

WEEKLY RAIL REVIEW

FOR THE WEEK ENDING SAT, FEBRUARY 26, 2005

BY DAVE MEARS

(Editor's Note: The expression "ffd" at the end of a news item represents "for further details" and suggests a reference source for further related information.)

THE WEEK'S TOP RAIL AND TRANSIT NEWS (in chronological order):

(SUN) The nation of Sri Lanka operated a ceremonial first train over the rail line earlier wrecked by the great tsunami wave last December 26. The train operated over the recently rebuilt line from Sri Lanka's capital of Columbo to the village of Peraliya, where a memorial service was then held for those killed near that location when the wave swept over a passenger train on the line. Between 800 and 900 passengers on that train were killed by the wave, making it one of the single highest railway accident death tolls ever. (ffd: wire services)

(SUN) Union Pacific railroad police discovered 37 illegal immigrants hiding in a box car near Fort Worth, TX. A UP spokesman said that all the illegals were apparently in good physical condition and may have boarded the box car in or near El Paso. The spokesman added that the illegals were being turned over to the U.S. Border Patrol for repatriation to Mexico. (ffd: Fort Worth Star-Telegram)

(MON) More torrential rains in Southern California caused more washouts to Union Pacific's Coast Line, which in turn caused Amtrak to again cancel its Surfliner intercity trains north of Los Angeles to Santa Barbara and Metrolink to again cancel its commuter trains north of Moorpark to Oxnard. An Amtrak spokesman said that Surfliner service to Santa Barbara was expected to resume by the end of the week. The Amtrak spokesman added that Surfliner service north of Santa Barbara to San Luis Obispo was expected to resume on February 26 and 27 and that operation of its "Coast Starlight" train south of Oakland to Los Angeles was expected to resume on February 28 and March 1, both of these operations having been suspended due to line washouts and mudslides in mid-January. (ffd: NARP, Trains)

(MON) The Virginia Port Authority said that it would soon double its direct-to-rail capacity at its Norfolk International Terminal. The port is served by CSX and Norfolk Southern. A port spokesman said that plans call for 2 large warehouses behind Piers 1 and 2 to be torn down and replaced with up to 14 tracks for loading of containers off ships and onto rail cars. The spokesman added that direct-to-rail container shipments at the port increased from 174,241 in 2003 to 208, 574 last year. (ffd: Norfolk Virginian-Pilot)

(MON) The Alaska Railroad said that it would add first-class cars to its "Denali Star" passenger train starting June 1. The train operates between Anchorage and Fairbanks. A railroad spokesman said that the cars, each costing approximately \$3 million, were being built by Colorado Railcar and feature a dome on the upper level, a dining room on the lower level and a private outdoor viewing platform. (ffd: Trains)

(MON) The Western Maryland Scenic Railroad announced that 2005 would be the last year it operated over the former Western Maryland line from Cumberland to Frostburg. A railroad spokesman said that this was due to the high costs of having to maintain that line without state support, which the spokesman said was being ended this year by the state. The spokesman added that "the train will continue to run, but [that] this will be the final season that it travels all the way to Frostburg." (ffd: Cumberland Times-News)

(TUE) Atlanta, GA.'s Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Authority announced that it would install informational televisions in all cars of its 300-car subway fleet. The televisions will be tuned to news programming from Atlanta's ABC affiliate and will also broadcast advertising and emergency service information. Audio will be available through any FM radio, although MARTA policy requires all radios to be played with headphones. A spokesman said that the televisions, their installation and operation would be provided free of charge by New York-based media provider The Rail Network, with MARTA receiving a portion of the revenue from advertising and from on-train music channels. (ffd: wire services)

(WED) The New York City Transit Authority announced that there were 1.4 billion trips on the city subways last year, up 3 percent from the previous year and representing the highest annual ridership since 1953. The record year for subway ridership was 1947, when 2.1 billion trips were recorded. A subway spokesman attributed the ridership increase to factors including the restoration of subway service over the Manhattan Bridge, the rebuilding of the Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue stations and growing use of unlimited-ride fare cards. (ffd: New York Times)

(WED) Los Angeles, CA. commuter rail operator Metrolink said that they would temporarily ban passengers from sitting in the first 11 seats of the front car of a commuter train being pushed by a locomotive. The ban is in effect while National Transportation Safety Board and related personnel complete their investigation of the January 26 Metrolink crash in which 11 persons were killed and nearly 200 others were injured. The train on January 26 was being operated in push-mode when it struck a vehicle parked on the tracks and then derailed. Although some safety experts have suggested that locomotive-pushed trains have a greater chance of being damaged in a collision and are more likely to derail, a Metrolink spokesman cautioned that it was too early to determine whether the fact that the train was being pushed played any role in the severity of the accident. (ffd: Los Angeles Times)

(WED) Canadian Pacific announced that it would donate \$24,000 to Vancouver, BC.'s Public Library Foundation to help preserve a collection of historic CPR photographs. A CPR spokesman said that the library would use the funds to digitize more than 1,500 CPR-related images from the late 19th Century through the mid-20th Century. "When our company was made aware that the images were in a very fragile state, we made a decision to provide the necessary funds...ensuring their preservation for future generations to appreciate and utilize for research," said CPR VP Paul Clark. (ffd: CP Corp.)

