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Initiative: Tongue River Railroad

Submission Text

Comment Letter – Tongue River Railroad My name is Ed Joiner. I am a Rosebud County Commissioner. I would like to offer my comments and I'll break them down into three aspects of the project. Although we have tried to remain neutral in this issue, the bottom line is we have to deal with whatever hand is dealt to us. If it goes through we must plan and make all the preparations we can to deal with it. If not life goes on. First, the environmental issues as stated in the Environmental Impact Statement. There have been many discrepancies in the plan which I have heard of. Incomplete studies and misguided data seem to be the norm. Since this is not one of my strengths I will not dwell on this issue. But I will say from some of the things I have read and heard, more time should have been put in to this. Secondly, the economic and social issues. As far as Rosebud County itself goes, there are very few benefits to the county. Sure there may be a few jobs, but how many of these jobs will go to the local people? There may be some tax base from the section of railroad that is actually in Rosebud County. But the county itself will get most of the impacts without the benefits of an increased tax base, as Powder River County will get. Many problems with the infrastructure will occur. There will be increased traffic on our roads which will mean more maintenance for our road crews which are already stretched out in our large county. Our county is 5,027 square miles, and has 1,200 miles of roads which the county is responsible for. After looking at the maps of the preferred route to Colstrip many miles of our roads will be changed and altered. Many crossings will be needed to accommodate the route. Crossings are difficult to maintain as there would be a cattle guard on both sides and the tracks in the middle. Are there any provisions to help with this extra maintenance? Also just for the basic construction and alterations of the roads it will take quite a bit of work. Where will the gravel come from and water that will be needed for this project? Another concern on these roads is the school busses that use the roads daily. Will this hinder their schedule by trains being stopped on the crossings and making the busses late for school or getting home? Also on these same roads are our emergency response vehicles. It would be unfortunate for the crossing to be blocked when an ambulance tries to respond on an emergency call. In all of our disaster plans, wildfires are a main concern. I do not see where our area was the target of the study, but we were compared to eastern Oregon. Our region has had devastating fires the past decade. Getting to these fires while they are small due to a quick response is important. How are we going to have access to both sides of the tracks, and be able to respond in a timely manner? With the increased potentials of fire, is the county going to have any support from the railroad to handle the increased fires the trains WILL cause? Either financially or equipment support? With the busy fire seasons we have had in the past few years the fire budget has already been exhausted for this year and we have our first major month of the season upon us. Other infrastructure concerns will be with the influx of workers coming in. The areas around Otter Creek and Ashland have limited areas and housing available. Where would these workers stay during the major construction phase? There are not currently spots where water, sewer and electricity are available for a large number of workers except in the Colstrip area. This would add a large amount of traffic to our already crowded highway 212, and our county roads as the workers travel to and from the job site. Along with the infrastructure deficiencies we have for this there would be an extra burden on our law enforcement department. We already have as I mentioned 5,027 square miles to cover, and adding more people to this would be an extra burden. Along with this influx of workers come the social problems. Human and drug trafficking are also major concerns. Especially near the reservation where young Native American women seem to be a major target. With the geographies involved the impacts and people would affect Rosebud County, with minimal impacts to neighboring counties. Most if not all the people would travel from the various locations of the project to a location in our county adding stress to our roads, law enforcement department, and other infrastructure needs we currently do not have. As I said before Rosebud County would have nothing to gain from this. The tax base money would go to Powder River County, and we would be stuck with the impacts of the project. The third aspect of this project I would like to bring up is the human factor. People and their land are being treated as numbers, and not as people. The Northern Cheyenne Tribe which would be impacted not

only by people traveling through their reservation, but their cultural privileges has been neglected. I heard of a land owner that told the first archeologist of some significant grounds and burial sites that were just overlooked, later to be investigated and found to be a significant find. These are people that have a rich history and have survived many obstacles. Their interests in the cultural areas affected have been overlooked. Is there a way to go back and let them be more involved in the E.I.S. and take their comments and concerns to heart and not as a statistic? I heard the Northern Cheyenne Tribe was only mentioned 24 times in the whole 4,000 page report, this is not fair. Another group which will be effected and even a house destroyed or moved is the Omnish. The plans for the railroad preferred alternative goes right through their land, and they are only mentioned once in the report? This group of people are part of our county, yet I believe with their beliefs that they are being regarded as a silent group which will not resist this move. People are people. The last group of people I'll mention are the ranchers. Some of these hard working people have been at the same ranches for many generations. Family ranches that have developed and grown over many decades are now threatened to be cut in half or separated by the railroad passing through their land. Land that they have worked on and improved, and payed taxes on for decades. How will these people be compensated for this project? In talking with some ranchers I found it interesting some of their concerns. For one I never knew that a cow and a calf are different when it comes to walking through culverts. A cow will walk through but the calf sees the tiny hole at the end and fears to go through. This makes for problems when a cow and calf become separated the calf could die. The best answer to this is to put in bridges instead of culverts. Is there any way to guarantee that bridges will be put in at all crossings instead of culverts for these animals? Another big issue for many land owners is the fact that if a crossing is on your land you must provide liability insurance at these crossings. Since this will affect many new land owners with the new crossings will they be compensated for this added expense they will occur due to the new crossing? Also after the crossings are built the land owner is responsible for maintaining the crossing. Many of these crossings will be county as well as private crossings. Will there be any provisions for helping with this extra maintenance to landowners and to the county? Although I cannot say I have read the whole E.I.S. for the Tongue River Railroad, I do see many deficiencies to the plan. Deficiencies and problems I see in the three aspects I have mentioned, environmental, social and economic, and the human factors. Now we approach the end of the comment period. The responses to the comment period will follow, and I just have to wonder if the final decisions will come from the comments from the people, or if the big businesses will have the final say in this project.