

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Central Regional Working Group Meeting 2

Date: July 13, 2023, 9 am-2:45 pm CT

Location: New Orleans Regional Planning Commission, 10 Veterans Boulevard, New Orleans, LA 70124

1. Introduction

Under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA), FRA is conducting a study to evaluate the restoration of daily intercity passenger rail service along:

- any Amtrak long-distance routes that were discontinued and
- any Amtrak long-distance routes that occur on a nondaily basis.

FRA may also evaluate potential new Amtrak long-distance routes, including with specific attention provided to routes in service as of April 1971 but not continued by Amtrak.

As part of this study, FRA is engaging with State Departments of Transportation, Amtrak, Class I Railroads, metropolitan planning organizations, regional passenger rail authorities, and local officials as well as transportation and rail partners, federally recognized tribes, and the broader community, as they evaluate how to better connect people with long-distance rail services.

In January and February 2023, FRA hosted the first of four rounds of regional working group meetings, in six separate regions, across the United States to engage members of the regional working groups. The second round of meetings was held in July 2023, with the Central regional meeting taking place on July 13. The purpose of this round of meetings was to brief regional working group members about the progress of the study, inform participants of the methodology for developing an enhanced long-distance rail network, and receive input from stakeholders on potential new routes and the baseline and enhanced networks.

The meeting was held both in person in New Orleans, Louisiana, as well as online for virtual participants. Each regional working group meeting followed a similar agenda, which is summarized below:

- Welcome and Introductions
- Study Overview – What We’ve Heard So Far
- Baseline Network Overview
- Enhanced Network Development
- Discussion of Enhanced Network
- Comparison of Enhanced and Baseline Networks
- Route Development and Feedback
- Stakeholder Insights for Ongoing Feedback Opportunities

This summary provides both an overview of the information shared at the Central regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

2. Welcome and Introductions

The Central regional meeting began with a welcome from the FRA study team, followed by a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves and the FRA

study team reviewed the meeting agenda and objectives. Regional working group participants in attendance, both in-person and virtually, are listed at the end of this summary.

Figure 1. Participants at Central Regional Working Group Meeting 2 on July 13 in New Orleans, Louisiana



3. Study Overview and What We've Heard So Far

The FRA study team began by providing meeting attendees with an overview of the study scope and what has occurred since the first round of regional meetings. The FRA study team detailed the legislative direction for the study, which will result in a report to Congress that includes recommendations for preferred options for restoring or enhancing long-distance service, a review of funding options, estimated costs and public benefits of long-distance service enhancement or restoration, and a prioritized inventory of capital projects to restore or enhance service. The overview gave an opportunity for participants to understand the study's objectives and the FRA's vision for using their feedback in the future.

Next, the FRA study team provided a summary of feedback received during the first series of the regional meetings and the comments received from the study website. The team highlighted the critical role of stakeholder input in the development of study evaluation factors and gave an overview of public comments as they pertained to geographic and service priorities.

4. Network Definitions

Next, the FRA study team shared background information about the network concepts that the study will evaluate. Four network concepts were presented: the Existing Network, the Baseline Network, the Discontinued Network, and the Enhanced Network. Development of the Enhanced Network comprised most of the working group discussion during the meeting.

The Existing Network is defined as current intercity passenger rail services, including current long-distance services, state-supported services, and Northeast Corridor services. The Baseline Network is defined as the Existing Network with the addition of several other forthcoming intercity passenger rail services. The FRA study team developed a Baseline Network solely for the purpose of comparing the near-term "current" intercity passenger rail services with potential future Enhanced Network of long-distance services.

The FRA study team also defined the Discontinued Network as all long-distance routes that were in service as of April 1971 but were not continued by Amtrak, and long-distance routes that were previously operated by Amtrak but have since been discontinued.

