

Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study Southwest Regional Working Group Meeting 3

Date: February 6, 2024, 9 am - 4 pm PST

Location: Sacramento Area Council of Governments; 1415 L Street, Suite 300; Sacramento, CA

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 the study, FRA is engaging with State Departments of Transportation (DOTs), Amtrak, Class I Railroads, metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs), regional passenger rail authorities, and local officials and listening to stakeholders, including transportation and rail partners, federally recognized tribes, and the broader stakeholder community, as we evaluate how to better connect people with long-distance rail services.

So far, FRA has hosted three of four total rounds of regional working group meetings across the United States, in six separate regions, to engage these stakeholders. This third round of meetings was held in February 2024, with the Southwest regional meeting taking place on February 6. The purpose of this round of meetings was to brief stakeholders about the progress of the study; inform participants of the methodology for developing routes, route schedules, and cost estimates; review preferred routes; and receive feedback on prioritization concepts for implementation timeframes and ongoing collaboration and planning.

The meeting was held both in person in Sacramento, California, 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
- Route Development and Evaluation Methodology
- Identification of Routes
- Discussion of Route Identification
- Approach for Development of Route Service
- Development of Capital and Operations & Maintenance Cost Estimates
- Prioritization and Implementation Feedback
- Ongoing Collaboration and Planning

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 working group meeting began with a welcome from FRA, followed by a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves, and the

Southwest Regional Working Group Meeting 3

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 3 on February 6 in Sacramento, California



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

FRA began by providing meeting attendees with an overview of the study scope and what had occurred since the last round of regional meetings in July 2023. FRA 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 study team provided a summary of feedback received during the second series of regional meetings and the comments received from the study website. The team gave an overview of comments as they pertained to geographic and service priorities.

4. Route Development and Evaluation Methodology

Next, the study team presented attendees with the methodology used to develop and evaluate potential routes. This was approached in three sections. First, the team discussed the methodology used to develop potential new long-distance routes, followed by a description of the methodology used to evaluate them.

The methodology for developing potential routes was informed by the four IJIA legislative considerations that guide the study: link and serve large and small communities, advance the economic and social well-being of the United States, provide enhanced connectivity, and reflect public engagement and local and regional support. Routes were developed to address metropolitan area travel flows, rural accessibility, and geographic

coverage/network connectivity. The methodology also considered stakeholder input and discontinued long-distance routes. This resulted in a range of route options for evaluation.

To evaluate route options, the team utilized criteria that aligned with the legislative considerations, including:

- Metropolitan Area Travel Flows
- Rural Accessibility
- Geographic Coverage/Network Connectivity
- Stakeholder Input

The study team also leveraged knowledge and experience of rail planning and considered the previously discontinued routes to evaluate routes.

5. Discussion of Route Development and Evaluation Methodology

One attendee asked if the four criteria were evaluated in a series or simultaneously. FRA answered that the evaluation happened concurrently to decide on preferred routes. The attendee followed up by saying that it was important to factor in the possibility of induced demand – that current data do not reflect the rise in demand that may happen if rail service is provided in certain places. FRA responded that the proposal for a completed route network attempts to look beyond current ridership data and instead focuses on a variety of different considerations.

Another attendee asked about a section of the evaluation criteria that excluded major local city pairs in an attempt to accurately reflect demand for entire long-distance routes. The attendee raised that local service is an important reason to implement long-distance rail, even if these connections are only a small part of a larger route. FRA responded that these considerations would be included in future service development plans. The evaluation methodology excluded some local trips between MSA pairs within 100 miles of each other that exceeded the 80th percentile of all demand for a given route option to accurately reflect demand for potential new long-distance routes. These local trips were only removed in the evaluation of potential route options. These localized trips are still included in overall total travel demand estimates of the preferred routes and will be used when considering potential future ridership.

An additional attendee asked whether the study team had considered scheduling in their evaluation criteria. FRA responded that travel demand and scheduling weren't a factor in their evaluation but will be an important part of planning in the future.

6. Identification of Routes

After discussing methodology, the study team presented the proposed network of preferred routes map to the working group. The map showed the proposed preferred routes illustrated on top of the baseline map of existing service. The restoration of daily Cardinal and Sunset Limited passenger rail service was assumed when identifying the proposed network of preferred routes. The 15 proposed preferred routes were:

- Chicago - Miami
- Dallas/Fort Worth - Miami
- Denver - Houston
- Los Angeles - Denver
- Phoenix - Minneapolis/St. Paul
- Dallas/Fort Worth - New York
- Houston - New York
- Seattle - Denver

- San Antonio - Minneapolis/St. Paul
- San Francisco - Dallas/Fort Worth
- Detroit - New Orleans
- Denver - Minneapolis/St. Paul
- Seattle - Chicago
- Dallas/Fort Worth - Atlanta
- El Paso - Billings

The study team then outlined key takeaways from the comparison between the baseline network and preferred network, which included:

- 45 million additional Americans reached by rail
- 61 additional Metropolitan Statistical Areas served
- 91% of all U.S. higher education institutions served
- 75 total National Parks, Recreation Areas, and Preserves served
- 43% increase in rural and transportation-disadvantaged populations served
- 74% of previously unserved populations on tribal lands served
- 23,200 long-distance route miles added
- 86% of all U.S. medical centers served

Please see the regional working group presentation at <https://fralongdistancerailstudy.org/meeting-materials/> for additional information and data descriptions related to these takeaways.

