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SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD FINANCE DOCKET NO. 34936

**Northern Columbia Basin Railroad Project
Grant County, Washington**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Co-Lead Agencies

Surface Transportation Board – Section of Environmental Analysis
and Washington State Department of Transportation

Northern Columbia Basin Railroad Project

Preliminary Environmental Assessment Executive Summary

Prepared by the

**Surface Transportation Board
Section of Environmental Analysis**

and the

**Washington State Department of
Transportation**

November 7, 2008



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- Comments may also be filed electronically on the Surface Transportation Board's website at www.stb.dot.gov by clicking on the "E-FILING" link. A Login Account is not needed; simply click on "Environmental Comments," which will take you to the comment screen. Type in the docket number "FD 34936" then select "Christa Dean" in the drop down list under "attention of." Complete the form by adding your name, address, phone, and e-mail, and click "Submit."

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Executive Summary

On August 28, 2008, the Port of Moses Lake (Port) filed a petition with the Surface Transportation Board (STB) seeking an exemption under 49 U.S.C. 10502 from the prior approval requirements of 49 U.S.C. 10901 for the construction and acquisition of approximately 11.5 miles of rail line in Grant County, Washington.¹ Columbia Basin Railroad Company, Inc. (CBRW) intends to file a verified notice of exemption to operate over the rail lines that are the subject of the Port's Petition for Exemption. The proposed rail project (also known as the Build Alternative) is the action that is evaluated in this Preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA).

The STB, pursuant to 49 U.S.C. 10901, is the federal agency responsible for granting authority for the construction and operation of new rail line facilities. The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) is responsible for improving the state's transportation systems, including short-line rail systems.

The STB's Section of Environmental Analysis (SEA) and WSDOT are issuing this Preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA) for public review and comment. SEA will consider all comments received on this document in making its final recommendations to the STB. The STB will consider the entire environmental record, all comments, and SEA's final recommendations in making its final decision in this proceeding. The STB will decide whether to approve, approve with conditions (which could include environmental conditions to mitigate impacts), or deny the proposed action.

What is the Northern Columbia Basin Railroad Project?

The proposed project, known as the Northern Columbia Basin Railroad (NCBR) Project, includes the construction of two new rail line segments and the acquisition and refurbishment of an existing rail segment to provide rail access to land designated and zoned for industrial uses along Wheeler Road (Road 3 NE) and at the Grant County International Airport (GCIA).² Although CBRW operates rail lines in the City of Moses Lake and Grant County, the industrial areas along Wheeler Road (Road 3 NE) and the eastern side of the GCIA are not currently served by rail.

¹ The proposed 11.5-mile-long rail route includes the acquisition and rehabilitation of approximately three miles of existing track that is currently owned by Columbia Basin Railroad Company (CBRW). In addition, the proposed 11.5-mile-long rail route includes the acquisition of approximately 0.5 miles of existing track, for which no construction or rehabilitation is planned. Accordingly, the 0.5-mile rail segment was not evaluated in this EA.

² Two airports are located in the project vicinity. The larger airport, Grant County International Airport (GCIA), is located north and west of Randolph Road. Moses Lake Municipal Airport is located north of Wheeler Road (Road 3 NE) and east of Crab Creek / Parker Horn. GCIA is the airport that would be accessed by the proposed project.

The project location is shown in **Exhibit ES.1**. The entire proposed route is would be between 11.1 miles and 11.5 miles long, depending on the alternative selected at the western end of the project corridor. The entire rail route would be owned by the Port and operated by CBRW.

