We’re finally beginning to emerge from the worst economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Rail freight traffic is gradually recovering; stored equipment is being returned to service—plus taking additional time for some areas of the rail industry to recover—namely, new freight car and locomotive building—but, overall, our industry is in excellent shape, well-prepared for a full economic recovery, and continued traffic growth.

What have the railroads been doing during this down time in business? Preparing for the future by 1) maintaining their track, ties and ballast (the basics for operating a safe, efficient railroad), 2) maintaining momentum on capacity improvement programs, and 3) working diligently at new-technology initiatives like Positive Train Control, electro-pneumatic braking, and ultra-low-emission locomotives. Those of us who have been around this industry for a while know that America’s railroads, freight and passenger, are in an excellent position. Indeed, the recession has not stopped the “railroad renaissance” in its tracks. Rather, it has accelerated it.

How is this possible? In simple terms, the stars are in alignment to continue a resurgence that began 30 years ago with partial deregulation under the 1980 Staggers Rail Act, and that has accelerated rapidly during the past decade. Railroads—the old “bricks and mortar” industry that’s been around since the early 19th century—are a long-term growth industry with tremendous staying power. Why else would Warren Buffett, arguably the world’s smartest savviest investor, have bought Burlington Northern and Santa Fe?

We all know the superiority that railroads have over all other transportation modes, in terms of fuel efficiency, environmental friendliness, capacity, and safety. What we’ve got, that we’ve never had before, is an Administration in Washington that recognizes the fundamental value of America’s railroad system, and that’s willing to back up what it’s saying with policy, and with funding.

Consider these excerpts from the Federal Railroad Administration’s preliminary National Rail Plan, which the White House Office of Management and Budget has approved.

- “When private freight companies provide transportation services without being held accountable for using the infrastructure, the resultant inefficiencies can impose higher costs on society.” (Trucks drive away with the freight, unlike the railroads, trucks do not, and never have, paid their full share of their infrastructure costs.)

- “It is the inherent efficiency of rail transportation that enables freight railroads to do something that is expected of no other form of transportation: maintain their infrastructure, add capacity, host passenger operations, and pay local property taxes on their real estate.”

- “Cost-effective, fuel efficient and environmentally friendly, improved rail transportation is essential to achieving national freight transportation goals. Failure to keep and grow rail market share will impose a further burden on highways.”

This is the Federal government talking? That bunch of blinder-wearing bureaucrats that, with few exceptions, knows nothing about railroads, and even tried to destroy what little intercity passenger services we have? Is it possible that there’s been an awakening on Capitol Hill and at the White House to the industry that helped build this nation into an economic and industrial powerhouse? Was that the President of the United States on national television, launching an initiative to build a high speed rail system?

Yes, it’s all true. Our journey to a future where rail transportation is on a level playing field is just beginning. There is an enormous amount of work to do, an enormous number of goals to attain, and an enormous amount of private and public money that will have to be invested, wisely.

Our industry is ready.

The smart money is on railroads today


Warren Buffett, known as the “Oracle of Omaha” for his investment success, has acquired 100% ownership of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway. This is the biggest transaction in U.S. railroad history. The BN-SF employs 40,000 people and operates over 33,000 miles of track in the Midwest and West.

Buffet described his bold move as “an all-in wager on the economic future of the United States.” He believes that the railroads are the key to that future growth because of the inherent efficiency of rail in moving goods. He pointed out in one interview that an average BN-SF train can carry as much freight as 280 trucks. The price of oil, congestion on the highways, and environmental concerns are all driving the greater use of rail to move freight and passengers.

Buffet had previously owned 23% of the BN-SF stock, but decided in the midst of a deep recession to acquire 100% control over this well-run railroad. This will give the BN-SF management greater freedom to make long-term investments for equipment and tracks than when it had to answer to nervous short-term-minded shareholders. TRAINS Magazine called Buffet’s acquisition “a stirring vote of confidence” for the BN-SF and the U.S. rail industry in general.
Too close for comfort—or safety

If a stationary car is parked too close to a switch it may be struck by a passing train. This is what railroaders refer to as a “fouled” track. A fouled track can cause grave injury or death to a railroad worker riding on the side of the passing train (which is a common railroad practice during switching moves, even on industrial tracks).

On a rail siding, it is easy to misjudge how far a railcar can be shoved toward a switch before the mainline is fouled.

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Truck Dock Safety A guide to selecting and using wheel blocks and stabilizing jacks

WE WISH TO THANK

the following publications for their help in putting together this edition of the Aldon Express:

Railway Age, (the oldest railroad magazine in North America) and its sister publication, Railway Track and Structures.

We also wish to thank Trains Magazine which has brought feature stories and great photographs of American railroading since 1940.

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