

EI - 20113



Re: West Michigan RR Co - Abandonment Exemption - Van Buren County,
STB Docket No. AB-1107X
RWimbish to: Dandridge, Tameka
Cc: David.Navecky, WMullins

02/06/2013 02:00 PM

Dear Ms. Dandridge -

Thank you for your note and for your guidance concerning the proposed railroad line abandonment's expected impact on endangered or threatened species.

As you mention in your note, West Michigan RR ("WMI") sent to USFW and various other consulting agencies a copy of a consolidated Environmental & Historic Report ("E&HR"), which the US Surface Transportation Board ("STB") requires of all railroads seeking to abandon a line. Your feedback and guidance to the railroad and to the STB is very much appreciated.

As relevant here, WMI expressed its opinion in the subject E&HR that the proposed abandonment would not likely have any impact upon any endangered or threatened species. This determination, as explained in the E&HR, was predicated upon the fact that the proposed abandonment and related track salvage activity would take place on previously-developed railroad right-of-way, would involve limited activity related to the removal of rail and track material, and not affect any natural habitat (such as the removal of trees or other plants adjacent to the rail line right-of-way or any activity in streambeds or wetlands).

In my opinion, the subject project area would be the 50-foot-wide rail line right-of-way ("r-o-w") along the length of the roughly 10.67-mile line of railroad extending from milepost 19.88 (west of the Line's crossing of 56th Street, near Lawrence, MI) to milepost 30.55 (east of Kalamazoo Street in Paw Paw, MI), and roughly 25 feet on either side of the r-o-w. That said, the proposed action would be limited to the removal of rail and track material on land developed for railroad use. Track salvage can and will be accomplished entirely within the subject rail line r-o-w, and so the impact on any habitat would be, in our opinion negligible to non-existent, unless, of course, any threatened or endangered species can be expected to be living atop, within, or along the subject railroad trackage.

I have visited the USFWS website from the link you have supplied below in

connection with Section 7 consultation, and have determined that the following threatened or endangered species may be found in Van Buren County, Michigan, where the rail line proposed for abandonment is located: Indiana bat, eastern massasauga (technically listed as a "candidate" for federal listing), Mitchell's satyr butterfly, and Pitcher's thistle.

In examining the area surrounding the rail line slated for abandonment and maps of the vicinity, and in considering the scope of the proposed project (which will be limited to removal of track and track material within an existing rail corridor), it is my opinion that the proposed abandonment would have NO EFFECT on any of the above-listed species. To begin with, it does not appear that the proposed abandonment would result in the loss or disturbance of Indiana bat habitat. Also, the subject rail line does not appear to extend near or through any habitat that would host the Mitchell's satyr butterfly or the Pitcher's thistle. Accordingly, I now conclude that the appropriate determination here is that the proposed abandonment and the activities stemming from it will have no effect on threatened or endangered species that may be found in Van Buren County.

This is essentially in keeping with the conclusion of the STB's Office of Environmental Assessment ("STB-OEA"), which recently stated that

"due to the temporary nature and very limited scope of the proposed salvage activities, OEA believes that potential impacts to any such species could be appropriately mitigated through consultation with the USFWS pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA)." Should USFWS conclude that the proposed rail line salvage activities may nevertheless threaten to adversely affect threatened or endangered species, please let me know at your earliest possible convenience, so that we may explore appropriate salvage mitigation measures. Since my client expects soon to commence salvage activity, your input and guidance on mitigating any adverse impact to endangered species would be essential to swift project completion. My contact information is supplied below, and I welcome your call.

As you may have noted, I am sharing a copy of your email and my reply with David Navecky of the STB-OEA, to whom this project has been assigned for purposes of STB environmental and historic impacts analysis. If you have any questions concerning the STB's environmental review process, I encourage you to contact Dave directly at David.Navecky@stb.dot.gov or 202-245-0294.

Sincerely,

Rob (Counsel for WMI)

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West Michigan RR Co - Abandonment Exemption - Van Buren County, STB Docket No. AB-1107X

Dandridge, Tameka

to: Robert A Wimbish

02/06/2013 10:45 AM

Hello Mr. Wimbish:

In your letter to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, dated December 18, 2012 and received in our office on January 7, 2013, you stated that the West Michigan Railroad Company does not believe that the proposed action is likely to adversely affect federally listed species or designated critical habitat. Your letter did not provide any information on which federally listed species may be in the project area or a project area description.

Before we can concur, you will need to provide an explanation of why the proposed action is not likely to adversely affect federally listed species. Please include a description of the project area and if any federally listed species may use the habitat within the project area (i.e., would the site provide habitat to support an endangered or threatened species).

If your project area does not provide habitat or if the proposed action will not impact habitat or federally listed species, then the appropriate determination is "No Effect". Upon making this determination, section 7 consultation is complete and contact with our office is not required. However, if you maintain your "Not Likely to Adversely Affect" determination, then you will need to request our concurrence.

Additional information about the section 7 consultation process may be found here:
<http://www.fws.gov/midwest/endangered/section7/s7process/index.html>

I am also providing definitions of the terms No Effect and May Affect, But is Not Likely to Adversely Affect.

No effect - implies that the weight of available evidence indicates that either: (1) there will be no exposure to the environmental impacts resulting from the proposed action, or (2) neither the species nor the critical habitat will respond in any manner (i.e., behaviorally, physiologically, or chemically) upon exposure to the proposed action.

May affect, but is not likely to adversely affect - appropriate conclusion when the species or critical habitat may, based on the available information, be exposed and may respond upon exposure. This analysis occurs at the individual level. The appropriate conclusion for an action that may not affect the species as a whole but will impact individuals in some manner is "may affect." Effects may be insignificant, discountable or beneficial.

If you have any questions, please call or email me.

Sincerely,
Tameka Dandridge

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Tameka N. Dandridge
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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