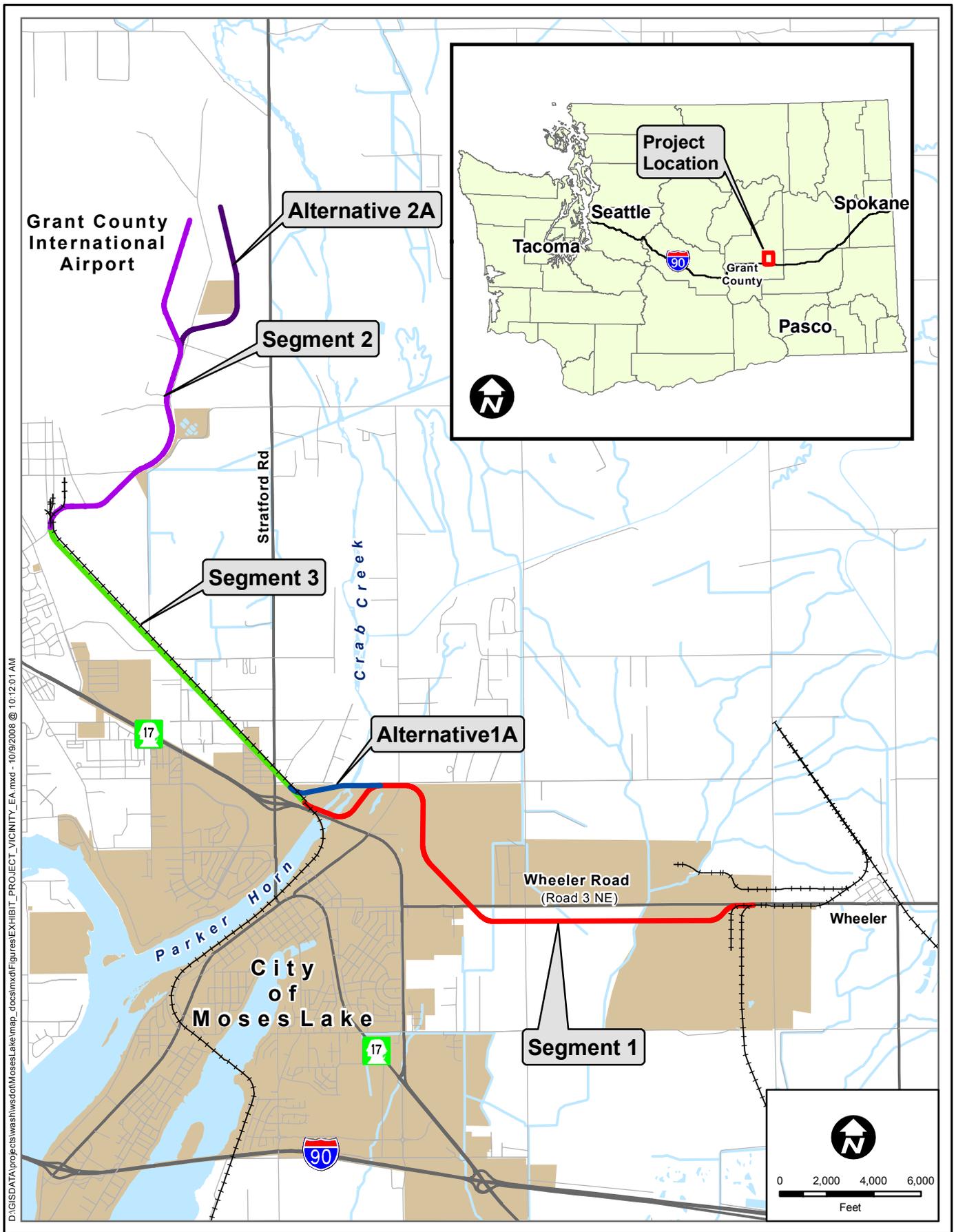
Segment 1 (4.5 miles) would begin at the existing CBRW rail line at the community of Wheeler, diverge south of Wheeler Road (Road 3 NE), and proceed west, paralleling Wheeler Road (Road 3 NE). Segment 1 would then swing to the northwest and cross back over Wheeler Road (Road 3 NE) and cross Parker Horn / Crab Creek at one of two alternative locations (Segment 1 or Alternative 1A). Segment 2 would start at the western end of Segment 3 and would proceed north to the eastern side of the GCIA property. At the northern end of Segment 2, one of two alternatives would be constructed, either Segment 2 (3.1 miles of track ending on the west side of the GCIA industrial area) or Alternative 2A (3.6 miles of track ending on the east side of the GCIA industrial area). Segment 3, an existing 3.0-mile rail line located between Parker Horn and the GCIA, would be acquired and refurbished by the Port. The Port would also acquire a total of approximately 0.5 miles of rail line located north of the conjunction of Segments 2 and 3. However, no construction or rehabilitation work is proposed on that portion of the rail line, and it is not evaluated in this EA.