(THU) The chairman of New York State's Metropolitan Transportation Authority complained that debate over air rights atop the MTA's Long Island Rail Road West Side Yard in Manhattan had overshadowed the case for MTA's 5-year capital program. New York Governor George Pataki has proposed delaying MTA planned expansion projects and spending \$2.5 billion less than the \$17.2 billion MTA says is the minimum necessary to sustain bus, subway and commuter rail operations. On its part, MTA has been at odds with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg regarding air rights atop the West Side Yard, which the city wants to secure as the site of a new stadium to lure the New York Jets football team back to New York. Said MTA Chairman Peter Kalikow, "Nobody's willing to focus on the capital plan until the stadium is resolved. That's my problem." Mr. Kalikow went on to complain that "the stadium is probably 60 percent of my time now, maybe 70 percent." (ffd: New York Times)

(THU) An Idaho state judge ordered BNSF's new locomotive refueling facility at Hauser, ID. temporarily closed, saying it threatened the aquifer that supplies the adjoining region's drinking water. Since it opened in September, the facility has twice leaked petroleum-contaminated wastewater and state officials said that there may now be a third leak. The judge stayed the closing order 24 hours so that trains enroute and scheduled to fuel at Hauser, which is just east of Spokane, WA., could be serviced. (ffd: Trains)

(THU) Los Angeles, CA.'s Metropolitan Transportation Authority voted to again consider subway lines in its planning processes. The MTA voted in 1998 to halt all new subway building, following construction problems and extreme cost overruns in building its Red Line, which is now operating. That same year, Los Angeles voters approved a ballot measure to prohibit using sales tax funds for subway construction. The MTA's new vote does not suggest any new subway lines, but calls for studying cases in which underground subway lines might prove a better alternative than building above ground. (ffd: Los Angeles Daily News)

(THU) The U.S. Surface Transportation Board announced that it would hold public hearings March 24 on challenges to railroad rates under the "stand-alone cost" methodology. An STB spokesman said that the purpose of the hearings is "not to offer a forum for the discussion of pending cases, [but rather to provide a forum for views] regarding the agency's consideration of rail-rate reasonableness challenges under the 'stand-alone cost' methodology." (ffd: AAR, STB)

(THU) The Long Island Rail Road formerly deeded its Oyster Bay, NY. rail station to the Town of Oyster Bay. A town spokesman said that the station would be restored to the way it looked in 1902, when Theodore Roosevelt was president; Roosevelt's estate, Sagamore Hill, now a national historical site, is located just outside Oyster Bay. The spokesman added that the station will be part of a town railroad museum which "will encompass the depot, the turntable that reversed steam locomotives and No. 35, the LIRR steam engine that is slowly being restored." (ffd: New York Newsday)

(FRI) Continuing its efforts to question the Bush Administration's proposed elimination of Amtrak operating subsidies, the National Association of Railroad Passengers created a new feature on its website, "DOT/OMB Amtrak Fact Check", also known as "Debunking Common Myths About Amtrak." A NARP spokesman said that the new feature is "an evolving document that refutes false or misleading statements from the [Bush] Administration" related to Amtrak. The feature may be found on the NARP website at <<http://www.narprail.org/>><http://www.narprail.org/>. (ffd: NARP)

(FRI) A spokesman for the African nation of Kenya said that it would hand the state's Kenya Railways over to a private operator by the end of the year. The Kenyan railway system is approximately 1,200 miles in length and presently employs approximately 7,000 workers. The spokesman added that a bidders conference was scheduled for March 1, with submission of technical and financial bids due on April 15. (ffd: The Standard)

(FRI) The nation of China ordered 361 specially equipped rail cars for its new rail line being built to Lhasa in Tibet. The line, which is being built at high altitudes and in harsh weather conditions, is expected to begin operation by June, 2006. A spokesman for rail car manufacturer Bombardier, which received the order, said that the cars will be equipped with enriched oxygen ventilation systems and special ultraviolet ray protection. (ffd: Bombardier Corp.)

STATS – TRAFFIC:

(THU) For the week ending February 19, U.S. rail volume totaled 32.6 billion ton-miles, up 5.8 percent from the comparable week last year. Also for the week, U.S. carload rail traffic was up 4.9 percent, up 3.7 percent in the East and up 5.8 percent in the West. Notable traffic increases included coke up 24.1 percent, metallic ores up 15.2 percent, crushed stone, sand and gravel up 13.1 percent and coal up 5.3 percent; notable traffic decreases included primary forest products down 3.6 percent and grain mill products down 2.4 percent. Also for the week, U.S. intermodal rail traffic was up 22.8 percent, Canadian carload rail traffic was up 6.4 percent, Canadian intermodal rail traffic was up 7.8 percent, Mexico's Transportacion Ferroviaria Mexicana's carload rail traffic was up 7.2 percent and TFM's intermodal rail traffic was down 1.1 percent.

