

Chapter 12

Rail Plan

This chapter presents a discussion of rail transportation in rural Josephine County including goals and objectives, an assessment of consistency with other plans and programs including the *Oregon Rail Plan*, a discussion of needs and strategy development, and a summary of policies and recommendations. The chapter is divided into two primary sections. The first is devoted to freight rail and the second presents a summary of the status of passenger rail service in Southern Oregon.

Freight Rail

Overview

As noted in Chapter 3, freight rail in Josephine County is provided by the Central Oregon and Pacific Railroad (CORP), the state's second largest short line railroad. CORP operates on 391 route miles and 8 miles of trackage rights within the state. The route generally follows an alignment build in the 1880s, extending from Weed, California north to Springfield, Oregon and then west to the Oregon Coast, where it turns south and continues through Coos Bay to its terminus in Coquille. With lumber and freight being the primary commodities carried, the CORP line handles between 1 and 5 million tons of cargo each year. Recent CORP service increases have led to significant growth in the number of cars available to carry freight. However, even with this growth the CORP line is underutilized in Josephine County due to constraints created by grades, tunnel dimensions, train speeds, and other factors.

In Josephine County, the CORP line runs generally west of and parallel to I-5 from the Josephine/Douglas County line before entering the Rogue Valley and continuing on to Medford. Although the Josephine County segment of CORP is used less than the segments leading to the coast and serving Medford, the PML Forest Products intermodal rail/truck reload facility in Grants Pass does serve all of southern Oregon. Freight that is carried on the CORP line through Josephine County to the intermodal facility and other stops is freight that does not travel by truck on the County roadway system. Maintaining the availability of freight rail service thus helps reduce the demand on the roads that would otherwise carry the equivalent amount of truck traffic, reducing maintenance costs and postponing the need for roadway improvements to accommodate growing truck traffic.

Consistency with Other Plans and Policies

The 2001 *Oregon Rail Plan* is of particular importance to the operation and long-term management and improvement of freight rail service in rural Josephine County. The *Oregon Rail Plan* identifies several policies applicable to freight rail service in the County, particularly within the Grants Pass area. The policies include:

- Providing a Level of Service C or better on Oregon highways serving intermodal facilities during off-peak periods (applies to Interstate 5 and US 199)
- Providing high quality highway access to terminal and reload facilities for transfers from truck to rail for long haul movement of freight

The *Rail Plan* also identifies actions that can be taken by local governments to mitigate conflicts between rail and vehicular traffic, and to improve access to freight facilities. For the TSP these actions affect rural Josephine County mainly where CORP trackage passes through Merlin. They include:

- Avoid or minimize the number of future railroad at-grade crossings when new streets are planned for growing portions of the community
- Avoid creating intersections of major streets and railroads where possible
- Locate new parallel streets at least 500 feet from the railroad to allow for industrial development between the tracks and the highway
- Plan community development, particularly residential uses, with sensitivity to rail noise and other potential conflicts

The *Josephine County Comprehensive Plan* (2000) contains goals and policies intended to support rail transportation within and through the County. Goal 4 focuses on developing facilities and services that are needed and affordable to County residents. A supporting policy encourages the development of a master plan (coordinated with City, State and Federal agencies) for bridges and roads in Josephine County (this would also include at-grade road/rail crossings). Relating to passenger rail, another policy related to Goal 4 states that *“the physically handicapped and transportation disadvantaged shall be considered in the design of transportation facilities and alternative transportation modes”*.

The *Grants Pass Urban Area Master Transportation Plan* includes several goals and policies specifically directed at enhancing rail transportation. While not specifically applicable to the rural portions of Josephine County, they do offer guidance for the development of policies for the *Rural TSP*. Goal 1 encourages the City of Grants Pass, Josephine County and ODOT to *“Provide a Comprehensive Transportation System”*. This goal is supported by objectives that encourage completion of the transportation system. The supporting policy applicable to rail transportation focuses on *“maintaining adequate levels of service and facilities for freight movement”*. Goal 1 also has an objective of providing a multi-modal transportation system. Policy 1.5.1 supports this objective by providing transportation choices for the movement of people and goods.