7. Discussion of Route Identification

During the presentation of the preferred routes, the working group discussed and provided feedback on the routes.

After the presentation of the Dallas/Fort Worth to Miami route, one attendee commented that the route was a good example of routes that include overlapping types of service and “rail products,” a characteristic that helps to ensure the success of a route.

During the presentation of the Los Angeles to Denver route, an attendee asked why the route goes through Wyoming as opposed to the original Desert Wind route, which connects Salt Lake City to Denver without passing through Wyoming. FRA responded that the route allows for markets in Wyoming to be reached, which improved its strength in the criteria evaluation, and also noted that the original Desert Wind route would be addressed in an upcoming slide. Another attendee asked whether there would be opportunities for connections to other routes in hub cities like Salt Lake City. FRA responded that there would be opportunities for riders to get off in a hub city and board a new route.

In reference to the Seattle to Denver route, an attendee asked whether FRA utilized micropolitan statistical areas as part of their planning process. FRA responded that only metropolitan statistical areas were considered as part of the evaluation process.

An attendee asked why Laredo service wasn't included in the preferred route from San Antonio to Minneapolis/St. Paul. FRA responded that terminating the service in Laredo would make it a “stub-end,” which could cause difficulties for managing long-distance service. Additionally, FRA reminded the participants that the Laredo extension (as well as all segments not included in a preferred route) could still potentially be included in service in the future as part of further analysis after the completion of this study.

At the end of the series of slides, an attendee said that they were impressed by the map, that although most people in attendance were planners and not politicians, the outcomes of the study are political, and suggested that FRA identify the number of congressional districts the network of preferred routes serve. The same

attendee noted that, if Amtrak utilizes bilevel trains, routes coming out of New York may have a difficult time due to tunnel height, and that should be considered in future analysis.

One attendee was pleased with the preferred routes' service through Arizona, particularly the routes that connected the state to the Midwest and Bay Area. Another attendee noted that the preferred routes will allow for more people to reach medical centers, which will be beneficial to rural populations who could access medical care easier.

8. Approach for Development of Route Service

Once the study team reviewed the preferred routes, they presented the development of conceptual run times, which will eventually inform conceptual schedules. These conceptual run times and schedules will be used to inform cost estimation, travel demand estimation, and future investment analysis. The study team then gave an overview of the conceptual run times developed for each preferred route.

One attendee brought up how the analysis doesn't currently factor in the potential for increased train speed, noting that ridership data could change if a route became faster. They suggested including this data as an appendix in any reporting. Another attendee added that variables (like increased train speeds) impacting ridership would likely be considered through future service development plans. The same attendee also said that the comparison is currently between current rail travel and the additional ridership gained by implementing preferred routes. They added that, in addition to recognizing that comparison, it's also valuable to compare to car travel time, which often necessitates a stay overnight in a city between stops.

One attendee asked about the extent to which hub connections would be included in the service, and if only the most lucrative hubs would be considered as viable connection points to other segments. The study team responded that there will be an analysis of hub connections to ensure that key market connections are not missed in the developed service concept.

Another attendee pointed out the connection capacity that Phoenix, Arizona, has and its potential to be a future hub. An attendee from Amtrak responded that there have been efforts through the Corridor ID program from Amtrak and the State of Arizona to include hub connections in Phoenix.

An attendee proposed the idea of a "loop" that would connect routes with each other based on a synchronized schedule that prevents routes from becoming separate "silos." They added that maximizing operational efficiency in ways like this will become more important as the study progresses.

After presenting the conceptual run times for each route, the study team described the next steps for using the run times to develop conceptual service schedules.

9. Development of Capital and Operations & Maintenance Cost Estimate

Next, the study team gave an overview of the methodology used to develop capital cost estimates in addition to operations and maintenance (O&M) estimates.

The overview of the capital cost estimate methodology included a description of different types of passenger service-specific project costs associated with implementing new long-distance routes. Cost estimates will be developed using the FRA Budgeting Tool's Standard Cost Categories (SCC) system, which classifies different types of costs into different categories. The methodology to estimate capital costs was developed to provide high-level order-of-magnitude capital costs to support early project planning. Capital cost estimates include 35% allocated contingency to address project risks. Capital cost estimates will include passenger-service-specific project costs, including track upgrades, stations, maintenance facilities, and signaling/communications/positive train control, and rolling stock. It does not include capacity improvement projects.

