

Received: 9/23/2015 1:17:25 PM

Commenter: Jim Atchison

Organization: SE MT Development

State: Montana

Agency: Surface Transportation Board

Initiative: Tongue River Railroad

Submission Text

As the Executive Director for Southeastern MT Development Corporation (SEMDC), I would like to express my strong feelings in support of the Tongue River Railroad Project proposed for southeastern Montana. SEMDC is a regional non-profit economic development group that was established in 1997 to encourage economic activity in the four (4) Counties of Custer, Powder River, Rosebud and Treasure. Today, SEMDC continues to work with the private, public and non-profit sectors to help create and retain jobs in these four counties. Our track record has documented over 988 jobs created or retained and over \$35 million dollars in project assistance since 1997. Since 2005, SEMDC has been designated by the State of Montana as a Certified Regional Development Corporation (CRDC) and the federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) as an Economic Development District (EDD). In my opinion, the Tongue River Railroad Project is a vital and much needed economic development opportunity as it relates to the proposed Otter Creek Coal Mine Project. Both SEMDC and I strongly encourage the STB to finalize your current Environmental Impact Study (EIS) and to move forward with the Route that supports the most economic benefits yet shows the least environmental impacts. My reasons are as follows: * SEMDC passed Resolution #712, strongly supporting this project in 2012, * We feel that most perceived environmental impacts can be properly minimized with effective communication between all stakeholders and pro-active planning, * SEMDC had in-place a proactive planning position called the Impact Mitigation and Planning Position (iMapp) specifically tasked to work with all of the project stakeholders in-order to minimize the impacts, yet maximize the benefits, * SEMDC helped form the Eastern Montana Impact Coalition with three (3) other economic development groups in-order to leverage scarce funds and to target impacted areas occurring in a 16 county region, including this EIS area and project. Half of this region is currently within the Bakken oil and gas development area, * We feel that the tremendous economic opportunity that these related projects could bring to this economically challenged region would be mutually beneficial to all parties, * We also know there is strong state-wide support for natural resource development as the job creation and tax base improvements would be tremendous for the local and state governmental units, especially the State Educational Budget and once again * SEMDC strongly supports the Tongue River Railroad. Thank you for the chance to express my comments on this much needed opportunity.