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Path of rail plan cuts through Purdue research farm



Superintendent of the Pinney Purdue Ag Center Jon Leuck, on right, and Director of Purdue Agricultural Centers Jerry Fankhauser speak among farm equipment in a storage shed on Wednesday about the proposed Great Lakes Basin Transportation rail which would cut through the research farm if approved. (Kyle Telechan / Post-Tribune)

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Jon Leuck and Jerry Fankhauser looked over a map with a red line running through it, north to south on the Porter County side of the Pinney [Purdue](#) Agricultural Center property, cutting through research fields and running parallel to a drainage ditch.

The red line, running through the heart of the ag center, represents Great Lakes Basin Transportation's route for its proposed freight train line.

"It's truly our most valuable soil and land," said Fankhauser, director of Purdue Agricultural Centers, as he and Leuck sat in the main building Wednesday at the center.

"This is where our researchers like to conduct their research," added Leuck, superintendent of the center in Wanatah. "It's high-value land."

Because Purdue University, which oversees Pinney and seven other ag centers across the state, hasn't issued a statement on the impact GLBT's proposal might have at Pinney, neither Fankhauser nor Leuck could offer an opinion about the route's effect, though Fankhauser said a statement should be forthcoming soon.

But they could talk about what the 664-acre farm does, how much land would be lost to a freight route, point out irrigation systems in fields that would be disrupted by train tracks.

The two estimate Pinney would lose 50 to 75 acres of its most productive land to the rail line and for easements.

"If our progress is impeded by a rail line, that could have a negative impact on our educational mission," Fankhauser said, adding the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) and the state's department of agriculture often fund research projects conducted by students and faculty.

GLBT proposes a 278-mile freight train track, starting near Milton, Wis., and with two endpoints in LaPorte County, with the goal of alleviating rail congestion in Chicago. The \$8 billion, privately funded track would have the capacity for 110 trains a day and its path would run through southern Lake and Porter counties, shooting north along the Porter-LaPorte County Line until it juts eastward into LaPorte County.

Under gray skies and blustery winds, Leuck and Fankhauser offered a tour of the property by pickup truck. They pointed out the grass "alleys" between research fields, providing access for researchers many times a day.

They showed off three irrigation systems they said would be rendered inoperable because they can't be moved across train tracks if a field is bisected.

"We have researchers who want irrigation on a weekly basis even when it's wet out like this," Leuck said, adding they may be doing work on plant pathologies and diseases that need wet conditions.

Pinney has a 90-acre field that fronts U.S. 30, purchased 10 years ago because some researchers want to do large-scale work. The proposed route would run through that field, Fankhauser said.

"It's going to limit our ability to do that," he said, adding the purchase of the land "allowed us to spread our research out and get the land they needed."

Frank Patton, founder and managing partner in GLBT, has said the route is being laid out to avoid densely populated areas, will be an economic boon for the region, and those impacted by the project will be fairly compensated.

Calling the project "the largest U.S. rail project in the last 125 years," Patton also has said he was "disappointed and saddened" by the growing number of communities against the project who are "not interested in hearing the other point of view."

In late April, the Porter County Plan Commission joined several other elected and appointed boards in Lake and Porter counties in passing a resolution against the freight train line. The resolution, among other points, singled out Pinney, noting the research farm "educates farmers on best practices and crop research for quality products," and was positioned away from urban areas so lights, noise and vibration wouldn't affect it. The rail route would further damage agricultural business, the resolution states.

Fankhauser, a Hebron native, was manager at Pinney from 1988 to 1995. His sister and brother-in-law have a farm north of Boone Grove, he said, "and the proposal has the tracks through their farm, so this is a family issue."

The research farm, which straddles the Porter-LaPorte county line, was founded through a land donation in 1919. There, three types of soil, woodlands and wetlands, and dozens of research projects, including one that's been ongoing for 17 years can be found.

Purdue's other seven ag centers are located strategically across the state, Fankhauser said, to take advantage of differing soil types and weather conditions.

In addition to research on typical crops like corn and soybeans, Pinney also hosts work on specialty crops including hops, cucumbers and tomatoes, and its woodland area is used for research as well. The farm was the site of 85 research projects last year, Fankhauser said, including one on corn and soybeans that's been ongoing for 17 years.

"If the land is taken out of production, does that ruin 17 years of research?" he said.

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