

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

Date: July 20, 2023, 9 am-2:45 pm PT

Location: Maricopa Association of Governments; 302 N. 1st Avenue, Suite 300, Phoenix, AZ 85003

## 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 members of the regional working groups. The second round of meetings was held in July 2023, with the Southwest regional meeting taking place on July 20. 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 on potential new routes and the baseline and enhanced networks.

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

## 2. Welcome and Introductions

The Southwest 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 Southwest Regional Working Group Meeting 2 on July 20 in Phoenix, AZ



### 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 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 the potential future Enhanced Network of long-distance services.

The FRA study team clarified that the baseline conditions are similar to what occurs in other planning and environmental work, in which a no-build condition, which includes existing conditions and committed future conditions based on a set of evaluation criteria, is compared to the baseline network and the build alternatives.

An Amtrak staff member asked if a year had been identified for future ridership modeling. The FRA study team responded that a year for modeling had not yet been determined because ridership modelling has not yet been completed as part of the study.

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, as well as long-distance routes that were previously operated by Amtrak but have since been discontinued.

A meeting attendee commented that it would be interesting to understand when these routes were discontinued. The FRA study team noted that information on when routes were discontinued can be found in presentation materials for the first meeting series, available on the study's website.

Another meeting attendee asked about whether the Denver to Portland line that was discontinued had a stop in Salt Lake City. The FRA study team clarified that the stop was in Ogden, not Salt Lake City.

## 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 (MSA) that can inform future route development.

After defining the different networks, the 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; and
- 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 (FHWA) NextGen data for this analysis. Step 2 addressed rural accessibility, including an evaluation of access to rural counties, tribal lands, and USDOT Justice 40 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.

Based on the four-step process described above, the FRA study team presented Southwest 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.

The presentation of Step 1 (metropolitan travel flows) led to a discussion among meeting attendees. One attendee asked how the travel flow data was selected and what modes were included in the data. The FRA study team explained that travel flows were determined by using FHWA's NextGen 2020 data, looking at multiple modes and the specific distance parameters between 100 and 1000 miles in length.

An Amtrak staff member asked why data from 2020 were used (as opposed to 2021) and asked if the source of the data was cellphone data. The FRA study team explained that the data is collected using GPS, and that 2021 data were not available when the team was working on this step of the study. Since then, 2021 data have been made available, and the data is consistent with 2020 in that origins and destinations are consistent across the different years, regardless of number of trips. They noted that while volumes may shift, the market locations have remained the same.

An Amtrak staff member asked when the FRA study team would align long-distance routes with state supported routes, and if it is important that they align with state route proposals. The FRA study team noted that the next step in the study will include stringing segments together into routes and knowing about other routes will help the team with long-distance route development.

A meeting participant asked why there aren't any travel flow data from Phoenix to Casa Grande or Tucson. The FRA study team explained that metropolitan and micropolitan statistical areas were used as the underlying geographic data as delineated by county. They noted that Phoenix and Tucson are more than 100 miles apart – but, due to the center-to-center measurement used, they fell below the 100-mile threshold previously reviewed. The FRA study team noted the strong demand and are incorporating this and other similar areas into the study.

A meeting attendee asked about the study's treatment of Brightline West alignment between Las Vegas and Inland Empire in Southern California. The FRA study team noted that while the long-distance study could potentially recommend a similar Las Vegas to Los Angeles route, but that when it comes to implementation, the FRA study team will take into consideration the development of Brightline West.

The presentation regarding Step 2 (rural accessibility) prompted a meeting attendee to ask whether the size and density of counties was considered, as most of Arizona is rural – but due to the way MSAs are defined, the Flagstaff MSA is being considered 'not rural.' The meeting participant asked if the FRA study team would consider this in future analysis. The FRA study team responded that they are taking this into account and the analysis will get more granular as the study team gets closer to determining routes and service.

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 Southwest region meeting attendees.

A meeting attendee stated that they needed an overview on why routes had been discontinued. The FRA study team noted that it was largely due to previous measures of cost effectiveness and profitability, and that further information about discontinued long-distance routes can also be found in presentation materials for the first meeting series, available on the study's website. An Amtrak staff member noted that while it's important to understand the past, it is important to understand the present opportunity to discuss the expansion of long-distance passenger service.