5. Enhanced Network Development

The FRA study team defined the Enhanced Network as the expanded and interconnected passenger rail network for rail service and expansion. The Enhanced Network is comprised of the Baseline Network, portions of the Discontinued Network, plus new segments where long-distance passenger rail service has not previously operated.

The Enhanced Network is not routes; it is comprised of conceptual segments between metropolitan statistical areas that can inform future route development

After defining the different networks, the FRA study team presented the four IJA considerations used to guide the development of an Enhanced Network, taking into consideration how the network could:

- link and serve large and small communities as part of a regional rail network
- advance the economic and social well-being of rural areas of the United States
- provide enhanced connectivity for the national long-distance passenger rail system
- reflect public engagement and local and regional support for restored passenger rail service

The FRA study team then showed meeting attendees the four-step process used to create an Enhanced Network with conceptual segments for future route development consideration. Step 1 included reviewing travel flows by all modes (travel by car, plane, bus, and rail) to show travel flows and market demand between metropolitan areas not served directly by rail in the Existing Network. The FRA study team used Federal Highway Administration NextGen 2020 data for this analysis. Step 2 addressed rural accessibility, including an evaluation of access to rural counties, tribal lands, and USDOT Justice40 disadvantaged communities. Step 3 addressed geographic coverage/network connectivity and reviewed passenger rail service by state, as well as regional rail plans, to provide enhanced network connectivity for long-distance passenger rail. And finally, Step 4 addressed stakeholder input and highlighted where stakeholders were most interested in seeing service enhancements.

Based on the four-step process described above, the FRA study team presented Central region meeting attendees with potential segments that could be utilized as part of the Enhanced Network. More detailed regional conceptual maps were also shared to further how new segments could be added in the Central region of the United States.

Detailed Enhanced Network maps are available in the [presentation](#).

6. Discussion of Enhanced Network

The presentation of the Enhanced Network concept prompted questions and comments from Central region working group attendees.

A meeting attendee asked why the Baseline Network map did not show the New Orleans, Louisiana, to Mobile, Alabama, Gulf Coast route as a baseline project. The FRA study team noted that the Baseline Network was only created to show the benefits of an Enhanced Network, and that the study used conservative criteria to identify forthcoming service, resulting in only a few projects on the Baseline Network map. Discussion led to the FRA study team noting that they would re-consider adding the Gulf Coast route back to the list of baseline projects. Afterwards, the FRA study team determined that the Gulf Coast route was left off the baseline map due to a misunderstanding about the status of the project. Feedback from stakeholders during the regional working group meetings helped clarify this, and the FRA study team will be adding it to the Baseline Network map.

An attendee noted that FRA should consider the communities along rural routes, even if a station is not located in a specific community but with trains passing through the area. The FRA study team commented that the study will compare characteristics of the existing network against the enhanced to understand and measure economic impact.

Another meeting attendee asked whether Congress will be considering funding and costs for prioritization, due to the rural nature of some of the areas and whether routes are feasible to some locations. The FRA study team mentioned that the work ahead will include costs, as well as prioritization and identifying potential funding sources.

A meeting attendee also mentioned that, while considerations around service in the middle of the night/frequency won't come until the next phase of the study, it will be important to consider length of segments as well.

A meeting attendee inquired as to whether there is a return-on-investment analysis that would provide additional context to the Enhanced Network when making a case for the new network. The FRA study team affirmed the importance of this idea and noted that an upcoming task would specifically address the public benefits of restored or enhanced long-distance service. Additionally, another attendee asked that the FRA study team clearly discuss the return on investment and look at benefits of passenger rail on the community it serves, through a 'return on taxpayer equity' measure as well.

Finally, a meeting attendee asked whether the study would include a focus on future routes that are anticipated to come online but are not currently included as part of long-range service at this time. The FRA study team responded that this effort will result in a 'living' document that could potentially adapt and incorporate new routes/elements over time.

