

Greater Northwest Rail Policy Recommendations

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Endorsed by

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Improved rail transportation is a solution to both transportation equity and climate challenges.¹ Investment in rail provides benefits such as jobs, equitable access, improved mobility, health and safety of railway workers and the public, reduced greenhouse gas emissions and pollution, reduced highway infrastructure damage and congestion.

Our Legislatures need to recognize the importance of a robust rail transportation appropriation that positions the Greater Northwest to leverage grant opportunities such as offered by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act given that most federal grant opportunities require matching funds. The states and provinces in our region must be proactive in developing project plans that are ready for construction while funding is still available.

We support Washington and Oregon's Governors and our respective Legislatures' commitments to clean transportation. However, statistics show that neither state is on track to fully achieve its climate goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by almost 50% by 2030.^{2 3} Emissions

¹ Andreas Hoffrichter, *Rail travel is cleaner than driving or flying, but will Americans buy in?*
<https://theconversation.com/rail-travel-is-cleaner-than-driving-or-flying-but-will-americans-buy-in-112128>

² Environmental Defense Fund, *Turning Climate Commitments into Results*, December 2020, p.56;
Turning Washington State's Climate Commitments into Results, Fact Sheet, April 2021.
<https://www.edf.org/sites/default/files/documents/Turning%20Washington%20State%27s%20Climate%20Commitments%20into%20Results.pdf>

³ Washington State Department of Ecology, *2018 Greenhouse Gas Data*
<https://ecology.wa.gov/Air-Climate/Climate-change/Tracking-greenhouse-gases/2018-Data>

should be decreasing by now and will need to be cut by almost half by 2030, if warming is to be limited to 1.5°C. Rail must be the backbone of our surface transportation network because of its energy efficiency, low carbon emissions, electrification potential, and reduction in vehicle miles traveled.

In March 2020 the Governor of Oregon signed Oregon Executive Order 20-04⁴ setting goals for State of Oregon agencies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to at least 45 percent below 1990 emission levels by 2035, and at least 80% by 2050. Neither state is on track to meet defined greenhouse gas reductions.

The following specific steps must be taken in our region in order to rapidly build a regional rail network that will help achieve our transportation climate goals within this decade.

Update the *Amtrak Cascades* Long Range Plan

Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has been instructed by the Legislature to develop a Service Development Plan (SDP) for the *Amtrak Cascades*.⁵ In order to leverage prior state investments⁶, and realize superior return on investment from future new train sets, the WA Legislature needs to ensure that the SDP includes service goals commensurate with those contained in the “Long-Range Plan for *Amtrak Cascades*” (2006)⁷:

- Seattle-Portland travel time of 2 hours 30 minutes,
- Seattle-Vancouver BC travel time of 2 hours 45 minutes,
- Same number of current stops,
- Maximum headway 1 hour, clock-face schedules,
- Minimum service day 6 am until 8 pm first and last departures from endpoints.

WSDOT must expedite completion of the SDP with ambitious service goals as above to be positioned to acquire federal funding for rail improvements in Washington state that will help meet our climate goals.

Oregon has adopted similar objectives for improving frequency and reducing trip time.⁸

⁴ State of Oregon Executive Order 20-04 https://www.oregon.gov/gov/eo/eo_20-04.pdf

⁵ Substitute Senate Bill 5165, 2021 Regular Session, *Transportation Budget*, Section 222. <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2021-22/Pdf/Bills/Senate%20Passed%20Legislature/5165-S.PL.pdf?q=20220116150634>

⁶ U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Railroad Administration, *Service Development planning for Intercity passenger Rail*, (Peter Schwartz:2015) <https://railroads.dot.gov/elibrary/service-development-planning-intercity-passenger-rail>

⁷ https://www.dropbox.com/sh/gvg4xjcx3hfjk3x/AACBXs6JwCZpLCm0MM8_IWHJa?dl=0

⁸ *Oregon State Rail Plan Amended August 13, 2020* <https://www.oregon.gov/odot/Planning/Documents/Oregon%20State%20Rail%20Plan%202020.pdf>

Implement East/West Passenger Rail Service

Further immediate actions are needed to connect Washington's underserved cities from East to West via Burlington Northern Santa Fe Stampede Pass tracks with an implementation timeline that meets our state's climate goals. It is especially important that this service not be defined by the endpoints of Seattle and Spokane, but rather as an essential statewide corridor providing access to/from the national network for underserved, burgeoning, and diverse population centers in Kittitas county, Yakima county, the Yakama Nation, and Benton/Franklin counties.⁹

Action is also needed in Oregon to restore East-West passenger rail service in Oregon to Hood River, The Dalles, Hermiston, Pendleton, La Grande, Baker City, Ontario, Boise and beyond.

