



COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

For the meeting of: 10/5/2021

File #: 21-1450

To: Board of Supervisors

From: Supervisor Mike Wilson

Agenda Section: Initiated by Board Member

SUBJECT:

Resolution Expressing Continued Support for the Great Redwood Trail and Opposition to New Fossil Fuel Export Facilities (Supervisor Mike Wilson and Supervisor Virginia Bass)

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Board of Supervisors:

1. Approve the attached resolution.
2. Direct staff to develop a local ordinance to prohibit the construction of new infrastructure for the transportation, storage, processing or export of coal;
3. Take other action as appropriate.

SOURCE OF FUNDING:

N/A

DISCUSSION:

After decades of failed attempts to restart freight service on over 300 miles of the Northwestern Pacific Railroad, which at one point ran from Marin County to north of Eureka, State Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg, in February 2018 introduced the Great Redwood Trail Act (SB1029), a bill to convert the publicly owned line into a destination for bikers and hikers.

In an effort to facilitate the further development of that trail, NCRA has recently submitted an application to the federal Surface Transportation Board to “railbank” the section of rails between Willits and Humboldt County. Railbanking allows for the removal of tracks, if necessary, to facilitate trail development, but also preserves the rail corridor for future transportation-related uses, including the restoration of rail travel/freight transport.

In an August 16, 2021 filing before the Surface Transportation Board, a newly-formed corporation called North Coast Railroad Company, L.L.C. objected to railbanking and alleged that they intend to rebuild the dormant rail line. From reporting, it appears that coal interests from the Powder Basin region of Wyoming are behind this corporation. The proposed use is suspected to be for the transportation of coal that is mined in the Wyoming region and bound for Asian nations. If their “offer

of financial assistance” is accepted by the Surface Transportation Board, the historic rail line and public owned transportation asset would be transferred to the private company. If transferred, Humboldt County and the State would lack the ability to affect the use of the rail line as many issues would be preempted from local control.

An additional part of the suspected plan from North Coast Railroad Company involves the Humboldt Bay, necessary for shipments by barge. This facility would also require significant modifications, subject to local and Coastal Commission approval, in order to accommodate the proposal.

The proposed resolution offers two means to signal local opposition to a proposed coal export facility through Humboldt Bay. The resolution directs staff to begin work on a local ordinance to prohibit the construction of new infrastructure for the transportation, storage, processing or export of coal Humboldt County.

Additionally, the Board could direct staff to coordinate with the North Coast Railroad Authority to appear before the Surface Transportation Board to highlight the County’s continued support for the Great Redwood Trail and opposition to a potential transfer of ownership of the rail line to a new entity.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

This agenda item would require County Counsel to present an ordinance for adoption by your Board no later than Dec. 1, 2021. The financial impact would likely come in the form of staff and professional services costs. However, the impact is unknown as depending on the form of the ordinance, it could require further review and consultation with other agencies.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:

Coordination in any future action before the Surface Transportation Board with the North Coast Railroad Authority.

ALTERNATIVES TO STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Board may choose not to approve the resolution and may provide other direction to staff.

ATTACHMENTS:

Resolution

PREVIOUS ACTION/REFERRAL:

Board Order No.: N/A

Meeting of: N/A

File No.: N/A