

Al-Can Rail Corridor: Infrastructure For Development

by Marcia Merry Baker

In Fairbanks, Alaska on Oct. 10-11, an international conference took place in support of construction of an Alaska-Canada railway, through to the U.S. lower 48 states. The Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce and the Fairbanks Industrial Corporation sponsored the event, which was organized by state Rep. Jeannette James (R), Majority Leader of the Alaska House of Representatives. Among the 50 participants were representatives of mining companies, legislators from Alaska and from Canada's Yukon Territory, and rail experts. Larry Bagnell, a Member of the Yukon Parliament, typified the enthusiasm, telling the *Fairbanks News-Miner*, "It's a great long-term project. It'll change the face of the world."

Opinions vary on the most beneficial route southwestward from Alaska. One route often cited is that mapped out in 1942 during World War II by Army engineers, going from Fairbanks down to Prince George in British Columbia. There it could connect with the Canadian lines. Because of the wartime constraints of steel and other inputs, this rail line was never built, although the strategic Al-Can Highway — 1,500 miles of unpaved road — was completed at that time.

Even earlier, there was significant interest in a line to Alaska, with a link-up to Asia, especially after the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1903. In New Jersey in 1906, the Trans-Alaska-Siberia Railway Company was incorporated.

Figure 1 is from a paper presented to the Fairbanks conference by Seattle-based transportation consultant Dr. Hal B.H. Cooper, Jr., entitled "Project Development Proposal For An Integrated Energy, Water, Transportation, And Communications Corridor Between Alaska, Canada, And The Lower 48 States." Cooper has been in Russia five times, and is an active participant in the dialogue on how to restore and expand the North and South American rail systems. He provided a map of worldwide priority routes for the 1997 *EIR Special Report*, "The Eurasian Land-Bridge: The 'New Silk Road' — Locomotive For Worldwide Economic Development."

The "Inter-American Railroad" system in Figure 1 features a development corridor running north-south through the interior of North America, with the idea of creating the infrastructure base (transportation, power, water, communications) for maximum economic growth — new towns, agriculture and manufacturing concentrations, and so on.

Also shown is the idea under discussion by the Al-Can rail backers, for the North American rail network to proceed westward, via a tunnel under the Bering Strait, to eastern Russia. This would link up North America with the new transport and energy network projects now under construction, or set for initiation, throughout the Russian, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese region.

The Bering Strait link is an engineering challenge, but not a pipedream. The Strait is 60 miles wide, but the experts regard the subsurface soil conditions as more favorable for a tunnel than the English Channel project, now in operation. Figuring in the design are the two Bering Strait islands, Big and Little Diomedes.

The October Fairbanks conference is the latest among several meetings to discuss the various rail proposals. In January of this year, an Alaska-Canada Rail Link Conference took place in Vancouver, British Columbia. On June 13-14, a two-day conference was held in Nome, Alaska, titled the Alaska-Chukotka Summit Conference. (Chukotka is the eastern-most state of Russia.) Of the 200 mostly government attendees, 28 were from Russia. Chukotka Gov. Roman Abramovich actively backs the Bering Strait link and the rail route plans. This Fall, a follow-up meeting of legislators from Alaska and Chukotka took place in Anadyr, Chukotka.

Infrastructure For Recovery

Getting going on the Alaska-Canada-Lower 48 rail project is exactly the kind of infrastructure-spending project that is required for an economic program to revive U.S. economy. The impact includes the direct and indirect creation of thousands of jobs, and the demand for heavy commodity inputs (steel, concrete, machinery, etc.). Equally vital, the project contributes directly to the future economic benefit of all localities and nations involved, by providing the basis not only for modern, inexpensive transportation, but for development corridors for whole new towns, and mineral, industrial, and agricultural concentrations.