For the period January 1 through February 19, U.S. rail volume totaled 215.2 billion ton-miles, up 3.2 percent from the comparable period last year. Also for the period, U.S. carload rail traffic was up 2.4 percent, U.S. intermodal rail traffic was up 10.4 percent, Canadian carload rail traffic was up 3.2 percent, Canadian intermodal rail traffic was up 3.3 percent, TFM's carload rail traffic was up 7.1 percent and TFM's intermodal rail traffic was up 18.6 percent. (ffd: AAR)

MORE STATS – "BIG 6" OPERATING PERFORMANCE:

(THU) For the week ending February 19, average train speed was 24.2 mph for BNSF, 24.6 mph for Canadian National, 24.6 mph for Canadian Pacific, 19.2 mph for CSX, 21.3 mph for Norfolk Southern and 21.4 mph for Union Pacific. Average train speed is calculated by dividing train miles by hours operated, excluding dwell time.

Also for the week ending February 19, average terminal dwell time was 9.8 hrs for BNSF, 14.6 hrs for Canadian National, 34.5 hrs for Canadian Pacific, 30.5 hrs for CSX, 25.6 hrs for Norfolk Southern and 29.4 hrs for Union Pacific. Average terminal dwell time is the average time a car is at specified terminal locations, expressed in hours. (ffd: AAR)

ACQUISITIONS, ABANDONMENTS AND ALIKE:

(MON) Shortline operator OmniTrax announced that it would lease CSX's Alabama Mineral Subdivision line. An OmniTrax spokesman said that the line would be operated by its Alabama & Tennessee River Railway subsidiary. The spokesman added that the line totals 12 miles in length, interchanging with CSX at Birmingham, AL. and with Norfolk Southern at Alabama City, AL., and will also serve the Port of Guntersville, AL. (ffd: Birmingham Business Journal, OmniTrax Corp.)

(WED) The U.S. Surface Transportation Board granted a petition filed by the Ohio Valley Railroad and the Mid-America Locomotive & Car Repair Co., and ordered the Indiana Southwestern Railway to restore 2 switches connecting the ISW and the OVR in Evansville, IN. ISW had removed the switch connections last October. (ffd: STB)

(THU) The City of Peoria, IL. filed an adverse application with the U.S. Surface Transportation Board to discontinue service by Pioneer Industrial Railway over approximately 9 miles of the Kellar Branch, between Peoria, IL. and Peoria Heights, IL. (ffd: STB)

(FRI) Union Pacific granted temporary overhead trackage rights to Burlington Northern Santa Fe over UP's line between Valley Jct., IL. and Rockview Jct., MO., totaling approximately 132 miles. The purpose of the temporary trackage rights is to allow BNSF to detour its trains onto the UP, while BNSF performs necessary track maintenance. (ffd: STB)

(FRI) Canadian National and Ontario Northland Railway jointly announced a new routing protocol. Under the agreement, CN will pay ON to haulage its traffic between North Bay, PQ. and Noranda, PQ., and between Noranda and Hearst, ON. A spokesman for the 2 railroads said that the new protocol would cut almost 850 miles off previous all-CN and joint CN-ON routings. (ffd: CN Corp., ON Corp.)

(FRI) The U.S. Surface Transportation Board granted Sierra Pacific Industries's earlier request to abandon approximately 12 miles of line between Lone, CA. and Martell, CA. (ffd: STB)

PERSONNEL CHANGES AND ALIKE:

(WED) Kansas City Southern announced the following appointments: R. Michael Chapman as SVP-Transportation; Michael Bilovesky as VP-Marketing-Agriculture & Minerals; and Thomas Campbell as AVP-Support Services. (ffd: KCS Corp.)

(WED) New York Times Reporter Walt Bogdanich received the George Polk Award for distinguished journalism. Mr. Bogdanich won the award in the "national reporting" category for his series of investigative articles beginning in Summer, 2004 concerning railroad safety and its oversight. Also winning a Polk award were 2 other New York Times reporters and the New Yorker's Seymour Hersh, the latter winning his fifth Polk award for his accounts of prisoner abuse at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison. (ffd: wire services)

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(NOTE: I would like say thanks to WRR readers who responded to my recent query concerning WRR emailings that have been returned to me "addressee unknown." Your followup information has been a great help in conclusively updating my mailing list concerning these individuals. I will have a chance shortly to personally thank those of you who responded.)

Weekly Rail Review is edited from public news sources and published weekly to those working in, or interested in, rail and transit. Send an e-mail to <<mailto:weeklyrailreview@aol.com>>weeklyrailreview@aol.com to receive it, with my compliments.

HAVE A SAFE AND PROSPEROUS WEEK,

Dave Mears

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