

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

Date: July 18, 2023, 9 am-2:45 pm MT

Location: Boise Public Library, 715 S. Capitol Boulevard. Boise, ID 83702

## 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 across the United States, in six separate regions, to engage these stakeholders. The second round of meetings was held in July 2023, with the Northwest regional meeting taking place on July 18. The purpose of this round of meetings was to brief stakeholders about the progress of the study, inform participants of the methodology for developing an enhanced long-distance rail network, and receive input on potential new routes and the baseline and enhanced networks.

The meeting was held both in person in Boise, Idaho, 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 Northwest regional working group meeting and an overview of meeting attendee feedback and conversations that occurred throughout the day.

## 2. Welcome and Introductions

The Northwest 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 Northwest Regional Working Group Meeting 2 on July 18 in Boise, Idaho



### 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 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.

One meeting attendee commented that it may be necessary to include the discontinued segment between New Orleans and Mobile to the Baseline Network due to preliminary plans for reinstating the connection. The FRA study team noted 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 participants during the regional working group meetings helped clarify this, and the FRA study team will be adding it to the Baseline Network map.

Another attendee asked a question about an 18-mile stretch of rail in Boise that is owned by the City of Boise and has been deemed worthy of a return to service after 20 years. They wondered if FRA had included the segment in its Discontinued Network map. The FRA study team responded that they would take a closer look at how the track is categorized.

## 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 IJJA 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 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 to provide Enhanced Network connectivity for long-distance passenger rail from regional rail plans. And finally, step 4 addressed stakeholder input and highlighted where stakeholders were most interested in seeing service enhancements.

After the description of the fourth consideration, a meeting participant asked a question about how the FRA study team defines stakeholders. FRA noted that the IJJA includes specific groups for FRA to engage as part of the study, and that those who do not attend regional meetings are given opportunities for additional engagement. The participant asked if FRA is engaging with specific communities along routes. The FRA study team responded that certain organizations like MPOs and local governments fall into this category, and that additional information for communities is available through materials posted to the study website.

Based on the four-step process described above, the FRA study team presented Northwest region meeting attendees with potential segments that could be used as part of the Enhanced Network. More detailed regional

conceptual maps were also shared to further show how new segments could be added in specific regions 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 Northwest region meeting attendees.

A meeting participant asked whether trip purpose was considered in the feedback collected after the first meeting series. The FRA study team noted that Amtrak conducted a passenger survey in 2022 that gathered trip purpose data, which is highlighted on slides from the first round of regional meetings. Another meeting attendee referred to the first round of meetings, noting that specific factors and reasoning for travel were discussed thoroughly as data to review in the future of the study.

Another participant asked if there were any ongoing efforts to coordinate and strategize for the capacity building that will be necessary on routes where both freight and passenger rail would need to use rail. The FRA study team responded that while the timeline of the study restricts the ability to fully analyze capacity improvements, FRA will note the need for capacity study and freight railroad coordination in future steps of route development, after this study is complete.

A meeting attendee asked if there has been any reluctance by freight rail companies at the prospect of expanding passenger service on shared routes, and if Amtrak has the equipment needed for expansion. The FRA study team responded that capacity improvements may be required in places to ensure reliable service. The FRA study team added that this would require a detailed analysis and collaboration with freight companies. An Amtrak staff member noted that current equipment does not meet the capacity needs of the conceptual Enhanced Network.

One participant added that there is a strong relationship between BNSF and passenger rail stakeholders, and that BNSF will continue to collaborate with various governments, organizations, and other companies. An Amtrak staff member commented that, by statute, passenger rail has access to utilize freight rail for passenger service. An Amtrak staff member continued that “a rising tide raises all ships” and that this is a historic time to make investments that improve freight and rail productivity. An Amtrak staff member continued that Amtrak stands shoulder to shoulder with its host rail partners like BNSF and believes that the right investments in rail will benefit both parties.

Another Amtrak staff member referred to several examples of freight and passenger rail companies working together to ensure mutual success, including in North Dakota, California, and Washington, where routes that were in jeopardy were saved through collaboration and partnerships. A meeting attendee added that there is often a narrative that freight and passenger operations act in opposition to each other. They noted that the regional working group meetings are a testament to the ability to collaborate and come together to create synergy between the two lines of business.

## 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 stakeholder meetings, regional stakeholders 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 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

An attendee asked for clarification about the first measure and whether the FRA study team included mid-sized population centers alongside the rural and metropolitan areas considered for that measure. The FRA study team responded that the measure evaluates all sizes of communities ranging from rural to major metropolitan.

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](#).

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

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 digital map of the Enhanced Network segments to create new long-distance routes.

Two routes that appeared frequently from the Northwest working group meeting attendees included a route connecting Seattle to Los Angeles through Portland, and another connecting Boise to Las Vegas via Salt Lake City. Participants noted that these routes provide north-south connectivity lacking in the existing network. An attendee proposed a route that follows the Interstate 35 corridor, noting that this route would be another way to improve north-south mobility.

The second Mural interactive activity allowed meeting attendees to draw potential new long-distance routes directly on to a digital map. During this activity, meeting attendees noted that military locations and uses should be considered. One attendee noted that military bases, specifically training facilities, are large sources for passenger ridership. There was general consensus among meeting attendees that bases should be closely considered as routes are conceptualized.

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 Amtrak and FRA can use 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.

One meeting attendee noted that they are interested in further engagement with freight rail companies like Union Pacific. Another agreed, noting that they feel it is important to strive for synergy between freight and passenger rail.

Many attendees agreed that rural medical centers that require doctors and other professionals to travel between clinics should be included in ongoing conversations about current and future passenger rail service.

One meeting attendee also advocated for sustained coordination with FRA's Corridor Identification and Development Program.

Another meeting attendee advocated for engagement between government entities and tribes, noting previous successes and recent lessons learned.

Weather was also an important factor that meeting attendees discussed, including groups and organizations that could potentially rely on passenger rail during inclement weather events.

For the final exercise, meeting attendees were asked to share examples of organizations or coordinating groups that have worked well for efforts with similar goals as the Long-Distance Service Study. Washington state's long-range planning projects were referred to as a strong planning example. Three groups that were highlighted during the discussions were the Southern Rail Commission, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), and the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), all of which can bring together transportation professionals and advocates. Tourism and destination organizations were also brought into the conversation as other potential groups to engage with.

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

## 10. Conclusion

The Northwest regional 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

- All Aboard Northwest
- Amtrak
- Association of Idaho Cities
- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority
- BNSF
- City of Boise
- City of Missoula
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho
- Denver Regional Planning Organization
- Fargo-Moorhead Metropolitan Council of Governments
- Five County Association of Governments
- Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe
- Idaho Department of Transportation
- Mid-Columbia Economic Development District
- Missoula Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Montana Department of Transportation
- Montana State University Western Transportation Institute
- North Dakota Department of Transportation
- Oregon Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- Senator Mike Crapo's office
- Southwestern Washington Regional Transportation Council
- Spokane Regional Transportation Council
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Utah Rail Passengers Association
- Utah Transit Authority
- Valley Regional Transit
- Wasatch Front Regional Council
- Washington State Department of Transportation
- Wyoming Department of Transportation
- Yakima Valley Council of Governments