The purpose of the proposed project is to provide rail service to lands designated for industrial development in the northern part of the City of Moses Lake as well as to the south and east of the GCIA, to enhance opportunities for economic development, and to attract new rail-dependent businesses to those areas. Depending on the demand for rail service, rail traffic would increase as needed from the current one train per month (or less) up to a reasonably foreseeable future maximum of two trains per day (one round trip).

Why did the STB and WSDOT prepare an Environmental Assessment?

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA),³ the STB must take into account in its decision-making the environmental impacts of its actions, including direct, indirect and cumulative impacts. The STB must consider these impacts before making its final decision in a case. SEA assists the STB in meeting this responsibility by conducting an independent environmental review of cases filed with the agency and preparing any necessary EA or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

³ 40 CFR 1500 et seq.



An EA is a public disclosure document required by NEPA that analyzes potential environmental impacts, as well as alternatives to the proposed action. Coordination with federal, state, and local agencies; applicants; Tribes; and the public are key elements in the preparation of an EA. When the preliminary analysis is completed, an EA is issued and government agencies, Tribes, and the public have an opportunity to review and comment on the document. The purpose of an EA is to provide enough analysis to determine whether a proposed project would have significant environmental impacts, in which case an Environmental Impact Statement is required. When no significant impacts are found or significant impacts can be mitigated, that results in a “Finding of No Significant Impact.”

Under Washington’s State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA)⁴, any agency that proposes to take an official action is required to perform an environmental review to identify any benefits and/or impacts that may result from the action.

Therefore, SEA and WSDOT prepared this EA in accordance with NEPA and SEPA, as well as the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) guidelines,⁵ the STB’s environmental regulations,⁶ WSDOT requirements,⁷ Executive Orders,⁸ and other applicable federal and state laws.

Why is the Port of Moses Lake proposing this rail project?

The purpose of the proposed NCBR Project is to provide rail service to lands designated for industrial development in the northern part of the City of Moses Lake as well as to the south and east side of the GCIA, to enhance opportunities for economic development, and to attract new, rail-dependent businesses to those areas.

The proposed project includes the following:

- Segment 1 - Building a new rail line between the community of Wheeler and Parker Horn (a water body and an arm of Moses Lake) or Crab Creek to join the existing line (Segment 3);
- Segment 2 - Extending the existing track, which currently terminates just south of the GCIA, to the industrial lands located east of the GCIA; and

⁴ Revised Code of Washington (RCW). 43.21C.

⁵ 43 CFR § 1508.9(b).

⁶ 49 CFR Part 1105.

⁷ WSDOT’s *Environmental Procedures Manual* outlines the department’s legal requirements related to natural and man-made environmental resources. The *Environmental Procedures Manual* provides guidance on environmental procedures for WSDOT and its environmental consultants. The *Environmental Procedures Manual* may be viewed online at <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Publications/Manuals/M31-11.htm>.

⁸ Executive Order (EO) 12898 (Federal Register 1994), *Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations*.

- Segment 3 - Refurbishing the existing track between Parker Horn and the GCIA.

The new rail line segments would be owned and constructed by the Port. Segment 3 (existing track) would be acquired by the Port from CBRW and would be refurbished by the Port. As stated above, the entire route would be operated by CBRW.

Although the proposed project would allow trains to bypass downtown Moses Lake, the project does not include abandonment of the existing rail line that runs through downtown Moses Lake. If that line were proposed for abandonment in the future, that would be a separate action before the STB and would be subject to a separate environmental review by SEA.

