

Four Corners Freight Rail would boost economy

San Juan County, Navajo Nation working together on rail project

BY DAVID EDWARD ALBRIGHT
TRI-CITY RECORD

San Juan County, along with the Navajo Nation and the Federal Railroad Administration, are studying the economic feasibility of a freight rail service to the Four Corners Region. Two public input meetings were held in June and the study is scheduled to wind up in 2024.

San Juan County manager Mike Stark, who is serving as the point man for the project, said in a phone interview that he shared with those who attended a recent community input meeting at the Senior Center in Fruitland information on the proposed freight rail project.

Stark said for "citizen awareness," he discussed "what we're doing and why, our partnership with the Navajo Nation and having the study done to determine if it makes sense to bring a freight rail line from the I-40 corridor to Farmington."

The proposed greenfield rail line would connect Farmington to Burlington Northern Santa Fe railway near Gallup, approximately 120 miles south.

Rail service to the Farmington



Stock photo

The Four Corners Freight project would connect rail service to the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railway near Gallup.

area can be traced back to 1983, with the Economic Review for a Railroad serving San Juan County. The report estimated a need for rail transport related to coal mining within three to five years, with "side benefits" for lower-cost transporting of farm commodities and general cargo. The report did say that without "the vast number of coal leases" in the area the construction costs would difficult to

justify.

Additional studies were conducted in 1991, 1998, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2020 and 2022.

Even with all these studies, the project never progressed because of a lack of key partnerships and funding.

Stark said they will look at both state and federal grant opportunities, as well as, some of the short line rail operators.

Funding for the recent study came from a \$2 million awarded to the county through the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development Transportation Discretionary Grant Program, administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The study was conducted by HDR, an international company that specializes in environmental sciences and sustainability and

resiliency, among numerous services.

A partnership between San Juan County and the Navajo Nation was formed by a Historic Memorandum of Understanding in February 2020. It created the collective framework of cooperation to bring rail service to the Farmington area.

The proposed routes will be primarily through Navajo Nation land. Stark said the partnership with the Navajo Nation "really opened the door for obtaining the grant ... and without them we wouldn't be where we're at today."

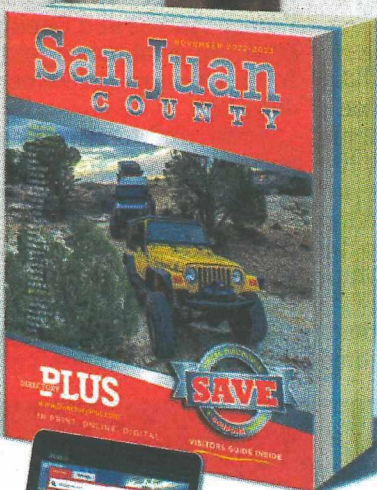
When asked about Navajo President Buu Nygren's support of the rail project, Stark said that before Nygren took office he was briefed and "he did give us the thumbs-up and said that we should continue exploring the opportunities."

Public meetings were held on June 21 in Newcomb and June 22 in Crownpoint, in addition to two meetings last September in Shiprock and Farmington.

According to Stark there were about 30 people who attended the Newcomb meeting and about 15 to 18 people at the Crownpoint meet-

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ing at Navajo Technical University.

Community concerns from those affected by the impact of the rail service are being considered.

Stark said, "I think we get concerns about the location of where the prospective line would go. You know, folks concerned if it's going to be in their backyard ... the noise and/or visual impact," adding that holds true whether it's a "rail line, a highway or water line, for that matter."

People at the meetings were asked where they would like to see the rail service located and if they were missing any opportunities on the import/export list of proposed goods.

Stark said no additional meetings are planned, but "we do anticipate as we get near the end of the study that we will circle back with input meetings."

The feasibility study will determine if the project is economically sound and, if so, it will be used as a "marketing document to funding agencies, whether it's the private or public sector," Stark said.

According to Four Corners Freight's website, primary benefits of the project include reducing the amount of commercial truck traffic and decreasing the potential for crashes.

The study stated that about 40%

of U.S. freight is shipped by railway, more than any other mode of transportation. Rail produces fewer greenhouse gases, 2.1%, compared to idling trucks that contribute approximately 20% of carbon emissions.

According to Four Corners Freight, moving freight by rail rather than trucks lowers greenhouse gas emissions by up to 75%, and that if 50% of truck traffic moving at least 750 miles went by rail instead, greenhouse gases would fall by 26.2 million tons.