Needs

As discussed in Chapter 3, local rail (specifically CORP) faces several infrastructure challenges requiring major investment. The existing CORP line in Josephine County is characterized by steep grades and tight turning radii that limit operating speeds to about 25 or 35 miles per hour. Forty-three miles of track are limited to an operating speed of only 10 miles per hour. Apart from the ongoing need for track repair and improvements, system improvements are needed to allow short rails to continue serving the larger railroad companies. As larger railroads increase the size of their railroad cars, short lines need to make improvements to handle the larger cars from these companies. Tunnels likewise need to be modified to accommodate the increased height and lengths of containers and cars. Until this is done, local rail cannot carry “piggyback” truck trailers or containers. Systemwide, CORP has identified over \$6 million in line, tie, and roadbed improvement and upgrade needs.

CORP is undertaking an aggressive maintenance program in an attempt to increase overall operating speeds to 25 miles per hour and to ease some of the height restrictions currently in place on the line. Loan guarantees by the Federal Railroad Administration are being sought to help fund maintenance needs.

While Josephine County has no direct control over the operation or improvement of the CORP’s rail trackage and right-of-way, the County is impacted by the need for safe rail crossings on its roadway system. Table 12-1 lists the 11 major rail crossings (all involving CORP trackage) with gates, traffic control and/or other warning devices in rural Josephine County and includes a description of the features at each crossing and an general assessment of crossing condition.

**Table 12-1
Major Freight Rail Crossings in Rural Josephine County**

Roadway	Railroad Crossed	Street Classification¹	Type of Crossing	Warning Devices	Crossing Condition	Other Comments
Lower Wolf Creek Road	CORP	Rural Minor Collector	Grade-separated	None	N/A	
Leland Road	CORP	Rural Minor Collector	At-grade	Stop sign, X bars	Good	
Hugo Road	CORP	Rural Minor Collector	At-grade	Stop sign, X bars	Fair	
Three Pines Road	CORP	Rural Minor Collector	At-grade	X bars with flashers, pvmt. mark.	Fair - Good	In middle of lower speed S-curve with limited sight distance
Pleasant Valley Road	CORP	Rural Major Collector	At-grade	Gates and flashers	Good	Multiple tracks
Merlin-Galice Road	CORP	Rural Major Collector	At-grade	Gates and flashers	Very good	Advance warning flashers WB, EB is 40 mph and urban
Merlin Landfill Road	CORP	Rural Residential	At-grade	Stop sign, X bars	Poor - Fair	Serves landfill only
Camp Joy Road	CORP	Rural Minor Collector	At-grade	Gates and flashers	Good	Close spacing to Sierra Way
Plumtree Lane/ Pine Crest Drive	CORP	Rural Minor Collector	At-grade	Gates and flashers	Good	Advance warning flashers, limited SB sight distance
Averill Drive	CORP	Rural Residential	At-grade	Stop sign, X bars	Good	Dead end road – serves local residential traffic, close spacing to Foothill Blvd.
Pearce Park Road	CORP	Rural Residential	At-grade	Gates and flashers	Fair (timber)	Access road to County park only

¹ Street classification in this table refers to categories that existed prior to adoption of the *Rural TSP*.

Note: CORP means Central Oregon and Pacific Railroad

Source: CORP administrative office, March 2003 and field reconnaissance.

Three deficiencies of note are identified in the table above:

- Three Pines Road near the intersection with Hugo Road – this crossing location is situated in the middle of a relatively low speed S-curve and is controlled by a stop sign, with advance warning signage. Sight distance approaching this crossing is limited but lower speeds, a posted stop at the crossing, and the visual clear zone that has been established around the crossing should be sufficient to protect motorists. Traffic volumes at this relatively isolated location are light. No improvement is recommended at this time.
- Merlin Landfill Road – this minor crossing location is controlled by a stop sign with advance warning signage. Pavement is rutted and broken at the tracks, but some useful life remains. Speeds at the crossing are very slow and sight distance appears to be adequate from the stop bars. Use of this crossing is limited to vehicles visiting the County landfill and improvement recommendations should be subject to pavement evaluation over the next five years.
- Plumtree Lane/Pine Crest Drive – This crossing location carries a higher volume of traffic at significantly higher speeds than the two crossings mentioned above. Currently the crossing location is identified by advance warning flashers, and is protected by gates and flashers.