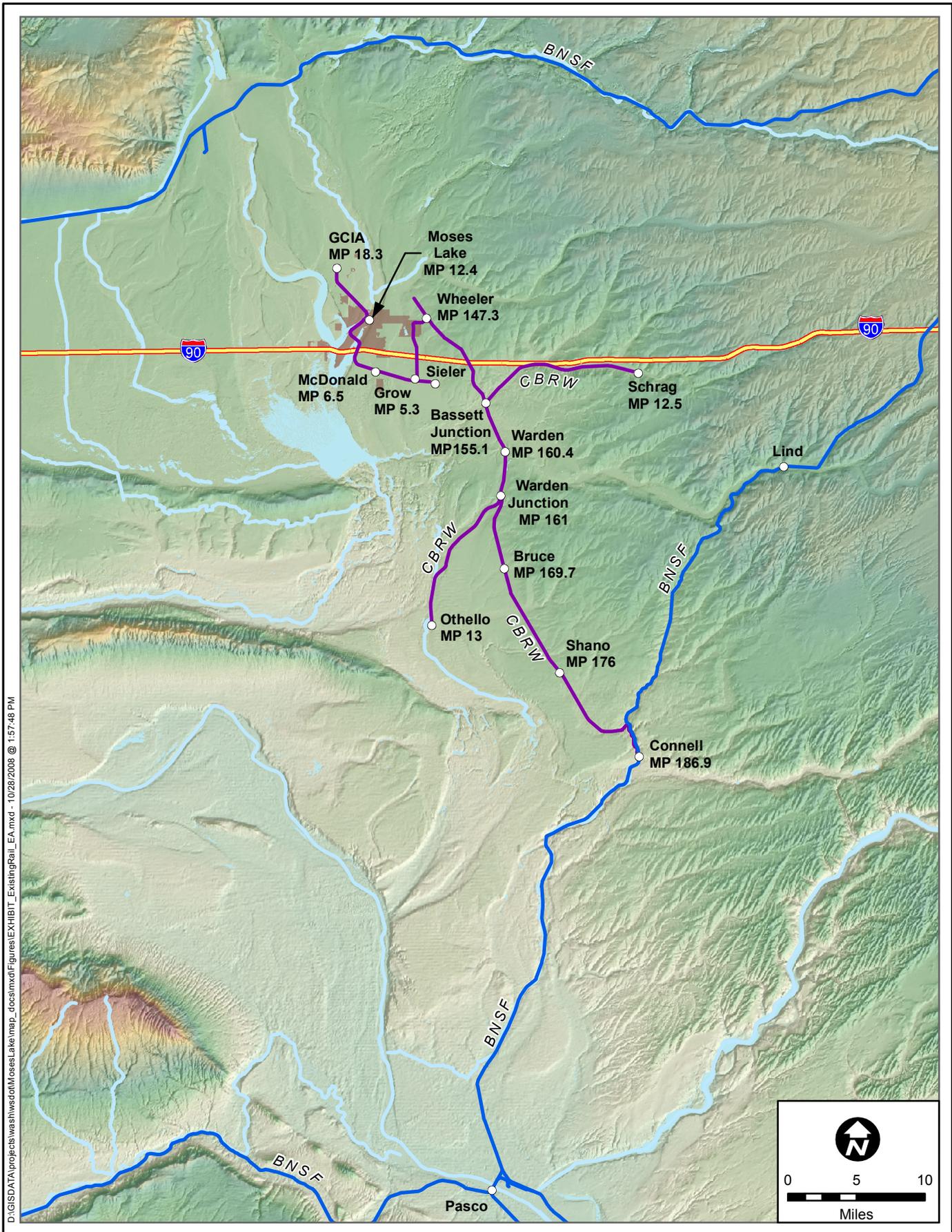
What is the physical setting of the project area?

The project area is located in central Washington, in Grant County, north of I-90. **Exhibit ES.2** shows the existing rail lines and general topography in the project vicinity. The project area is located partially in the northern portion of the City of Moses Lake and partially in unincorporated Grant County. Although generally zoned and designated for industrial use, at this time land in Segments 1 and 2 is primarily being used for agricultural purposes. Segment 3, the existing line, is adjacent to the Longview residential neighborhood and the Longview Elementary School.

The project area is located northeast of Moses Lake in the Crab Creek Watershed. Upper Crab Creek originates on the northeastern Columbia River Plateau and flows to Moses Lake at Parker Horn and ultimately to the Columbia River. Local topography consists of relatively flat uplands broken by the Crab Creek and Parker Horn drainages, where the topography slopes downward to the creek.