The spokesmen in the U.S. Congress for the idea of an infrastructure-led rescue of the economy, are Senate Majority Whip Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.V.), both associated with the Subcommittee on Public Works. In deference to their colleagues' focus on an economic "stimulus" package based on small-scale spending on anti-terrorism defenses, tax relief, and some unemployment benefits, these Senators have recently spoken out in favor of only limited projects on behalf of "infrastructure security," totalling some \$20 billion for anti-terrorism safety investments of various kinds (rail, air, highways, water systems, etc.). However, the principle stressed by Senator Reid, on Nov. 7 at a joint press conference with U.S. mayors, that "every billion dollars we invest will create 42,000 new jobs," applies equally to the long-overdue long-term "big" projects such as the Alaska-Canada-Lower 48 rail proposal.

On Sept. 25, U.S. Rep. Don Young (R-Ak.) introduced

FIGURE 1

Proposed Inter-American Railroad Line



Source: Hal B.H. Cooper, Jr., Cooper Consulting Co., Kirkland, Washington.

a railroad expansion bill into the House, entitled the Rail Infrastructure Development and Expansion Act (RIDE), which calls for some \$71 billion of various kinds of funding. Last year, Sen. Frank Murkowski (R-Ak.) backed a bill which was enacted, for creating a joint U.S.-Canadian Commission

to do a feasibility study on the Alaska-Canada-Lower 48 rail project.

What will push an infrastructure-building effort to realization in the United States, is the citizens mobilization now being led by Lyndon LaRouche and his LaRouche in 2004

Presidential campaign, for emergency measures for national economies. LaRouche is conferring with national leaders in Eurasia on the Land-Bridge projects, and on transportation corridors of development in South America, Africa, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Australia.

Development Corridor Concept

In Figure 1, Cooper proposes an economic development corridor to run along “a 2,700-mile-long railroad/utility/water transport corridor between Fairbanks, Alaska, and Bismarck, North Dakota, with a branch going to Seattle, Washington. The development of this corridor will require the construction of 1,600 miles of new railroad line and the upgrading of 2,400 miles of railroad line. This new Alaska-Canada-Northern Tier railroad and utility corridor will be designed to incorporate railroad and road transportation plus increased air service. The corridor will be able to incorporate crude oil and natural gas pipelines, plus electric transmission lines with new power plants, plus a fiber optic telecommunications network.”

Cooper continues his description: “The Alaska-Canada-Northern Tier corridor will also incorporate the ability to locate a water pipeline to transport fresh water from Alaska and Canada to the east side of the Rocky Mountains along the Great Plains, and the Southwest in the United States mainland. This water conveyance could be the first step toward the recreation of the North America Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA) originally proposed in the 1960s. The development of the Alaska-Canada-Northern Tier railroad/utility/water transport corridor could become the start of a major program to upgrade and expand the present North American infrastructure for the benefit of the United States, Canada, and Mexico.”

Figure 2 shows the major components of the NAWAPA plan. It is a large-scale geo-engineering project, involving long-distance water channels—canals, augmented river courses. (Cooper’s water pipeline/corridor proposals are for certain locations where frigid average temperatures, or other circumstances warrant.)

The NAWAPA concept was to divert southward some 15% of the flow of the MacKenzie River system—which presently flows to the Arctic—and run the main part of the flow through the 500-mile-long Rocky Mountain Trench in British Columbia. NAWAPA was originally put forward by California-based Parsons Engineering, and reviewed by Congress in the 1960s as a 20-year national interest project. Had NAWAPA been launched in the 1970s, the recurring droughts in the Western basins would now be a thing of the past.

Cooper describes the rail-based development corridor idea this way: “The operating concept for the Alaska-Canada-Northern Tier corridor is to have parallel transportation, utility, and water conveyances on a common right of way. The approach to be taken is to construct the railway line first, and then to utilize its superior economic transport characteristics to bring all of the other media, equipment, and facilities into

line. The development and use of a common right-of-way corridor would make it possible to minimize construction costs, maximize economic throughputs, and minimize land use needs.”

At the Fairbanks conference, Representative James said that the estimates of the cost for rail construction might run in the range of \$1-3 million per track mile, for the 1,200-mile extension of rail between Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska, into Canada’s railroad system. She stressed that the benefits far outweigh the costs, and that the idea of “bundling” other utilities along the rail route, namely, the proposed natural gas pipeline and fiber-optic cable, allows for great economies.

