

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

Date: June 6, 2024, 9 am – 3 pm MDT

Location: Missoula Public Library – 455 East Main Street, Missoula, MT 59802

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.

Previously, FRA hosted three rounds of regional working group meetings across the United States, in six separate regions, to engage these stakeholders. The fourth and final round of meetings were held in June 2024, with the Northwest regional meeting taking place on June 6. The purpose of this round of meetings was to review and discuss analyses associated with each of the preferred routes, including conceptual service schedules, high-level capital and operating and maintenance (O&M) cost estimate ranges, and public benefits analysis. Additionally, the meetings aimed to create a shared understanding of next steps for the study.

The meeting was held both in person in Missoula, Montana, 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 and What We've Heard
- Network Development and Methods and Tools for Network Assessment
- Preferred Route Analysis
- Prioritization
- Ongoing Long-Distance Collaboration and Planning
- Conclusion

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 working group meeting began with a review of housekeeping and safety information. Next, in-person and virtual attendees introduced themselves. Regional working group members in attendance, both in-person and virtually, are listed at the end of this summary. FRA then delivered opening remarks, which provided attendees with an orientation toward the day's presentation and discussions. Amtrak also provided opening remarks.

Figure 1. Participants at Northwest Regional Working Group Meeting 4 on June 6 in Missoula, Montana



3. Study Overview & What We've Heard

The study team began by providing meeting attendees with the legislative direction for the study, including requirements for a report to Congress, as well as an overview of current long-distance service and intercity passenger rail funding programs, and the overall study scope and approach.

The study team also reviewed feedback received during and after the third round of regional working group meetings in February 2024. Between February 6 and March 11, 2024, more than 47,000 public and stakeholder comments were received – primarily via the study website and email address. Artificial intelligence (AI) was used to analyze the comments and identify preferred routes and geographies (cities, states) mentioned.

Key stakeholder and public comment takeaways:

- 99% of comments were supportive of long-distance passenger rail in the United States
- 23% of comments simply offered support for passenger rail
- Some cities that are not included on a preferred route generated many comments and support for consideration (these cities were discussed later in the presentation)

Further information pertaining to stakeholder and public feedback may be viewed in the working group presentation on the project website – www.fralongdistancerailstudy.org/meeting-materials.

An attendee asked if the study team was planning to further analyze the comments. A member of the study team confirmed that they were still analyzing comments and planned to maintain a database as a reference for future planning studies.

An attendee noted that, by showing the cities and regions by the volume of comments received, less populated geographies appeared less important. Instead, the attendee suggested showing the proportion of comments received to the population along each route, rather than just the raw number of comments. A member of the study team replied they were working through the AI analysis and identifying best practices.

4. Network Development & Methods and Tools for Network Assessment

The study team gave an overview of the approach to developing the preferred routes. This began with a review of the existing passenger rail network, as well as the baseline network identified for the study. Next, the study team reviewed the conceptual enhanced network (presented in-depth at regional working group meetings in July 2023), as well as the preferred routes developed from the conceptual enhanced network (first presented at regional working group meetings in February 2024). Daily Cardinal and Sunset Limited passenger rail service was assumed when identifying the preferred routes.

The study team then reviewed the methodology and tools used to evaluate the proposed network, including the development of conceptual service schedules, network analysis, cost estimates for O&M costs and selected passenger-service required projects, and public benefits analysis.

An attendee expressed concern with the methodology used to determine conceptual service schedules, which was based on maximizing daytime service for the highest demand market pairs. The attendee did not think selecting the highest-demand market pairs aligned with the requirements of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law priorities of connecting large and small communities and advancing the well-being of rural areas.

The same attendee requested that the distinct conditions of the American West (such as terrain, weather, climate, and willingness to travel further) be accounted for in the analysis when determining station catchment areas. The attendee did not agree with the methodology of using uniform catchment areas across the United States. A member of the study team reminded attendees that the 30-mile catchment area applies to stations in a Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and the 50-mile catchment area is for stations in a non-MSA. The catchment areas are based on Amtrak's ridership data.

The same attendee suggested that if the study team used larger catchment areas they would see higher ridership on some routes in the West; there are currently fewer passenger rail routes in the western U.S. than the eastern U.S., and people in the western U.S. would travel further to get to a train station. A member of the study team responded that the conceptual service schedules for preferred routes were developed for analysis purposes only. They added that if these routes were to move forward into service development planning there would be additional analysis and coordination with stakeholders and host railroads to determine actual station departure and arrival times.

An attendee shared that an equitable analysis should account for the fact that travel patterns in rural western America differ from urban eastern America. The attendee provided an example of colleagues in rural Oregon who commute 70 miles one-way, five days a week. A member of the study team responded that there would be additional opportunities to address catchment areas in different parts of the country as preferred routes move forward into service development planning.