What alternatives were considered?

Two alternatives are analyzed in depth in the EA: the Build Alternative, which includes the construction of Segments 1 and 2 and the acquisition and rehabilitation of existing Segment 3, and the No Build Alternative. Within Segment 1, two alternative water crossings (at Parker Horn and Crab Creek) were evaluated, and within Segment 2, two alternative routes on the eastern side of the GCIA were evaluated. The EA also includes discussion of two additional alternatives initially considered, but rejected, due to the length of those routes and associated adverse environmental impacts. In addition, those two alternatives were rejected because they did not meet the purpose and need of the proposed project, which is described in Chapter Two. A comparison of all the alternatives considered can be found at the end of this Executive Summary, in **Exhibit ES.3**.



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EXISTING RAIL SYSTEMS IN THE PROJECT AREA Exhibit ES.2

Northern Columbia Basin Railroad Project

What potential environmental impacts could result from the Build Alternative?

The project team identified potential adverse environmental impacts that could result from the proposed project. Chapter Five contains a more detailed discussion of these potential impacts, and **Exhibit ES.3** provides a summary of potential environmental impacts for all alternatives considered. SEA and WSDOT have incorporated mitigation measures that would avoid, reduce, or otherwise mitigate all identified potentially adverse environmental impacts. All mitigation measures are discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

The following is an overview of potential environmental impacts that could result from the proposed rail project.

Air Quality, Energy, Noise and Visual Quality

Grant County is in attainment for all criteria air pollutants. Because the proposed project is expected to result in a maximum of two trains (one round trip) per day for the foreseeable future, impacts to air quality, energy, and noise are not expected to be significant. The EA includes measures to minimize dust and noise during construction and to revegetate disturbed areas following construction.

Cultural Resources

A cultural resources survey of the project area was prepared and sent to the Washington Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (State Historic Preservation Office or SHPO), the Colville Confederated Tribes, the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation of Oregon, and the Wanapum Tribe for review. Based on the results of the survey and initial consultations with the SHPO, the project team determined that there are no prehistoric archaeological sites, historic period archaeological sites, or traditional cultural properties located within the project area.

However, the project team identified 20 potential historic resources (sites that are 50 years old or older) within the study area; one of those resources, the Columbia Basin East Low Canal Feeder Canals system, has been determined to be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The proposed rail project is not expected to have an adverse effect on any historic resources, but any sites that are eligible for the NRHP would not be disturbed prior to completion of the Section 106 review process of the National Historic Preservation Act, 16 U.S.C. 470f (NHPA).

Because there are certain land parcels that the project team was unable to evaluate, the SHPO has recommended that SEA and WSDOT develop a programmatic agreement (PA) to ensure that cultural resources are assessed on

these parcels prior to initiation of construction. Accordingly, the project team is preparing a PA pursuant to the requirements of Section 106 of the NHPA. In addition, in the event that any unanticipated historic or cultural properties, archaeological sites, human remains, funerary items, or assorted artifacts are discovered during the proposed construction activities, the Port would be required to cease work and notify the SHPO, SEA, WSDOT, interested federally-recognized Tribes, and consulting parties, if any, in order to coordinate as appropriate to protect those resources.

Fish, Wildlife, and Vegetation

The proposed project is not expected to result in any adverse impacts to federally-listed threatened or endangered species or critical habitats. On August 28, 2008, SEA and WSDOT submitted a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service requesting a concurrence with this determination.

Construction of the proposed crossing at Crab Creek for Alternative 1A would impact a substantially smaller area than construction of the proposed crossing at Parker Horn for Segment 1 because Crab Creek is less than half as wide as Parker Horn. Alternative 1A would therefore have fewer impacts on biological resources.

The proposed project does have the potential to adversely affect the following state priority species: bald eagles, burrowing owls, Yuma myotis, Townsend's big-eared bat, and northern leopard frog. However, through design measures and the implementation of mitigation measures recommended by SEA and WSDOT, these impacts would be minimized or avoided.