‘Rails To Resources’

Senator Murkowski’s concept of a railway is much more delimited to the idea of hauling out mineral commodities. In fact, his press information packet in 2000, at the time he introduced his bill for a feasibility study, was called, “Rails To Resources.”

Alaska and the Yukon Territory, like Siberia, are treasures of natural resources. After discovery of gold in the 1890s, there were repeated gold rushes. Today, the Fort Knox gold mine east of Fairbanks produces at the rate of 1,000 ounces per day. But the region’s hardrock formations have rich, extensive deposits of silver, copper, lead, zinc, tungsten, and other ores. The coal deposits in Alaska are vast, in the range of 6 trillion tons, according to Murkowski. The timber resources are significant.

Murkowski’s estimate is that “there might be 120 million tons of freight a year from new mines and timber development along the Alaska-Canada rail corridor that would utilize such a new railroad link.”

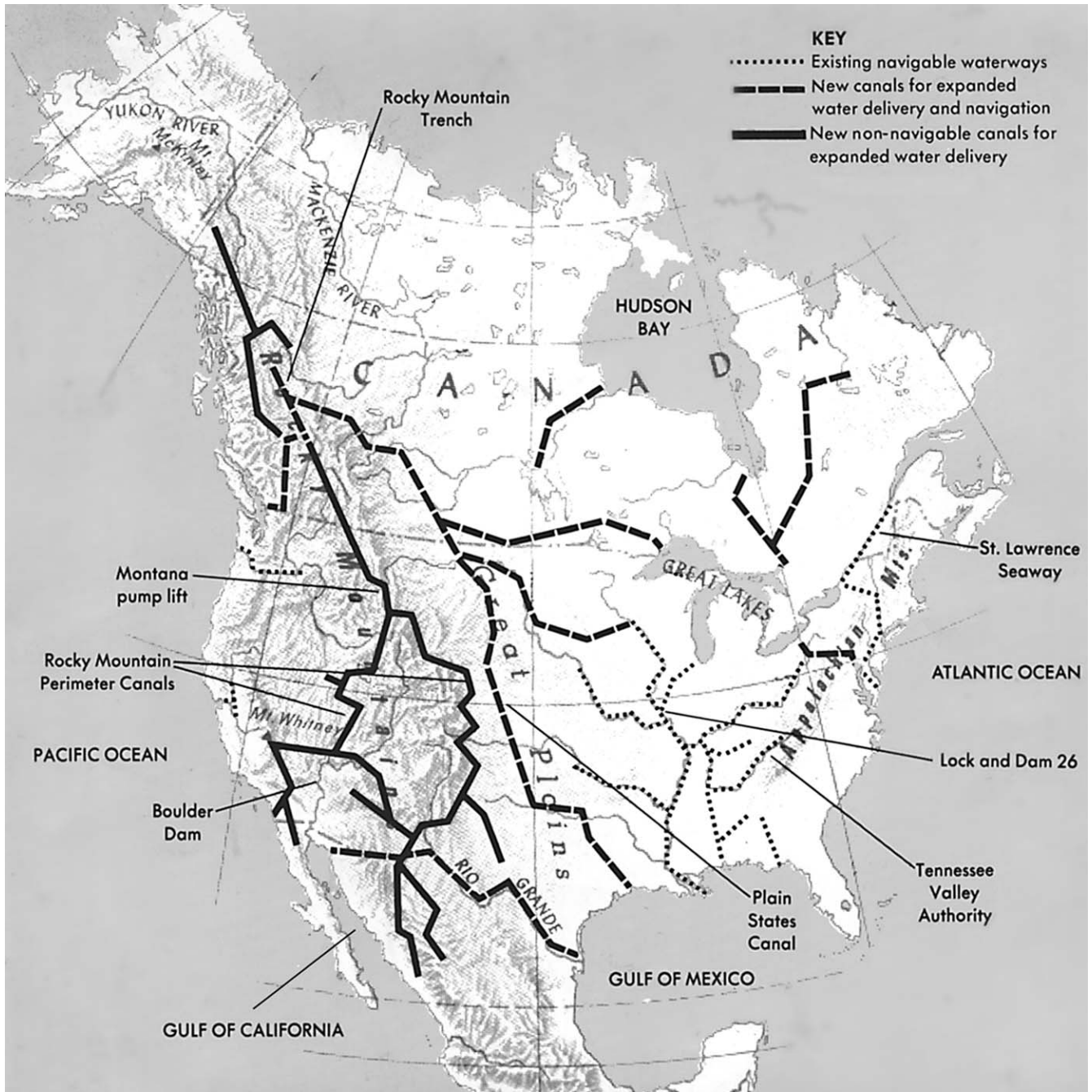
At the October Fairbanks conference, James McLachlan, of the Yukon Legislative Assembly, spoke of estimates on the Canadian side that some 500,000 tons could be shipped out yearly, for 30 years, from the mineral deposits there. He said that this would mean revenue in the range of \$46 billion. Many minerals and fuels companies are backing the Murkowski “Rails To Resources” plan.

