

"World Class" Rail on Single Track?

By Richard L. Beadles

Volume III, No. 7. April 14, 2011

It is now commonplace to hear that the U. S. has a "world class" freight rail system, but so far as we know nobody has sought to define just what that means? When the U. S. did have clear leadership in rail infrastructure and operations, prior to the near-melt-down of U. S. rail in the 1960's, double-track main line routes were widely advertised and generally regarded as the standard for excellence in operations. There were also some important three and four-track routes, and thousands of single track lines.

U. S. freight rail companies are today highly rated as investment opportunities by Wall Street, and the dramatically down-sized route system is generally in better shape, maintenance-wise, than it has ever been. But operations are, in many places around the country, severely congested and restricted as result of too much traffic forced through congested gauntlets. Some of this is due to growth, some to network operations redesign, and much of it is due to too much single track. Can this really be called "world class"?

One of many such examples is the Peninsula Subdivision of CSX, between Richmond and Newport News. Once double-tracked, it was slimmed down to mostly single-track in the years 1957-1959. Before that it handed, during peaks in the coal cycle (1957), as much or more coal tonnage as is moving today. It also accommodated, daily, without delay, three round-trip passenger trains, plus two pairs of scheduled "manifest" freight trains, occasional runs of ore trains, military MAINS, four local freights, sixty (60) yard jobs at Newport News terminal, plus work trains, and track maintenance, etc.

Today, the Peninsula is often a mess. Part of it could be attributable to the change in Newport News coal terminal arrangements, which were made in the 1980's; a radical change from the traditional rail-car-storage and direct car-to-ship dumper system. In place of that we now have two ground-storage facilities owned and operated by non-rail interests. The concept was undeniably appealing. The old system involved holding millions of tons of coal in railroad-owned hopper cars. The new one is in theory more efficient. Coal from arriving trains is dumped on the ground, from which storage piles it is conveyed to ships when they arrive. In layman's terms, it was to be much like a McDonald's drive-through restaurant concept, but we know from experience that when the window is slow, or when the queue is long, the parking lot gets congested. All this was exacerbated by elimination, over the years, of coal storage tracks at Newport News and in yards and terminals for several hundred miles along the route from the coal mines.

Recently, CSX was doing annual maintenance on the Peninsula, resulting in curtailment of passenger service by 50% four days each week. Fifty-four Amtrak train-trips were annulled in

Feb.-March. Even now, coal trains are often seen standing, for many hours, on main line tracks around Richmond. Our Peninsula service was once cited by Amtrak as one of its best performing routes. In Newport News, the *Daily Press* has questioned the future of rail passenger service there. None of this sounds "world class". We hope a fix is on the way. P.R. "spin" alone won't do it!

(c) copyright 2010 Richard L. Beadles