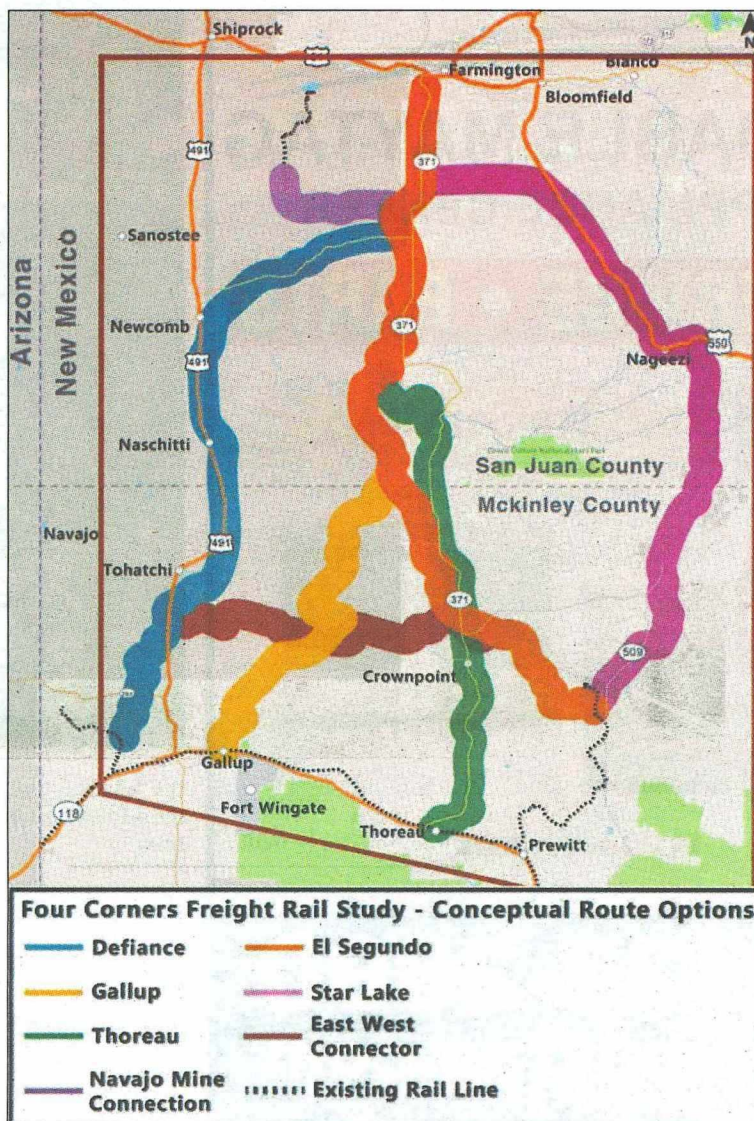
Railroads are the most fuel-efficient way to move freight over land, moving an average of one ton of freight more than 480 miles per gallon, according to the study. On average, railroads are three to four times more fuel-efficient than trucks. A single freight train can carry the freight of several hundred trucks.

The potential goods carried outbound from this region by rail include farm products, recyclables, food products, energy and manufactured goods.

Inbound goods would include minerals, forest products, fertilizers, fuel and metals.

Navajo Agricultural Products Industry CEO Dave Zeller said the project would "not just benefit NAPI, but I think the whole Four Corners Region."

As a large farm that ships a high volume of product currently being shipped by trucks, Zeller said freight would "allow us to



Proposed rail lines discussed in a recent study.

Courtesy San Juan County

ship product more cheaply down to the I-40 corridor, whether it's hay, beans, corn or wheat."

Zeller said it would help to lower the cost of bringing in other products like fertilizer, as well. He is optimistic about the project coming to fruition.

"I think there's a very realistic possibility that it will ... be worked out," but he believed the study would "reveal that it is a very feasible concept."

John Byrom, Business Development Manager for PESCO, said in a phone interview that freight rail service would especially help reduce shipping costs to coastal destinations. ... We would certainly support it. ... Everything we buy and sell comes in on trucks."

He added that with rail service PESCO "would be able to extend our competitive footprint."

Currently PESCO sells their products primarily across the Western states. Byrom said their shipping costs are higher than their competition in Houston or Denver because of the absence of rail service.

As a member of Four Corners Economic Development, Byrom believes the rail service would provide a boost to the economy, particularly in attracting new manufacturing businesses.

"We lose out on a tremendous number of potential new companies who would like to expand," he said, adding that it would definitely help as a recruiting tool.

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