7. Comparison of Enhanced and Baseline Networks

The next portion of the meeting focused on comparing the concept of the Enhanced Network to the Baseline Network to show the benefits of an Enhanced Network.

During the first round of regional working group meetings in January and February 2023, meeting attendees identified potential evaluation factors for the FRA study team to use to guide development of new or restored long-distance service. Based on this feedback, the FRA study team developed the following goals and objectives, with associated measures of effectiveness, to evaluate the Enhanced Network.

- Connectivity
 - Increase passenger access to the national passenger rail network
 - Improve passenger rail geographic coverage
- Large and Small Communities
 - Increase long-distance passenger rail connections to small communities
- Economic and Social Well-Being of Rural Areas
 - Enhance access for historically disadvantaged populations
 - Enhance access for tribal areas
 - Enhance rural access to services

The FRA study team presented the measures of effectiveness results comparing the Baseline Network and Enhanced Network. Detailed information pertaining to each evaluation measure is available in the [presentation](#).

A lengthy discussion among meeting attendees commenced after this section of the presentation, and it led to a number of comments and questions.

Regarding the Economic and Social Well-Being Goal, a meeting attendee asked for clarification that the Enhanced Network could provide service to an additional 5 million people. The FRA study team confirmed that it could.

An attendee also asked about whether FRA identified the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that the Enhanced Network could serve. The FRA study team said that, while they don't have the list on hand, it is something they can provide.

An attendee commented that it would be good to include mode share the Enhanced Network could capture; for example, how much of the existing travel could be done by rail in the future, as part of new segments. The FRA study team responded that there will be a high-level analysis on ridership in the future.

Another meeting attendee commented that Laredo is a stub end of the network and that they understood that the Government of Mexico has been interested in passenger rail between Monterrey, Mexico, and San Antonio, Texas. They asked how FRA might develop international service south of the border, as is operated into Canada. The FRA study team responded that it is a larger question that will be addressed in final report. An Amtrak staff member also noted they are exploring international service.

A meeting participant asked whether there might be an appendix or supplement that may cover additional topics or considerations that may not be clearly defined in the legislation (international service discussion, frequency, etc.). The FRA study team responded that they will be looking at ways to provide additional comments or context as part of the final report.

Another attendee mentioned that there was a Congress-led Gulf Coast Rail Study and that it may be worth reviewing or reminding Congress that the work has been done for that route.

Another attendee noted that Amtrak has been underfunded for decades, but now that there is potential for more funding, FRA must convey the need for more/ongoing funding.

An attendee said that a key purpose of this report is to present the economic case to continue investments. The FRA study team noted the report will address benefits in a way that is easily understood.

A meeting attendee commented about the need to focus on leveraging increased funding and current federal investment in passenger rail.

An attendee asked whether more regional rail plans will be developed and noted that at present FRA has only developed three regional plans. The FRA study team responded that ideally there would be regional rail plans across the country.

An attendee highlighted the notion of regionality, and that there is a lot of synergy with cities working together to strengthen the network. They suggested that perhaps Congress isn't aware of these connections and this broad support and collaboration among communities. The FRA study team noted that many people take relatively short trips on long-distance routes, emphasizing the ability for this service to connect riders within and among regions.

Another attendee mentioned that during the previous legislative session, they advocated to adjust the statutory definition of long-distance routes from over 750-miles to 500-miles segments, but there wasn't much appetite for it and that there may be an opportunity to leverage this group to make the case.

A meeting attendee asked if any of the criteria will be weighted. The FRA study team responded that consideration will be given to potentially adjusting or weighting the metrics used to analyze the Enhanced Network when conducting analyses at the route level.

8. Route Development and Feedback (Interactive Exercises 1 and 2)

During the afternoon, the FRA study team sought discussion and ideas from meeting attendees on future long-distance route development via several interactive activities. This portion of the meeting used an interactive digital tool (Mural) to capture ideas and help participants visualize each other's ideas.