Northbound sight distance approaching the crossing is adequate for the speed of traffic. Southbound sight distance is restricted. The County proposes to realign the road thus improving southbound sight distance at this crossing.

As noted in the discussion of policies and programs above, new railroad crossings are discouraged by policy. Creating a new public crossing or making any changes to an existing public railroad crossing requires interaction with the affected railroad public authority and ODOT's Rail Crossing Safety Section. ODOT Rail Division's regulatory responsibility includes any part of the crossing intersection (where steel meets asphalt) and the approaches (railroad and roadway) to the crossing. ODOT Rail Division's jurisdiction over the roadway approach extends to the safe stopping distance based on the posted speed of vehicles approaching the railroad crossing. Modifying an existing rail crossing by adding sidewalks, bicycle lanes, additional traffic lanes, etc., also requires a crossing application to be filed by the party initiating the modification and processed by the Rail Division.

Passenger Rail

Overview

Passenger rail is currently not provided in Josephine County. Passenger rail connections are provided via intercity bus service on Greyhound from Grants Pass to the Amtrak stations in Eugene and Klamath Falls. North/south passenger rail service is provided by the Amtrak Coast Starlight route in the California-Oregon-Washington corridor. The Coast Starlight provides one northbound and one southbound train each day as it passes through Klamath Falls and Eugene. Amtrak also provides four trips per day between Portland and Seattle on its Cascades route. Intercity bus connections to the train service in Portland are available via Greyhound bus lines. Three trips are provided each day in both northbound and southbound directions.

The intercity passenger rail line in Oregon is part of the federally designated Pacific Northwest High Speed Rail Corridor that connects Eugene, Oregon with destinations in Washington State and with Vancouver, B.C. The federal designation gives this route preference for Federal Railroad Administration funding to develop advanced technology passenger train service. The States of Oregon and Washington, in cooperation with the Province of British Columbia, are working together to incrementally improve passenger train operations in the corridor. The Oregon Department of Transportation is developing Oregon's portion of the corridor, with the long-range goal of providing safe service at speeds of more than 100 miles per hour in rural areas. The 2001 *Oregon Rail Plan* provides further guidance on the development of future passenger rail service along the I-5 corridor and elsewhere in the state. Key elements of this plan as they pertain to rural Josephine County are described below.

Consistency with Other Plans and Policies

As with freight rail, the provision of passenger rail service to Josephine County is strongly influenced by the policies and recommendations of the *Oregon Rail Plan*, the *Josephine County Comprehensive Plan* and the *Grants Pass Urban Area Master Transportation Plan* as discussed above. In addition, the passenger rail component of the TSP is also influenced by the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the recently completed *Southern Oregon Commuter Rail Study* as discussed below.

Oregon Rail Plan

The 2001 *Oregon Rail Plan* updates the 1992 *Oregon Rail Passenger Policy and Plan*. The 1992 *Passenger Policy and Plan* proposed an extension of passenger rail service from Eugene to Roseburg as a "Second Stage" expansion beyond the current Eugene to Portland high speed service. The "Third Stage" of service expansion would extend passenger rail service further south to Medford. Second Stage package improvements were estimated at \$32 million and Third Stage package improvements were estimated at

\$275 million due to the extensive track upgrades that would be required through the mountainous terrain south of Roseburg.

The *Oregon Rail Passenger Policy and Plan* proposed two daily round trip passenger runs from Medford to Portland in the Third Stage with travel times of six to eight hours, depending upon the schedule ultimately adopted. There is no mention in the *Passenger Policy and Plan* of service south of Medford, to connect with Ashland or cities in California. Annual operating and maintenance costs for the Eugene to Medford service were estimated to be \$15.8 million for the Third Stage with projected ridership for the entire segment south of Eugene being less than 500 passengers per day.