Hazardous Materials

Based on several screening criteria, 19 hazardous materials sites were found within the study area. Of these 19 sites, 13 were determined to be at low risk, four were determined to be at moderate risk, and two were determined to be at high risk of being disturbed by the proposed construction activities. To mitigate or avoid such risks, SEA and WSDOT have incorporated measures into the mitigation, including consultation and coordination with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 10 Office and the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) to ensure that appropriate investigation and mitigation are conducted prior to finalizing design plans and construction specifications. In addition, to minimize any impacts associated with accidental spills of hazardous materials, the preparation of a Spill Prevention, Control and Countermeasures Plan and an emergency response plan would be required.

Land Use

Construction of the proposed project would not have significant land use impacts. Although the route would cross existing farmland, there is no prime or unique farmland and the land is zoned primarily for industrial use. In

addition, most of the land is designated for industrial development. The proposed project would require between 93 and 100 acres of right of way, depending on the alternative selected. This includes approximately 55 acres for Segment 1 or Alternative 1A and approximately 38 acres for Segment 2 or 45 acres for Alternative 2A. One business would need to be relocated; however, no residences would be acquired and no residents would be displaced. To mitigate or avoid land use impacts, the Port would be required to negotiate with any landowners whose property would be affected or whose land access would be severed. In addition, the Port would be required to abide by all requirements of the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970.

Social Elements and Environmental Justice

Along Segments 1 and 2, the proposed project would not divide or separate any community or population groups. Along Segment 3, the existing rail line serves as a physical barrier between the Longview neighborhood and Longview Elementary School. Impacts along Segment 3 would be limited because the rail line already exists in this location, and because the rail traffic is expected to be low (two trains per day, one round trip) for the foreseeable future. SEA and WSDOT have included mitigation measures in the EA to address safety concerns, including the following measures: coordination with the Longview Elementary School, the City of Moses Lake, and community organizations to ensure that railroad safety programs (such as Operation Lifesaver) and other measures are implemented.

Grant County and the City of Moses Lake have greater minority and low-income populations than Washington State as a whole. Some of these populations are located within the study area for Segment 3. Because the rail line in Segment 3 already exists, and because the rail traffic is expected to be low (two trains per day, one round trip) for the foreseeable future, the proposed project would not have a high or disproportionate adverse effect on these populations.

Traffic

The Build Alternative would require seven new at-grade crossings of public roads and would include the upgrade of two existing crossings. Accordingly, the Port would be required to install the necessary signs, lighting, and safety warnings for all at-grade crossings. SEA and WSDOT have also incorporated mitigation measures for the proposed construction period to ensure minimal disruption to traffic along public roadways. The proposed rail operations would not be expected to cause significant traffic delays or accident impacts due to the low traffic levels expected on the route.

Water Resources

Segment 1 would cross six irrigation canals and two drainage ditches. The Port would be required to install culverts or bridges or otherwise assure that irrigation and drainage water would not be affected.

The proposed project would build a bridge across Parker Horn for Segment 1 or across Crab Creek for Alternative 1A. The bridge would be designed to ensure that stormwater did not enter the water body. Specific design and construction measures would prevent impacts to the water during bridge construction.

Construction could result in sediments being washed into waterways. To avoid or minimize impacts to water resources, best management practices and other mitigation measures would be implemented to control erosion, sedimentation, and release of any contaminants during construction and operation of the proposed project.

The Port would be required to coordinate with federal, state, and local agencies to obtain all necessary permits for work in and around water resources, including Clean Water Act permit applications to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Ecology, and the Port would also be required to comply with local agency requirements mandated by Washington State's Growth Management Act and the Shoreline Management Act.

Wetlands

Wetlands are found along Segment 1 and Alternative 1A on either side of Parker Horn and Crab Creek. Construction of Segment 1 across Parker Horn would have a direct adverse impact on 3.02 acres of Category 3 wetlands, and would have indirect adverse impacts, such as fragmentation or shading, on an additional 3.25 acres of wetlands within 50 feet of the proposed track, for a total impact area of 6.27 acres. Construction of Alternative 1A across Crab Creek would have direct adverse impacts on approximately 2.14 acres of Category 3 wetlands, and would have indirect adverse impacts on approximately 2.514 acres of wetlands within 50 feet of the proposed track, for a total impact area of 4.654 acres.