A meeting attendee asked whether new rail segments are going to be built by DOT or Amtrak -- and how this will compare to resource allocation to enhance existing service. The FRA study team explained that all segments on the Enhanced Network are correlated with existing rail infrastructure along the North American Rail Network, and that the study will not recommend greenfield development for routes. They noted that FRA will work closely with host railroads, and that funding allocation for new or enhanced service will be a question for the future.

A meeting attendee commented that they were impressed by the work done so far and that building a full system as shown on the enhanced network map is more cost effective than operating a 'skeleton' system.

A meeting attendee commented that they were pleased to see the Phoenix to Flagstaff segment, and that it is on an existing line called the Peavine. They asked if considerations for this segment included the capital

improvements needed to make Peavine suitable for passenger rail. The FRA study team noted that a future service development plan, after the completion of this study, would consider these existing conditions.

A meeting attendee asked what the future origin and destination pairs would look like for these segments. The FRA study team noted that determining origins and destinations will be a next step in the analysis; starting today and into the third meeting, the objective will be how to string segments into logical routes.

A meeting attendee emphasized that per the IIJA, there is money associated with this planning effort - primarily capital funding, not operating funding.

## 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 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 meeting attendee asked about measures of effectiveness and future routes, including how the measures of effectiveness account for the temporal nature (trains arriving late at night or early in the morning) of long-distance routes, the possible synergy between state-supported routes and long-distance investments that improve long-distance trains, and evaluation of projects that benefit multiple services but have different funding sources. The FRA study team responded that the temporal consideration will be addressed in the future, but that presently the study is looking at segments/locations.

An Amtrak staff member noted that it's important to consider a benefit analysis that considers the different measures that may not typically be evaluated in a cost-benefit analysis. The FRA study team noted that they are considering this and potentially developing a type of return-on-investment / public benefits analysis. A meeting attendee said that a traditional cost-benefit analysis is limited in what it includes, and additional modeling may address benefits gaps that a cost-benefit analysis may not cover.

Another meeting participant added that many large projects can come down to local politics and explaining the investment in a way that connects with local communities is important. The FRA study team noted that education is important, and that long-distance trains provide a lot of shorter trips for rural riders. A meeting attendee noted that linking cities in Arizona to rural and tourist areas is a big opportunity.

## 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 digital map of the Enhanced Network segments to suggest potential new long-distance routes.

An Amtrak staff member advocated for a New York City to Nashville route, that connected large cities like Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Columbus. Another meeting attendee commented that Denver is a natural hub for long-distance passenger rail and mentioned a Denver to Seattle route, connecting Billings, Montana. This comment led another meeting participant to identify other cities that could become natural hubs, including Denver, St. Louis, Dallas-Fort Worth, and potentially Salt Lake City.

These comments led another meeting attendee to advocate for national parks, providing an example of a route connecting Los Angeles to Zion National Park.

The second Mural interactive activity allowed meeting attendees to draw potential new long-distance routes directly on to a digital map. One route proposed by a meeting attendee was from Seattle to San Diego, with connections in Yakima, Kennewick, Boise, Las Vegas, and Southern California. Another meeting attendee proposed a route idea that included Los Angeles to Dallas-Fort Worth, with connections to Las Vegas, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Amarillo.

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 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. Then they provided ideas for discussion on digital sticky notes via the interactive Mural tool.

Meeting attendees provided many ideas, including establishing robust regional dialogue to ensure connectivity, identifying major trip generators, and gathering rider input through surveys. Meeting attendees suggested stakeholders including tribal nations, regional agencies, counties, cities, business groups, and organizations that address first and last mile transportation from train stations. One attendee recommended a new organization specifically for the long-distance network, which could include statewide agencies, but also US Conference of Mayors, University Presidents Organization, and others.

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. Organizations that meeting attendees offered as examples included Main Street USA, US Chamber, US Travel Association, rural transit authorities, Northeast Corridor Commission, and the Rail Passengers Association.

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

## 10. Conclusion

The Southwest 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 Arizona
- Amtrak
- Arizona Department of Transportation
- Arizona Governor's Office
- California Department of Transportation
- Five County AOG
- Maricopa Association of Governments
- MetroPlan Greater Flagstaff
- Mineta Transportation Institute
- New Mexico Department of Transportation
- Rail Passengers Association
- Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada
- Regional Transportation Commission of Washoe County
- Riverside County Transportation Commission
- Southern California Regional Rail Authority
- Sun Corridor Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Union Pacific Railroad
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Utah Rail Passengers Association