

Testimony of Senator Joanne Verger
for the
Surface Transportation Board

August 21, 2008

Eugene, Oregon

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AB-515 Sub 2
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

For the record, I am Oregon State Senator Joanne Verger, representing parts of six counties on the Oregon Coast from Coos Bay to Lincoln City. I am here today in opposition to the Abandonment application by the Central Oregon and Pacific Railroad and in support of the Feeder Line application by the International Port of Coos Bay.

Having spent eight years as the Mayor of Coos Bay before serving eight more years in the Oregon Legislature, I have been working with the Port of Coos Bay since 1992. Today, there is welcomed new leadership at the Port, a recognized economic engine for Southwest Oregon. These experienced Commissioners and staff have given new hope to this "once vibrant" community. This new leadership understands the global economy and Oregon's potential. This potential includes the need, right now, for new ownership of the entire Corp line from the Coos Bay line to the Union Pacific interchange in Eugene.

You will hear today from shippers and others impacted by the unacceptable actions of a rail company that has shown a hard and shocking callousness for the consequences of these actions. The regrettable human and economic fall-out since the announcement of the embargo is easy to identify in an area well acquainted with economic disaster brought on by mill closures and sever regulations. The once familiar fear now strikes the hearts of our families and the owners of small business, who are dependent on stable paychecks to survive.

The loss of a rail line to the coast can only mean more loss of jobs, declining revenue to governments by large property tax payers, and declining services—so, once again, the economic health of the coastal communities is seriously threatened and the people feel it, like you know when a storm is coming.

Remember, these are the same communities that are already struggling from the decline of their fishing industry and could now face the loss of manufacturing jobs.

"Silence is golden" is a motto I have always appreciated as a public servant. However, there are times when an entity's silence speaks volumes; which seems to be the case here where we have heard nothing from Union Pacific Railroad who faces tremendous financial responsibilities if this abandonment were allowed to go forward. There is a rail bridge to be dismantled, and tracks to be removed. Has Union Pacific no voice? just the bill in the mail? Faced with this outcome, any silence seems deafening.

But none of this has to happen with the ability of our Port to secure this vital piece of infrastructure, we no longer would be held hostage, our two-lane roads would not continue to face the dramatic increase in heavier truck traffic and consumer confidence can return.

I have served on the Transportation Committee since I was first elected to the Legislature in 2000. For years our short line railroads have had little maintenance or repair. Shamefully neglected, the Corp line still demanded profit, much as a starved horse beaten to cross the finish line.

By contrast, our new Port Commissioners were carefully appointed by the Governor for their reputations of integrity and commitment to the people of Southwestern Oregon and its economic future. They will accept the challenge of owning a rail line in the same responsible way that they turned this Port in a positive direction after they were appointed.

We cannot change the calculated and unprofessional actions of a rail company but we can change the ownership. Unlike the past, we can commit ourselves to Oregonians and the future of their families. We can do this by placing the responsibility for the entire Corp line into the hands of our new and qualified Port commissioners where they will put their best business practices to work

Only then can we be free of this blackmail. As good stewards of this important infrastructure that moves our products to market, that protects our manufacturing job base, we can have a vision of the future for a possible way to move people for the sake of our environment and congestion.

I beg of you to approve the Feeder Line application by the International Port of Coos Bay.