FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath  www.fofnl.org.uk

The campaign group for rail north of Inverness, lobbying for improved services for the local user, tourist and freight customers.

1. FoFNL is a 150 member rail user group which seeks to support both passenger and freight services on the railways north, east and south from the Inverness hub.

2. These lines are all mostly single track with short passing loops and this seriously restricts their capacity for freight in particular.

3. FoFNL welcomes current moves to add more loops, longer loops, double track, modern signalling and electrification to the Perth-Inverness (HML) and Aberdeen-Inverness (InvAb) lines for the substantial improvement of both passenger and freight services. Progress has been much slower than expected.

4. FoFNL is currently pressing Network Rail to significantly improve line speed and capacity (with dynamic loops, faster points, improved signalling) on the Far North Line which is no longer able to cope with existing or potential traffic.

5. Track condition, gauge and weight restrictions affect all three lines which is a sure sign of past underinvestment. Oil tanks to Lairg can only travel 75% full because of restrictions on the Oykell viaduct. Using new lower platform wagons to take higher containers on the HML has recently been banned due to track concerns.

6. The passenger timetable on the FNL has recently been slowed down and now includes the totally unprecedented note “This train may run 15 minutes later on certain days due to the operation of a freight train in the Lairg area.” This is another sign of lack of passing loop track capacity.

7. The offshore pipe train concerned runs from Caithness to Tees-side. Apart from the oil tanks, the only other freight on the FNL now is nuclear waste traffic.

8. Freight on the HML includes groceries, cement, timber products and the three flows to the FNL. There is no longer any freight on the Invab line and paths are difficult to find. Much timber used to be carried.

9. Many former flows such as timber, coal, aggregates, grain, seed potatoes, whisky and new ones such as offshore oilfield supplies, and domestic and industrial waste could be carried by rail in the Highlands. Ports such as Invergordon should be reconnected to the railway and gauge clearance extended there from Elgin.
10. HITRANS is trying to re-establish a timber flow from Georgemas and Kinbrace to Inverness for the Norbord wood factory, seven miles east of the city. The potential flow is huge, but the roads in Sutherland would need a lot of strengthening. At the moment rail is also handicapped because costly transhipment is required at Inverness.

11. Norbord has obtained planning permission to more than double its output, but although the factory is adjacent to the InvAb line and formerly had a rail siding it was not stipulated that this should be replaced. The former siding was built over the last time the factory was extended.

12. There appears to be a potential mismatch between local government planning procedures and the provision of new rail terminal sites and road access to these. Councils are not responsible for rail services or rail infrastructure, and designations of land for rail expansion can easily be forgotten.

13. The A9 road is used to carry gas by road tanker to Caithness. North of Dornoch this road is hardly suitable for this dangerous cargo which would be more appropriately on the railway. The problem is how do you abstract a relatively small flow from a much bigger road contract in order to send it by rail?

14. Railfreight is recognised as a less polluting and more sustainable mode for transporting freight. One train load can replace many individual HGVs, and railfreight is much more fuel efficient reducing greenhouse gas emissions by some two thirds.

15. Fuel is a very volatile commodity both in price and supply. If there were to be a major upset in the Middle East and supply became difficult, the Highlands, being at the end of a long distribution chain, would be the first area to suffer. It would be essential to try to save fuel by trunk hauling supplies by rail or sea to nodes such as Inverness for onward transport by road.

16. Fuel price and supply can change very quickly but extra rail capacity takes time to install which is why we should be pressing ahead now to urgently double and electrify the badly restrictive rail routes in to the Highlands from Perth and Aberdeen.

17. Modal shift away from road to more sustainable means such as rail and sea is avowed Government policy. The results so far show that this needs to be much more vigorously pursued. Some level of direction is needed rather than laissez-faire. Good stewardship of the planet suggests we cannot afford the “luxury” of unbridled competition in this matter. Also, we should be finding ways to avoid carrying goods long distances when they could be produced locally. These are big questions, beyond FoFNL’s determining, but they are fundamental ones which we hope the ICI committee will consider. ENDS.

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