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January 31, 2009

David Novecky
STB Finance Docket No. 34658
Surface Transportation Board
395 E Street SW
Washington, DC 20423-0001

Dear Mr. Novecky:

Let me thank you for this opportunity to provide some input on the Northern Rail Extension considered in Docket 34658. My comments mostly pertain to the area near the Richardson Clearwater – the South Common Segment.

I have recreated in the Richardson Clearwater area for almost 40 years now. My kids were practically raised on the Clearwater most weekends with their grandparents. They learned about the outdoors, fishing and hunting in that area. It is a special place. I am concerned that the plans to build a railroad so close to its upper reaches may affect it permanently, making it a terrible place to take my grandkids.

I believe that the South Common Segment should be moved to the south, out of the watershed. Move it closer to the military area. The railroad's purpose is to serve the military, so move it closer to them. One thing that its present proposed location would do is eliminate access to a significant amount of land between the railroad and the military area. My kids and other family members have recreated in this area over the years. Eliminating their access will be detrimental. I believe moving the project south would not have a significant affect on the project. What has been done to study that possibility?

I am concerned about the noise generated by so many trains moving daily between Delta and Fairbanks. My in-laws lived by the train tracks in Fairbanks. When the train went by, all conversation stopped – because it had to. Moving the railroad to the south will significantly reduce the amount of noise generated by the trains. One of the beauties of the Richardson Clearwater area is the lack of noise. Have you done any baseline studies of how much noise is along the South Common Route and have you estimated the amount of noise that will be projected into the Richardson Clearwater area? I want to be able to converse with family and neighbors while on the Clearwater and not have to stop doing so just because a train goes by when it could be going by unnoticed if it were farther south.

Just how much damage to salmon eggs is expected due to vibration during the construction process and what affects will there be on the aquifer? I am significantly concerned about damage to the aquifer for a variety of reasons. The returning salmon, all pretty and red, are great fun to watch in the fall. Damage to their eggs could eliminate this run, which would be a significant problem. If you study the comments made during a recent timber sale in the area, you will note that people are significantly worried about the salmon runs and the potential damage to the up-wellings and springs in the area. For years, we have been able to drink water right out of the stream. I am significantly concerned that if your railroad damages the wetlands in the upper Clearwater areas that there will be too much siltation at times to do so in the future. Since the Carla Lake fire in 1998, we have noted a significant decrease in the ability of the ground in the upper Richardson Clearwater area to hold rainfalls. The Clearwater never used to change in its depth. Since the fire, several times when we endure heavy rains, the Clearwater has raised and the waters have become turbid. I am significantly concerned about the additional sediment run-off possibilities by the construction of the railroad, roads, camps and gravel pits in the area of South Common Segment. Wouldn't it be better to move the rail line south to where the impacts to this watershed from vibration and siltation are significantly lessened?

Of particular concern are spills of hazardous materials being carried by the ARR in the South Common Segment. The ARR doesn't have a good history when it comes to derailments and spills. Ask the folks north of Talkeetna about a mid-winter spill that occurred there. It was impossible to clean up. If any kind of spill of toxic or hazardous material, including but not limited to diesel, gasoline, fertilizers, cement or other construction materials were to occur, it could be particularly damaging to the fish species, wildlife species and habitat of the South Common Segment. These concerns also could be lessened by moving the rail line south a few miles, wouldn't they? How much extra would that cost in comparison to the priceless area that would be ruined by a spill?

Your document states that construction of the South Common Segment would result in the destruction or disturbance of two red-tailed hawk nests, two great gray owl nests, and one great horned owl nests. We have several bald and golden eagles in the area also. Why displace them or destroy their nests in the Richardson Clearwater area?

I thank you for the opportunity to comment on your EIS. I may not have covered every area of which I have concerns in this letter. I will add additional comments later if I have an opportunity. Please keep me informed of changes in the routing, construction methods and timeframes as the planning process continues. I am especially anxious to see how far south you can move this railroad. Moving it south will cure lots of ills with the project.

I had one heck of a time trying to respond in the 45 days of open comment period. Not only did I do some traveling, but there were three major holidays and one presidential inauguration in that timeframe. I believe you should extend the comment period for an additional sixty days to accommodate as many people as possible. This is a pretty big project for such a short comment period.

Please send additional documents and responses to my questions to the address.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Cheryl Schikora".

Cheryl Schikora

cc:

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