In fact, to conceive the benefits of the Alaska-Canada transcontinental rail system in simply these “mine-to-mouth” terms, *misses the boat* in two fundamental respects. First, it ignores the great overall development potential possible from providing integrated infrastructure—of an intercontinental scope. Second, it ignores the reality that, right now, an epic financial and economic breakdown process is under way. So, any vision of extracting and hauling commodities based on some “rails for resources” scheme, such as used in colonial Africa, is doomed along with everything else.

The only approach that will work is that which worked before: the precedent of the Federally backed public works programs, and private contracting of the 1930s under Franklin Delano Roosevelt—the Hoover Dam, the Grand Coulee Dam, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and so on. The same principle applies today.

FIGURE 2

Proposed North American Water And Power Alliance

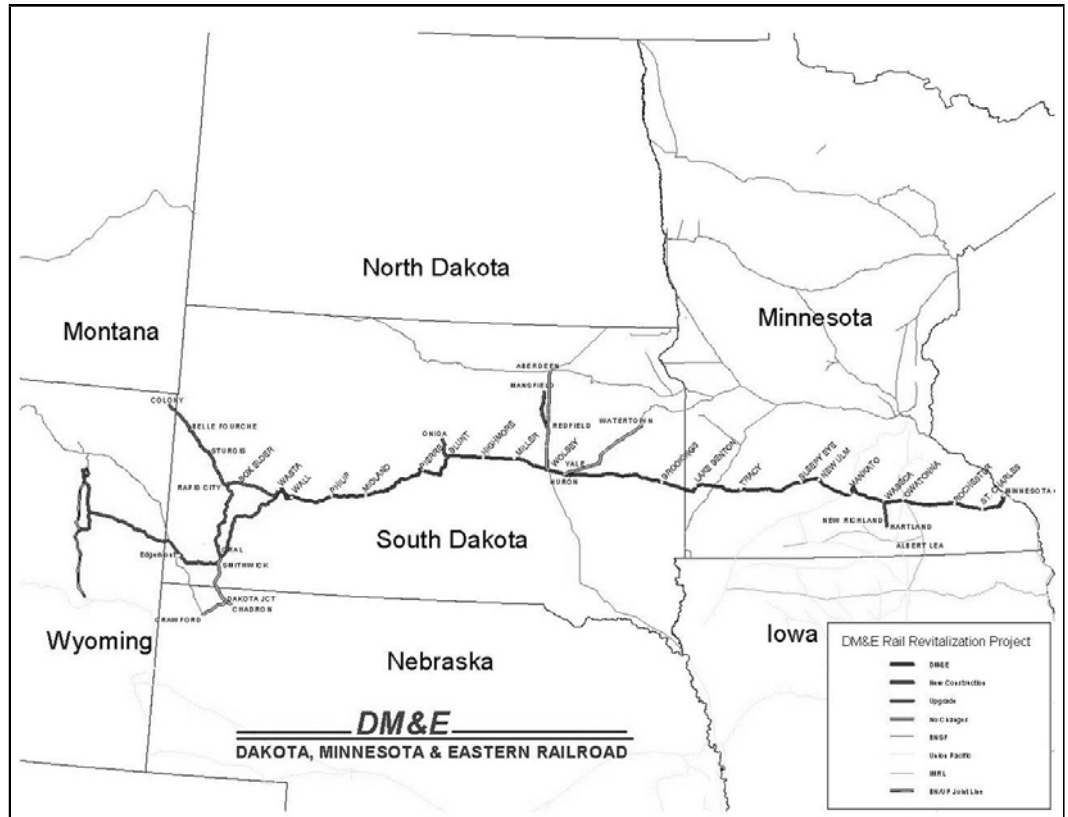


Source: Adapted from NAWAPA, Parsons Engineering, Anaheim, California.

In the conclusion to his paper, Cooper refers to the economy-building effects of rail construction. “The construction of the Alaska-Canada-Northern Tier railroad/utility/water transfer corridor will require considerable new infrastructure. The expected construction of 2,700 miles of new rail corridor from Fairbanks to Bismarck may just be the start of an effort

to build or rebuild as much as 70,000 miles of railroad corridors in the United States and Canada. There will need to be a very large amount of steel in order to perform this reconstruction as well as for other numerous infrastructure projects. In addition, large amounts of aluminum, copper, nickel, and other metals, plus larger amounts of cement and minerals,

FIGURE 3
**Proposed 900-
 Mile 'Coal Train'
 Route**



Source: Dakota, Minnesota & Eastern Railroad Corp., <http://www.dmerail.com/>.

will be required. There will then be a great need to expand American manufacturing within the United States to serve these needs.”

A Non-Development Corridor

One straightforward example of how *not* to plan a rail corridor, is the “coal train” proposal actively before the Federal Surface Transportation Board. This proposes a 900-mile unit-train (cars go point-to-point, with no stops and no decoupling), to run from Wyoming, through South Dakota and Minnesota, to the Mississippi River. **Figure 3** shows the route, owned by the Dakota, Minnesota & Eastern Railroad Corp. (DM&E), which is awaiting the board’s opinion on an environmental impact study on the project.

