August 20, 1998.

Board decisions and notices are available on its website at "WWW.STB.DOT.GOV."

By the Board, Elaine K. Kaiser, Chief, Section of Environmental Analysis.

Vernon A. Williams
Secretary

***** MAP HAS TO BE SCANNED *****