Accordingly, to mitigate impacts on wetlands, SEA and WSDOT have included measures in the EA, such as the preparation of a Wetland Mitigation Plan that describes measures to compensate for wetlands affected directly or indirectly by the proposed project.

Conclusion

The proposed project would provide new rail service to the northern part of the City of Moses Lake and to the south and east of GCIA to lands that have been designated for industrial development. Implementing the proposed project

would expand railroad service and add to the existing transportation network. According to project stakeholders,⁹ the project would help attract new businesses to the area and contribute to improving the local economy.

During the scoping process, SEA and WSDOT solicited comments from federal, state, and local agencies; Tribes; and the public. Comments received during the scoping process are addressed in the EA and were considered in the development of mitigation measures.

Under the No Build Alternative, the proposed project would not be constructed and rail service would continue on the existing CBRW system. In addition, under this alternative there would be no potential for rail service to lands designated for industrial development in the northern part of the City of Moses Lake or to the south or eastern part of the GCIA.

Based on available information from all sources to date, SEA and WSDOT preliminarily conclude that, as currently proposed, the construction, acquisition and operation of approximately 11.5 miles of rail line in Grant County (the Build Alternative) would not significantly affect the quality of the natural or human environment provided that all the recommended mitigation measures, as set forth in the EA, are implemented. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary in this proceeding.

How can I comment on the Northern Columbia Basin Railroad Project?

SEA and WSDOT invite comments on all aspects of the EA, including suggestions for additional mitigation measures. SEA will consider all comments received in response to the EA in making its final recommendations to the STB. The STB will consider the entire environmental record, SEA's final recommendations and the environmental comments in making its final decision in this proceeding.

All comments must be postmarked by **December 8, 2008**. Please send written comments (one original and two copies) to either SEA or WSDOT:

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⁹ Project stakeholders include existing and potential CBRW customers, CBRW and BNSF Railway Company, the ASPI Group, the Port of Moses Lake, the Moses Lake Chamber of Commerce, and the Grant County Economic Development Council. Please see Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the stakeholders.

Written comments may also be filed electronically on the STB's website: <http://www.stb.dot.gov/stb/efilings.nsf>. At this site, click on "Environmental Comments" to be directed to an electronic comment form. Please reference STB Finance Docket No. 34936 in all correspondence.

A **Public Open House** is scheduled to be held on **November 20, 2008**, from 4:00 – 7:00 P.M. Pacific Standard Time, at the Grant County International Airport located at 7810 Andrews Street, NE, Moses Lake, Washington, and comments may also be submitted at that meeting.

**Exhibit ES.3
Comparison of Alternatives**

	Public Alternatives		Build Alternative				No Build Alternative
	Segment 1		Segment 2		Segment 3		
	July	October	Segment 1	Alternative 1A	Segment 2	Alternative 2A	
Distance of line in miles	9.7	7.0	4.5	4.5	3.1	3.5	3.0
Right of way acquisitions/relocations	Affected parcels: 24 Relocations: unknown Acres of right of way required: 58	Affected parcels: 24 Relocations: unknown Acres of right of way required: 58	Affected parcels: 15 Relocations: 1 business / 0 residences Acres of right of way required: 55	Affected parcels: 4 Relocations: 1 business / 0 residences Acres of right of way required: 55	Affected parcels: 16 Relocations: none Acres of right of way required: 38	Affected parcels: 7 Relocations: none Acres of right of way required: 45	The Port would purchase the existing railroad. No additional land would be required
Acres of wetlands within the 100 foot right of way	0.9 acres through Crab Creek, including crossing Gloyd Seeps Wildlife Area	4.8 acres through Crab Creek, including crossing Gloyd Seeps Wildlife Area	6.27 acres	4.654 acres	No impact	No impact	No impact
Acres of encroachment into the Gloyd Seeps Wildlife Area	7.2	10.5	No impact	No impact	No impact	No impact	No impact
Number of water crossings	6	5	7	7	No impact	No impact	No impact
Number of public road crossings	12	10	3	3	1	1	No impact
Meets the Purpose and Need	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
							No

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