DM&E, formed in 1986, has been operating remnants of other rail lines, running agricultural, clay, and other commodities on its old track. In its “coal train” proposal, it would extend an additional 250 miles on its western end, to connect into the Wyoming Powder Basin coal deposits; then update the rest of its 600-plus miles of track, to be able to run unit trains of some 120 cars, at up to 45 miles per hour, going eastward without a stop to its eastern terminus at Winona, on the Mississippi River, sending coal to midwest and eastern energy users. Thus, it would be a point-to-point line, not a development corridor.

Opposition comes from the existing monopoly coal hauling rail lines, from so-called environmentalists opposed to

any rail or coal projects, and from the towns the coal trains would bisect as they thunder through. The Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, for example, has worked hard to hold up the project for that reason. The coal trains would go within yards of its hospital wards.

What is the alternative? Serve the national interest by mandating more on-site, regional power generation—high-tech coal and nuclear, and water development systems. Foster new, modern industrial, agricultural, and food-processing centers, which would revive whole towns, and lay the basis for new modern cities and rural county growth. Start to phase out the long-haul unit trains, and build modern freight and high-speed and magnetically-levitated passenger lines. In other words, take a *development corridor* approach.

As of the end of October, both the okay by the Surface Transportation Board, and the funding for the DM&E coal train project were up in the air. Cooper commented on Nov. 13, “I think it is important to point out, that that proposal is lacking on-site industrial and power generation—which has made the project hard to finance. They would have made it far easier if they had followed the LaRouche development proposals, than what they have tried to do. They need to have a power plant in Pierre, South Dakota, and they need to have one over near Mitchell, South Dakota. Those are the two places I would think where they need to have them, and then—if Minnesota lets you build one—in the southern part of [that] state.”