5. Preferred Route Analysis

The study team presented the results of the preferred routes analysis, starting with an overview of increasing the Cardinal and Sunset Limited to daily service. The study team then reviewed the results of conceptual service schedules, cost estimates, and public benefits analysis for each preferred route. These results were organized into a conceptual service overview; a review of equity and accessibility; a review of cost estimate ranges; and a review of safety, jobs, and earnings.

During the presentation of the Denver – Houston preferred route analysis, one attendee mentioned significant capital improvements would be necessary to run against the flow of traffic because the segment from Amarillo to Pueblo only runs northbound, by way of Trinidad.

During the presentation of the Los Angeles – Denver preferred route analysis, an attendee noted that it was typical for local communities to make investments in station maintenance and facility costs and wanted to

clarify the expectations for local community participation. A member of the study team replied that there would be a section in the report to Congress addressing potential federal and non-federal funding sources, as station ownership structures are complicated and vary significantly. The same attendee asked if there was a breakdown of station cost assumptions, such as building new platforms. A member of the study team confirmed that the cost estimates for stations include the station structure type, platforms, and costs to upgrade existing stations.

Another attendee asked if the study team included the marginal costs of operating additional trains at the Amtrak-owned Denver station. A member of the study team responded that the cost analysis assumed existing stations that are included in the preferred routes may need to be upgraded to accommodate the addition of the preferred routes. Another member of the study team added the study is not yet at the level of detail to determine potential cost efficiencies gained from operating additional trains at existing stations.

During the presentation of the Seattle - Denver preferred route analysis, an attendee recommended splitting the Portland, Oregon, to Seattle, Washington, segment in Hermiston, Oregon, and continuing to Kennewick, Washington, Yakima, Washington and Seattle, Washington; half of the route would go to Portland down the Columbia River Gorge, while the other half would go through central Washington. A member of the study team responded that none of the preferred routes have split services, but this could be considered as preferred routes move forward into service development. Another attendee believed the proposed Seattle-Portland segment of the preferred route was redundant and preferred a route such as Spokane, Washington - St. Paul, Minnesota was explored.

An attendee added the connection between Kennewick, Washington, and Hermiston, Oregon, would reduce traffic on the Columbia River corridor and the I-5 Corridor, addressing capacity concerns and increasing efficiency.

During the presentation of the Seattle – Chicago preferred route analysis, an attendee stated that certain segments of the proposed alignment have directional running freight traffic, and that running the route against the flow of existing freight traffic would be challenging. An attendee asked if the study team weighed varying weather conditions on each of the routes, because the Seattle – Chicago route has hazardous conditions. A member of the study team shared that the Bureau of Transportation statistics average crash rate for highway travel was used, and it was not tailored to specific geographies.

An attendee said there may be some redundancy between the North Coast Hiawatha and the Empire Builder. Another attendee stated there could be potential efficiencies and connections where the Seattle-Denver and Seattle-Chicago routes come together. A member of the study team responded that there were benefits to having those new routes overlap with existing services and key major hubs such as population centers and opportunities to get workforces for crew bases. Another attendee added that there is a lot of benefit to having multiple departures, including spreading costs over more trains, and offering passengers more attractive times and choices.

During the presentation of the Denver – Minneapolis/St. Paul preferred route analysis, one attendee encouraged the study team to look at how the routes would affect tribal lands in South Dakota. The attendee was concerned the catchment area methodology ruled out the impact the preferred routes could have on tribal lands. An attendee added that people living on tribal lands and in rural populations are willing to drive greater distances for services. An attendee requested the study team include the tribal colleges served by the preferred routes, in addition to the historically black colleges and universities. Another attendee stated South Dakota has never had Amtrak service before. An attendee added that there is interest and support in South Dakota for the Denver – Minneapolis/St. Paul preferred route.

After presenting analyses of each preferred route the study team gave an overview of the potential network hubs that could be developed if the complete network was implemented.

An attendee asked how the study team determined the capital costs for expanding station capacity in Denver for example, which would become a terminal with the preferred route. A member of the study team said they had estimated costs based on Amtrak station types. Existing stations that are included in the preferred routes

would be upgraded to at least a caretaker station (if necessary) to accommodate the addition of the preferred routes. While this estimate includes the assumption of additional infrastructure, it does not include site-specific property acquisition costs.

Then, the study team identified cities not included on a preferred route that generated many comments after the last round of regional working group meetings in February 2024, and noted the opportunities and challenges of adding new markets to the preferred network. For the Northwest region, these markets included Butte, Montana.

Results of the preferred route analyses are available in the [presentation](#).

6. Prioritization

Next, the study team presented on the methodology to prioritize the preferred routes. This early, initial assessment of the preferred routes was based on three evaluation categories: complexity, benefits, and selected costs. The study team gave an overview of the various metrics evaluated for this study, and how they were weighted. Daily Cardinal, daily Sunset Limited, and Seattle – Chicago routes were not included in prioritization because they are included in FRA’s [Corridor ID Program](#). The study team noted the results of this prioritization exercise may provide guidance on future priorities regarding the next phase of project planning, but that these initial ratings do not reflect prioritization for implementation funding.

