

## Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

### 'Betuwe line' bearing fruit

*Prospects for developing the continental rail link from Rotterdam to Moscow are improving.*

**A** revived debate in Europe about accelerated infrastructure modernization has been sparked by the breakthrough in the European Union summit in Essen on Dec. 9-10, which gave an official go-ahead for the first 14 priority continental high-speed railway projects.

Number five on the list, is the "Betuwelijn" route for a high-speed freight railway that will link the port of Rotterdam, Europe's largest, with the Ruhr region, the industrial heartland of Germany. After years of controversy, environmentalist obstruction, and administrative delay, the 120 km line, which is named after the Betuwe fruit-growing region in the Netherlands through which it will pass, has now received a green light from the expert committee of "wise men and women" that is advising the Dutch government on infrastructure and public works projects. The government is now expected to give its official go-ahead to the biggest single public works project in the Netherlands, along with roughly \$5 billion in funding, sometime in March.

The Betuwelijn route is the westernmost section of the future continental rail connection between the Atlantic and Russia. It will enter the German rail grid for high-speed trains at the Dutch-German border town of Emmerich, linking up to the Ruhr, a big consumer of raw materials and prefab goods. It will also allow freight to be moved even farther to the east, via Münster and Hanover, to Warsaw, Minsk, Moscow, and other industrial and population centers in eastern Europe.

The freight will be transported on high-speed trains at speeds of up to 160 kilometers per hour (kph), leaving Rotterdam and arriving in Moscow 30 hours later. This will be possible by about the year 2010.

The Betuwelijn and its connection with the modernized German rail grid will be completed by 2005; a new container port in Rotterdam will be operational by 2010. The extension of the German high-speed rail grid eastward, from Berlin to Moscow, which is the easternmost section of this continental rail route, will be completed by about the same time—on condition that an important document signed in Berlin on Jan. 23 is implemented without delay.

On that day, the transportation ministers of Germany, Poland, Belarus, and Russia, as well as the railway minister of Russia and a senior envoy of the EU Commission, signed a "memorandum of understanding" for the modernization of the combined road-rail transport corridor from Berlin to Moscow, a project that aims at transporting passengers and freight at speeds of up to 200 kph over 1,800 kilometers. The entire project, which is largely modernization of existing rail track, requires investment of up to \$14 billion.

What makes the document especially important is the fact that it ends the misguided discussion about private initiative construction, and restates the prime responsibility of the governments to realize the project. Only for the highway aspect of the project, is a leading role envisioned for private-initiative investment.

The memorandum stated the governments' commitments to turn the corridor into one of broader industrial and economic development for the 20 million people living along the route, and to extend the economic benefits to another 20 million living in Scandinavia across the Baltic Sea.

The first section of this rail route, from Berlin to Swiecko, on the German border with Poland, is already under construction; the next section, from Swiecko to Warsaw, will receive \$350 million in funding from the EU. By 1998, trains are expected to travel at 160-200 kph.

The project creates incentives for the productive sectors of the region's national economies on a scale that will change the parameters of investment significantly. The overall positive economic effect of the \$14 billion, which the construction of the corridor will require, on the regional economies will be three to four times as great. The impact on the overall employment situation, which at present looks very bad in Europe's east, is especially important.

In Rotterdam, the Dutch government plans to invest about \$1.2 billion in the construction of a new container facility to be built at the mouth of the Maas River. The project, "Delta 2008," is designed to allow the unloading of 6 million standard containers by no later than 2010. This will increase capacity by almost 50%, up from 4.5 million containers in 1994, when the port of Rotterdam handled 50 million tons of containerized freight. By 2015, the new facility will handle up to 80 million tons of containerized freight, of which it plans to transport 30 million tons by rail to Germany and beyond. Overall, Rotterdam's port, which handled 294 million tons last year, expects to reach a capacity of 400 million tons by the year 2010.