The *Oregon Rail Passenger Policy and Plan* did not propose an implementation schedule for any passenger rail expansion stages. Passenger rail service between Eugene and Medford would be constrained by a twisting track alignment, steep grades, and slow speeds. Given the need for significant trackway improvements, coupled with the competition for scarce resources on a statewide basis, it is not clear whether the Third Stage proposal from the *Passenger Policy and Plan* would be implemented within the 20-year planning horizon for the *Josephine County Rural TSP*. It is conceivable that passenger rail service might not be available until after 2023 in the county.

Even if Third Stage passenger rail service is available by the end of the planning period, reductions in traffic on the street and highway system are expected to be minimal. Traffic to and from a passenger terminal would be minor and would be unlikely to cause or contribute to any significant congestion. Likewise, intercity traffic volumes on I-5 should be unaffected by the minor diversion from auto to train travel.

The need for passenger rail service between Ashland and Grants Pass, then on to Portland as proposed in the Third Stage of the *Oregon Rail Passenger Policy and Plan* was further explored in the recently completed *Southern Oregon Commuter Rail Study*. Study objectives included both tourism enhancement, as well as improved connections to train service for intercity and/or commuter travel. This study and its key findings are discussed below.

Southern Oregon Commuter Rail Study

The 1999 session of the Oregon Legislature instructed the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to examine the potential for frequent local passenger service (commuter rail) between Grants Pass and Ashland, a distance of approximately 45 miles. This service was proposed to operate on trackage owned by the Central Oregon and Pacific Railroad (CORP). The majority of this trackage is in Federal Railroad Administration Class I and Class II conditions permitting top passenger train speeds of 15 and 30 mph. Freight train service on this line includes several local switchers, as well as through trains providing service to the north through Glendale to Roseburg and connection to CORP trackage in California to the south.

The *Southern Oregon Commuter Rail Study* was completed in 2001 as a joint effort of ODOT's Rail Division, the Rogue Valley Transportation District (RVTD), and the Rogue Valley Metropolitan Planning Organization (RVMPO). The overall goal of the study was to define costs, benefits and impacts of the project so that regional partners could compare implementation of this service with other regional transportation priorities. Key findings include:

- With substantial upgrading of the track and signal system, the rail line connecting Grants Pass with seven Rogue Valley communities is well suited to serve as the backbone of an effective commuter transportation system for the region.

- With top speeds of up to 60 miles per hour, commuter trains can travel the 45-mile corridor from Ashland to Grants Pass in about 80 minutes, making several intermediate stops.
- The estimated costs for upgrading the rail infrastructure (including track, ties, switches, a new 1.5-mile track through the Medford Yard, new sidings, and a modern train movement signaling system), making at-grade crossing safety improvements, acquiring passenger equipment, and operating the system at three potential levels of service are summarized in the table below.

Table 12-2
Southern Oregon Commuter Rail Service
Estimated System Capital Expenditures and Operating Costs

Level of Service*	Capital Expenditures	Annual Operating Costs
Level 1	\$42,737,000	\$3,977,000
Level 2	\$70,410,000	\$4,552,000
Level 3	\$96,671,000	\$8,077,000

Source: Southern Oregon Rail Study, ODOT, 2001

* Levels of Service Explained:

- Level 1: Full service (6 round trips in the morning and 6 in the evening) between Ashland and Central Point
- Level 2: Level 1, plus limited service (2 round trips in the morning and 2 in the evening) between Central Point and Grants Pass
- Level 3: Full service (6 round trips in the morning and 6 in the evening) between Ashland and Grants Pass

Ridership estimates range from a low of 475 passenger per day (based on Level 1 service) to a high of 850 per day (when the service is extended to Grants Pass). Daily ridership estimates are for new riders only as transfer of existing riders from public transit is not included in the total. The study also briefly explored the possibility of seasonal excursion service over the line during times when commuter trains are not operating.