An attendee asked whether the economic benefits, such as the construction jobs and earnings, were considered in the prioritization of the preferred routes. A member of the study team clarified that jobs and earnings were calculated as part of the public benefits analysis from the capital and O&M cost estimates. O&M costs were a metric in the prioritization methodology “level of cost” category. However, the economic benefits from creating new jobs and earnings are not reflected in the prioritization methodology. The study team noted that they conducted a public benefits analysis, not a cost-benefit analysis. The study team acknowledged that there were limitations to what had been studied when it came to overall economic benefits.

An attendee asked if prioritization would be part of the selection criteria for Corridor ID applications. Another attendee asked if IIJA funding that was identified through restoration or revitalization could be used for the preferred routes that the study prioritized. A member of the study team replied that Corridor ID has its own selection evaluation criteria. Some of the 15 preferred routes meet the current Corridor ID eligibility criteria while some do not.

After presenting prioritization, the study team gave an overview of the FRA project lifecycle and program framework as a reminder of the steps involved in developing and implementing railroad capital projects. The study is a systems planning effort that would help to inform and initiate project planning requirements. The study team emphasized that significantly more project planning would be necessary to advance recommendations from the study.

An attendee stated 15 years was an unacceptable timeline. Another attendee asked if local support and grassroots efforts could promote faster development. An attendee asked how the timeline could be expedited. A member of the study team noted that a few of the challenges are the timeline for fleet acquisition, not having a sustained funding program throughout the development stages, and the lack of sustained industry to continue project development activities. Another attendee asked if it was possible to streamline these problems internally. A member of the study team responded that FRA was working towards a more comprehensive planning process that would include coordination with sponsors and host railroads.

Next, the study team presented implementation considerations, including key considerations for implementing the preferred routes. These considerations include:

- Funding and preparation of a service development plan
- Industry capacity to plan and implement a new long-distance route
- Coordinating and agreement with the host railroads and passenger rail service operators

- Funding and acquisition of fleet
- Funding for construction
- Sustained funding for operations

The study team presented key project planning tasks that would need to occur after the study is finalized, as part of a service development plan process. The team emphasized that the study is a very early step in the process of planning, developing, and implementing an expanded long-distance rail network.

7. Ongoing Long-Distance Collaboration and Planning

Next, FRA presented opportunities and ideas for ongoing long-distance collaboration and planning, including ideas for a new Long-Distance Public Committee, as well as a high-level, recurring long-distance planning process that could be similar to State Rail Plans or other comparable transportation investment plans.

One of the attendees suggested that to reduce the 15-year timeline conversations with rail manufacturers should be initiated to accelerate fleet acquisition. They added that advancing passenger rail produces social, economic, and environmental benefits for the entire nation.

An attendee suggested local communities speak to their elected officials and that the study should be presented to Congress as a priority for funding. A member of the study team replied that one of the primary outputs of a state rail plan or any other long-range planning document for rail investment is identifying funding priorities.

Another attendee recommended a more frequent planning process with regularly scheduled evaluation. An attendee noted that the study has multi-state corridors for routes, but no mechanism for multi-state coordination. A member of the study team shared that FRA has previously led regional rail studies and that some parts of the country have multi-state frameworks that support broader multi-state efforts; the challenge for these entities is advancing from the planning phase to the implementation phase.

An attendee mentioned industry partners such as BNSF, UP, and CSX that are making improvements to their freight services on long-distance corridors within their operating footprints. According to the attendee, these industry partners make capital improvements, and buy rail cars and engines, but on a much faster timeline and could perhaps provide support. Another attendee agreed that partnering with host railroads to expedite long-distance projects was possible. The attendee recommended a Congressionally mandated Federal Rail Compact or Commission charged with developing and implementing nationally critical routes and continuing the regional working groups to ensure certain states are not omitted.

8. Conclusion

The regional working group meeting concluded with a review of the study's next steps. The next and final step of the study is the preparation and submittal of the report to Congress, which will happen later in 2024.

The study team noted that the study presents both opportunities and challenges for the advancement of long-distance passenger rail, which will be included as part of the report to Congress.

Attendees

- All Aboard Northwest
- Amtrak
- Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority
- Bismarck Metropolitan Planning Organization
- BNSF
- Cheyenne Metropolitan Planning Organization

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- City of Boise
- City of Missoula
- Colorado Department of Transportation
- Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes
- Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
- Front Range Passenger Rail District
- Idaho Transportation Department
- Mineta Transportation Institute
- Missoula Metropolitan Planning Organization
- Montana Department of Transportation
- Office of Senator Jon Tester
- Oregon Department of Transportation
- Pacific NorthWest Economic Region (PNWER)
- Rail Passengers Association
- Regional Infrastructure Accelerator Program – Northwest
- Regional Transportation District
- Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council
- Spokane Regional Transportation Council
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Utah Rail Passengers Association
- Utah Transit Authority
- Valley Regional Transit
- Washington State Department of Transportation
- Yakima Valley Conference of Governments