One attendee asked which rail database was used to identify the locations where track upgrades were necessary. FRA responded that the FRA Safety Map tool was used to identify upgrade locations. Another attendee asked whether the range percentage of 30% should be adjusted based on the varying risk factors of different cost types. The study team responded that the current estimates feature the same range percentage across the categories, but future analysis could be done to factor in variable risk. Another attendee specifically noted that there aren't any capacity improvements included yet in the analysis, and asked if that was going to happen at a later stage. FRA responded that the scope did not include capacity improvement costs, which are more likely to be featured in future specific service plans.

To estimate O&M costs, the team used Amtrak Performance Tracking statistics for fiscal year 2019 and applied weighted average unit costs for existing long-distance routes to preferred routes with the same number of nights and days operated per week. The O&M cost estimates will also be reported as a range. The low- and high-range of cost estimates for O&M will reflect the variation in marginal unit costs by operating statistic of existing long-distance routes.

10. Interactive Session: Prioritization and Implementation Timeframes Feedback

After the presentation of cost estimate methodology, the meeting transitioned to an interactive activity using Mural, an online interactive tool. The activity allowed meeting attendees (both in the room and participating online) to provide input on route prioritization, and which considerations they thought were the most important. Prioritization considerations were sorted into five categories: public and rider benefits, capital cost estimates, O&M cost estimates, complexity in development and implementation, and consistency with intercity passenger rail projects.

One attendee asked why prioritization was necessary. The study team responded that the exercise would help inform the development of a prioritized inventory of capital projects. The exercise gave an opportunity for the study team to understand which considerations were most important to stakeholders.

During the interactive activity, attendees placed dots onto virtual sticky notes that listed the categories for consideration, allowing for a visualization of which categories stakeholders thought were most important. The attendees were also asked to share other examples of considerations that they thought were important.

The interactive activity revealed that the Southwest working group participants viewed “public and rider benefits” and “capital cost estimates” to be the two most important categories to consider when prioritizing implementation of routes.

An attendee noted that one important consideration is to reflect not just capital costs but also capital revenue when prioritizing routes. They also noted that the team should consider the various host railroad companies and their differing negotiation needs. Another attendee advocated that the team shouldn't forget to consider O&M cost estimates. An attendee added that the study team could prioritize routes that could be implemented quickly to help bolster excitement and funding for future routes. Another attendee advocated for the consideration of local and state agencies developing partnerships with Amtrak to help better connect communities to new routes.

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

11. Ongoing Collaboration and Planning

After the interactive activities, the study team presented ideas for ongoing collaboration and interaction with other organizations and stakeholders. In the last meeting series, participants were asked how FRA and Amtrak could coordinate with stakeholders about current and future long-distance services. The team presented the themes that arose during the conversation, including community and rider engagement as well as coordinated planning. They also reviewed potential models of governance bodies.

Following this review, FRA introduced the idea of a new Long-Distance Public Committee. The committee could serve several functions and focus on ongoing feedback for long-distance service.

An attendee supported the idea but reminded the team that, in order for the group to be effective and meet legislative needs, it would need strong structure, true influence, and statutory requirements. An attendee also liked the idea, but warned that there must be a way to balance conflicting interests and limit personal agendas. Another attendee said that the decision-making could be overwhelming to local governments and MPOs and that the planning should remain broadly national. They also added that having too many people to engage with will lead to longer project delivery timeframes. Another attendee thought the committee could be a good way to make the public engagement needs less daunting in the future, yet still representative.

The study team also introduced an idea for a recurring, high-level long-distance planning process, potentially updated approximately every 5 years. The process would document existing long-distance service, trends and forecasts, proposed rail programs and investments, as well as the status of previously proposed long-distance passenger rail plans, projects, or other programs.

One attendee said that they supported the idea, but that the study team would need to identify areas of funding. Another attendee liked the idea because it encourages interaction between state DOTs that is informed by a federal rail plan – having a high-level plan will support better coordination across the nation. An attendee brought up that the process would help with securing reauthorizations.

12. Conclusion

The Southwest regional working group meeting concluded with a look ahead at the future of the Long-Distance Service Study, which will include a final round of regional working group meetings in the early summer. FRA outlined study next steps, including identification of preferred routes for near, mid, and long-term implementation. The next round of regional working group meetings will include costs and public benefits of the preferred routes, presentation of the implementation schedules for the preferred routes, and presentation of the recommended actions of the study.

Attendees

- All Aboard Arizona
- Amtrak
- Arizona Department of Transportation
- Association of Monterey Bay Governments
- California Department of Transportation (Caltrans)
- California State Transportation Agency
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- FRA
- New Mexico Department of Transportation
- North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Rail Passengers Association
- Rail Passengers Association of California and Nevada
- Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada
- Riverside County Transportation Commission
- San Jose State University – Mineta Transportation Institute
- Susanville Indian Rancheria
- Transportation Agency for Monterey County
- United Rail Passenger Alliance
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Utah Rail Passengers Association