

COMMENTS

NO 33407

200976

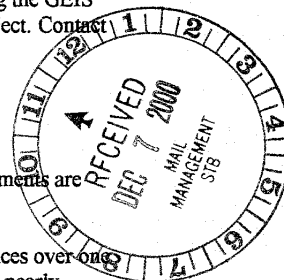
001835

11/16/00

Statement by Forrest Wilkinson, Director of Marketing for Wilkinson Hardwoods concerning the GEIS before the Surface and Transportation Board (STB) on the Dakota Minnesota and Eastern project. Contact phone (320) 253-1019

Hello,

My name is Forrest Wilkinson, Director of Marketing for Wilkinson Hardwoods. (These statements are from me personally and not from the board at WH.)



The rail line now owned by the Dakota Minnesota and Eastern first provided its valuable services over one hundred years ago. It provided transportation of goods to farm communities located along this nearly straight east/west line. It also made those communities prosper by shipping to market the wholesome bounty of the Minnesota farm family.

With this service of bringing corn and soybeans and other farm commodities to more distant markets, a family of towns linking hands grew along the rail. And these farms supported numerous other businesses in these little villages: cafes, and hardware stores, barber shops and craft shops.

For over one hundred years this family of communities have grown with the efficient and safe rail line providing reliable service over the decades. Towns like Lake Benton, Tracy, Lamberton, Sleepy Eye, New Ulm and Mankato have made use of this rail to move corn and soybeans; the lifeblood of these agricultural towns. Not only farm commodities, but bulk items like kaolin for cement production, are safely moved on this rail line to the benefit of these rail towns.

In recent years the DM&E provided service to grain elevators during bumper harvests throughout southern Minnesota when larger and more prestigious rail lines were effectively paralyzed due to restructuring.

Towns like Winona, Lewiston, and Rochester enjoy inexpensive and reliable electricity due to coal deliveries to municipal power plants. The homes in these towns are warm on February nights, and computer monitors glow in schoolrooms. Heart monitors guard one's health year-round at the Mayo clinic, due to electricity generated from coal transported on the Dakota Minnesota and Eastern Rail Road.

We have been told by the President of the DM&E that a major overhaul is required for this 'Little Engine that Could' to continue offering the most efficient and safe transportation of bulk commodities over land available.

I want to make clear that Wilkinson Hardwoods will be expanding operations in the "driftless" region of southern Minnesota regardless of the decision of the STB. And Wilkinson Hardwoods will continue to offer its premium hickory railroad ties to the rail market regardless of the outcome concerning the decision affecting the Dakota Minnesota & Eastern.

Some have feared that the project along this private rail line with private dollars will generate widespread job loss. On the contrary: many long term jobs will be lost if the DM&E is allowed to fade away. History, and the presence of these wonderful little towns alone, refutes this. We must keep in mind the jobs generated for hundreds of family breadwinners in the upgrading of this rail line. Reliable transportation is a major factor when new businesses locate facilities, and an improved DM&E would be attractive to new job-creating businesses.

Recent derailments are causing irrational fear of greater rail traffic. We must keep in mind that this is evidence of the very real need for the upgrading of this arterial rail line. With improved facilities, the odds

ENTERED
Office of the Secretary

DEC 12 2000

Part of
Public Record

ENVIRONMENTAL
DOCUMENT

of derailment is reduced to that seen on other upgraded rail lines. We can then expect the impressive ton per mile safety record seen on other modern rail lines.

There is a misconception that hazardous materials such as propane and ammonia will soon be transported on the rail line; that this is unacceptable. However, these materials are currently handled on the DM&E now. The alternative is to load these items on trucks and drive them on the presently overtaxed and dangerous Hwy. 14. If this were to happen we would see a dramatic increase in these heavy crushing loads on local roads which in turn would increase road maintenance costs on local city and county boards. Rail has the proven safety record over truck travel for such hazardous materials.

Some have implied that open topped coal cars will cause (or give the perception of) coal dust and that this will deter people from visiting these railroad towns. My father lives in the little town of Sartell on the Mississippi River north of St. Cloud. I often find myself traveling by car north to visit him. In so doing I follow the Burlington Northern Railroad. I go through many towns, including Becker, St. Cloud, Sauk Rapids and of course Sartell. In all these towns the BN, on its main line and at a high rate of speed, hauls many open topped coal trains. There is no coal dust in any of these towns.

Some of these same people object that this increased traffic on these improved rails will not allow for the passenger service promised by the DM&E. Yet these same people suggest that we should have commuter rail on the very heavily traveled Burlington Northern to St. Cloud.

Others have complained that any increased traffic and speed of these trains will affect emergency vehicles. Again I point to the communities along the BN who have major hospitals very near the rail line. St. Cloud Hospital has no noticeable problems due to its nearness to grade crossings, nor have they complained of excessive noise or vibration.

I would like to say again that Wilkinson Hardwoods will expand in this region and continue to market its premium hickory switchties no matter how this issue is resolved.

But it is my honest belief that allowing this project to go forward is the best thing that could happen to these towns located all along the DM&E. Allowing the DM&E to provide safe, reliable and inexpensive rail service is in the best interest of all Minnesotans.

604 2ND AVE N.
SARTELL, MN
56377