In summary, the study found no fatal flaws to prevent operating a commuter service over the existing railroad line between Ashland and Grants Pass. While only a field environmental review has been made to date, it is very unlikely that a full EIS would alter this conclusion. If the study moves beyond the preliminary investigation stage, the main issues to be addressed will likely involve financing, capital costs, and operating subsidies.

In addition to its potential for commuter rail, the rail line between Ashland and Grants Pass is well situated to attract tourist travel. Stations at each end of the line are conveniently located with respect to Interstate 5, and the line itself runs through very scenic areas. Ashland alone attracts over 350,000 visitors a year, many of whom visit the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. A daytime tourist train based in Ashland would be a major draw for people planning to attend a drama production later in the day.

By sharing equipment and facilities, a profitable tourist rail operation could help reduce the subsidy required to support a commuter rail operation. Thus, a well-designed system of commuter and tourist rail operations could produce benefits for each and for the County as a whole.

Action Plan

Josephine County has no direct responsibility for the development, operations or maintenance of the Central Oregon and Pacific Railroad or for the provision of freight or commuter rail service in the region. However, there are specific actions that the County can take to ensure safety around existing rail trackage,

general land use compatibility with the existing freight rail corridor, and support for potential commuter rail service in the future. The TSP includes two goals and supporting policies that pertain directly to rail service or indirectly by supporting the coordinated planning that will be essential to any rail service improvements.

Draft Rail Transportation Goals and Objectives

Draft goals and supporting objectives pertinent to rail transportation operation and improvement are listed below (numbers reflect the numbering of the complete list of goals and objectives).

Goal 1: Improve safety for all transportation modes.

- *Objective 1 – ensure the transportation system is planned to maximize safety.*

Goal 2: Provide for a transportation system that is accessible, efficient and practical.

- *Objective 1 - Increase mobility and access options for Josephine County citizens.*
- *Objective 2 - Facilitate movement of goods into and out of the County.*
- *Objective 3 - Enhance freight mobility (by rail, truck and air) and intermodal transfer.*
- *Objective 4 - Address changing characteristics of trucking, aviation and rail industries.*

Goals 3: Provide sufficient capacity within the transportation system to accommodate future demand.

- *Objective 1 – Satisfy Transportation Planning Rule requirements for system capacity and for encouraging the use of alternative modes of transportation.*
- *Objective 2 – Encourage alternative modes of transportation by providing for a choice in modes.*

Goal 7: Ensure an effective strategy for intergovernmental coordination in transportation planning.

- *Objective 1 - Maintain coordination with multiple jurisdictions.*
- *Objective 2 - Provide compatible design standards for all modes of transportation.*
- *Objective 3 - Work to achieve a balance between business and economic development and preservation of the functional capacity of the transportation system when coordinating transportation planning with other jurisdictions.*

Policies and Recommendations

To carry out the freight and passenger rail-related goals and objectives identified above, more detailed policies and specific improvement recommendations have been developed. These policies and recommendations are listed below.

Policy 12-A: Josephine County shall work cooperatively with CORP and ODOT to secure funding and implement improvements to enhance the safety and viability of rail transportation in the County.

- **Recommendation 12-A (1):** Support CORP and ODOT in securing state and/or federal grants to improve existing rail trackage and service.
- **Recommendation 12-A (2):** Pursue federal and state grants to improve existing rail crossings, particularly the Pine Crest Drive/Plumtree Lane crossing, where restricted sight distance is a concern.
- **Recommendation 12-A (3):** Provide for regular and ongoing inspection, maintenance and repair of streets at existing at-grade crossings.
- **Recommendation 12-A (4):** Support efforts to develop additional rail reload or intermodal facilities if and when market forces should dictate the need.

- **Recommendation 12-A (5):** Require any new roadways in areas served by rail to be located at least 500 feet away from the rail line, to allow industrial development between the tracks and the roadway.
- **Recommendation 12-A (6):** Eliminate or consolidate existing rail crossings as feasible.
- **Recommendation 12-A (7):** Avoid or minimize the number of new at-grade railroad crossings created by new roads crossing existing rail lines.

Policy 12-B: Josephine County shall consider development of intercity passenger rail service in conjunction with ODOT and Jackson County.