During the first exercise, meeting attendees used sticky notes and a map of the Enhanced Network segments to suggest potential new long-distance routes.

Many of the routes recommended by meeting attendees were east-west routes including routes serving Virginia to Cincinnati and Dallas to New Orleans. Minneapolis-St. Paul to Laredo, Texas, was a north-south route identified by a meeting attendee to serve more underserved cities and native communities. Kansas City, MO to Centralia, IL was also suggested by a meeting attendee as a shorter segment that could provide service to smaller communities.

The second Mural interactive activity allowed meeting attendees to draw potential new long-distance routes directly on to a digital map. Many of the proposed routes by meeting attendees were drawn as east-west connections, and as meeting attendees drew their proposed routes, many potential “hubs” emerged, such as St. Louis, Charlotte, Memphis, Nashville, and Tulsa.

During the route drawing exercise, one meeting attendee suggested a version of the exercise with the metropolitan area travel flows included on the map, to see people’s origins and destinations. The FRA study team noted that was possible, but also cautioned that in addition to travel flows, the study is also considering rural communities and enhanced connectivity.

Results of the interactive activities are available on the project [website](#).

9. Stakeholder Insights for Ongoing Feedback Opportunities (Interactive Exercises 3 and 4)

Section 22214 of the IIJA requires FRA to develop recommendations for methods by which Amtrak could work with local communities and organizations to develop activities and programs to continuously improve public use of intercity passenger rail service along each route.

The last two interactive activities of the day were designed to give meeting attendees an opportunity to discuss ideas and insights for future engagement and ongoing long-distance service feedback that FRA and Amtrak can utilize in the future.

In the third interactive activity, meeting attendees were asked to consider how Amtrak and FRA could best coordinate with stakeholders about long-distance service. Meeting participants were asked to consider both current service and future service, what type of stakeholder input is most essential, and who/what groups should be involved in providing that input. They provided ideas for discussion on digital sticky notes via the interactive Mural tool.

Meeting attendee ideas included finding champions in state legislatures, specifically in states that don’t currently have state-supported Amtrak service. An attendee mentioned states like Virginia, Louisiana, and Mississippi as good examples to learn from. Another attendee identified the Downeaster as a model for passenger rail coordination across states.

A meeting attendee suggested leveraging local officials at the ground level to work with state legislatures.

A meeting attendee suggested regional advertising, as well as a national campaign to maintain awareness, and potentially carrying forward Amtrak advertising.

For the final exercise, meeting attendees were asked to share examples of organizational or coordinating groups that have worked well for efforts with similar goals as the Daily Long-Distance Service Study. Organizations that meeting attendees offered as strong examples included the Southern Rail Commission, for their strength in exchanging information, using American Public Transportation Association (APTA) as an information resource, and Councils of Governments (COGs) across the country for their ability to be stable partners through political leadership changes among cities or other state agencies.

Results of the interactive activities are available on the project [website](#).

10. Conclusion

The Central region working group meeting concluded with a look ahead at the future of the Long-Distance Service Study, which will include two more rounds of working group meetings. The FRA study team outlined study next steps, including confirming and adapting the Enhanced Network based on stakeholder feedback, developing potential routes, and planning future meetings. Future rounds of regional working group meetings will include cost and benefit reviews, route prioritization review, and recommendation/strategy review.

Attendees

- Amtrak
- Baton Rouge Area Foundation
- Canadian National Railroad
- Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization (CAMPO)
- Central Mississippi Planning and Development District (CMPDD)
- City of Monroe, Louisiana
- City of Ponca City
- Houston Galveston Area Council
- I-20 Corridor Council
- Louisiana Department of Transportation & Development
- Metroplan
- National Park Service
- New Orleans Regional Planning Commission
- North Central Texas Council of Governments
- Rail Passengers Association
- Southern Rail Commission
- Texas Department of Transportation
- Texas Rail Advocates
- Union Pacific Railroad