

## Tillamook rail's future shaky

**Transportation** | Stakeholders will decide whether it's worth it to rebuild after \$20 million in storm damage

By MICHAEL MILSTEIN  
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Oregon's little railroad that could doesn't know it can anymore.

The Port of Tillamook Bay Railroad, built in the early 1900s through some of the state's most scenic but rugged terrain, lost so much of its line in the major storm early this month that it's not clear if or when it will recover.

The railroad now has no income, has laid off about half its staff and is looking to the state and federal governments to come up with millions of dollars for repairs scarcely a decade after millions went into fixing damage from big storms in 1996. Those earlier repairs were designed to prevent less damage even in a 500-year flood and

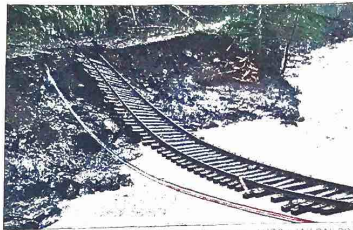
keep the line "safe far into the new century," according to its Web site.

The situation highlights the vulnerability of Oregon transportation infrastructure routed through storm- and landslide-prone terrain. The 95-mile railroad winds through the peaks and valleys of the Coast Range along the remote Salmon River River, through many tunnels and several high trestles, much of it inaccessible by road.

State officials say they're now wondering whether it makes sense to rebuild the railroad at all or whether it would be better to develop other transportation options to support industry in Tillamook over the long term. Several hundred jobs are tied to the line, which hauls feed grain to Tillamook and lumber to Portland.

"We fixed it in 1996 to the tune of \$12 or \$13 million, and now it looks like it's going to be another \$20 million," said Kelly Taylor, administrator of the Oregon Department of Transportation's rail

Please see RAILROAD, Page A11

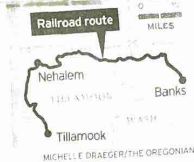


PORT OF TILLAMOOK BAY RAILROAD

The early December storms left the Port of Tillamook Bay Railroad in shambles, and officials wonder if it makes sense to rebuild. The line was knocked out by storms in 1996, and attempts were made to protect it from storms.

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### Railroad: Barges, trucks are possible alternatives



MICHELLE DRAEGER/THE OREGONIAN

Continued from Page One

division. "You have to start thinking about, 'Do we do this every few years, or what do we do to keep those jobs in the long term?'"

Gov. Ted Kulongoski met this week with shippers and others interested in the line and asked for a task force to consider the most reliable, affordable options, she said.

"There wasn't anyone in the room who didn't think there would be another" damaging storm, Taylor said. "You've got to look around and say, 'What's the best business decision at this point?'"

An alternative, for instance, might involve loading rail cars onto barges in Tillamook Bay and sending them to Astoria, where they could be transferred to a railroad to Portland. Another option could be extending the Tillamook line along the coast to Astoria.

Even before the storm damage it was tough for the railroad to bring in enough revenue to keep up its remote line, Taylor said.

#### Mud packs tunnel

Now, landslides and washouts have left sections of track hanging in mid-air and others covered with tons of rocks and trees. One tunnel is packed full of thousands of cubic yards of mud and trees.

The lore of the railroad is intertwined with its rugged topography. The line, originally built by Pacific Railway & Navigation Co., got the nickname "Punk, Rotten and Nasty," because its steep grades, hairpin turns, towering trestles and smoke from the locomotives made passengers queasy, according to the Oregon Historical Society.

The line climbs from the Willamette Valley to about 1,800 feet where it crests the Coast Range and then back down to the coast at Wheeler and south to Tillamook.

The railroad is a lower cost shipping option for lumber. Managers at a Weyerhaeuser mill in Garibaldi said it would cost an extra \$320,000 a year to use trucks. The line also carries occasional scenic passenger trains, though that service was suspended last summer.

It's also a major conduit for feed that supports Tillamook's famous dairy industry. One of its locomotives is known for its paint pattern resembling a Holstein dairy cow.

The Port of Tillamook Bay

#### Tillamook Bay Railroad online

- Railroad and storm damage: <http://www.potb.org>
- A ride on the railroad: <http://www.trainweb.org/chris/tillamook2006.html>
- Railroad history and photos: <http://www.brian894x4.com/POTBRailroad.html>

purchased the railroad with help from the state lottery in 1990 after the Southern Pacific Railroad, now part of Union Pacific, decided to abandon the line.

#### Port wants line open

The Port is still pursuing the goal of repairing and reopening the line as soon as possible, said director Robert Van Borssum.

But the longer it takes, the longer it leaves the Port without income and the harder it will be to keep experienced workers who would be needed for the repairs. He said trucks hauling cargo in place of the railroad are adding to traffic on already busy highways between the Willamette Valley and the coast.

Because most of the line is inaccessible by road, any repairs would have to be supported by trains running from each end of the severed line.

"We're at the mercy of external forces," said Van Borssum. "The longer it's in limbo — that's not good news."

A thorough damage and repair assessment is under way and is expected at the end of next week, he said. The assessment will also consider ways to mitigate the risk of future damage to the railroad.

The federal government provided most of the roughly \$12 million cost of repairing the railroad line after floods in 1996 swept away more than a mile of track. Van Borssum said he's waiting for the damage report to get a clear picture of the costs this time but said federal damage assistance usually requires local governments to cover 25 percent of the costs.

The Port doesn't have the money for that, he said, and would require state help.

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