Induce Demand for Rail (not Roads)

To achieve as much mode-shift of passenger and freight transportation as possible from roads to rail, we must plan passenger rail service based on a high ridership scenario. This means that our infrastructure must support fast, frequent, reliable service for passengers and shippers. This is especially important in anticipation of continuing population increases in our region.^{10 11} In order to dramatically reduce vehicle miles traveled, passenger rail service should be as attractive as possible – frequent, reliable, with high speed internet, abundant sustainable transit and multi-modal connections at stations, healthy menu, comfortable seating, and bike racks.

Electrify Railroads

Electrification of regional rail lines, drayage, rail yards, and ports is needed to reduce carbon emissions and local air pollution impacts. Mode shift of people and freight from roads to rail has an advantage over electric cars and trucks because rail can be electrified by multiple means, including overhead power lines which reduce the extraction and waste stream impacts related to batteries. The combination of mode shift from roads to rail, and electrification of rail, is the most effective path to transportation decarbonization and improved health for workers and communities living near transportation corridors and hubs.

Determine Practical Applications of High-Speed Rail

High-Speed Rail (HSR), as defined by the Federal Railroad Administration, refers to a wide range of passenger rail options beginning with speeds of 90 miles per hour.¹² HSR projects with

⁹ Washington State Joint Transportation Committee, *Feasibility of an East-West Intercity Passenger Rail System for Washington State* (Steer: Final Report July 2020).
https://leg.wa.gov/JTC/Documents/Studies/East%20West%20Rail/EastWestRail_FinalReportJune2020.pdf;

¹⁰ Puget Sound Regional Council, *Region planning for 1.8 million more people by 2050*, January 2018.
<https://www.psrc.org/whats-happening/blog/region-planning-18-million-more-people-2050>.

¹¹ Rachael Ramirez, *Climate change refugees who fled to Northwest still face impacts* (CNN:July 2021).
<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/climate-change-refugees-who-fled-to-northwest-still-face-impacts/ar-AALVYhT>

¹² U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Railroad Administration, *Vision for High-Speed Rail in America*, April 2009, p. 2.

a speed of over 160 mph require land acquisition for new rights-of-way¹³ and potentially decades to complete. Therefore, it is important to differentiate between HSR projects that can provide an effective climate solution and other benefits within this decade, and those that cannot.

As we plan for a more effective, beneficial surface transportation system, we must prioritize expansion and improvement of our existing rail corridors and determine where various applications of HSR may be appropriate. Applications must be consistent with the goals of rapidly reducing vehicle miles traveled and greenhouse gas emissions.

Support Freight Rail

Private freight rail companies have legal “common carrier” obligations, including obligations to Amtrak, that need to be enforced.¹⁴ Expanding and improving existing passenger lines is beneficial for freight rail operating on the same corridors, ensuring coordinated scheduling and providing shippers more options to decrease the number of long-haul trucks on highways. Although most freight rail is privately owned in the United States, the public benefits from safe, efficient, affordable freight rail service.

https://railroads.dot.gov/sites/fra.dot.gov/files/fra_net/16536/2009_VISION%20FOR%20HIGH%20-%20SPEED%20RAIL%20IN%20AMERICA.PDF

¹³ 49 CFR 238

¹⁴ Stas Margaronis, *American Journal of Transportation: Surface Transportation Board Chair Oberman says US railroads reduced service, raised rates and derived \$191 billion in dividends and buybacks since 2010*, September 2021.
<https://ajot.com/insights/full/ai-stbs-oberman-says-u.s-railroads-reduced-service-raised-rates-and-derived-191-billion-in-dividends-and-buybacks-since-2010>