



Willmar Rail Connector and Industrial Access Project, Minnesota

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and its partners Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF), City of Willmar, Kandiyohi County and the Kandiyohi County and City of Willmar Economic Development Commission will add a rail connection between two existing BNSF railway lines and modify surrounding roadways to better move freight through the city of Willmar.

This project is receiving US Department of Transportation funds through the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) competitive grant program, and is subject to review under NEPA. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is the lead federal agency for completing the NEPA environmental document and for compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (54 U.S.C. § 306108) (Section 106). The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) is administering the TIGER grant funds for the construction of the project. The two agencies have determined that an EA is the appropriate level of environmental review for this project.

Project purpose

The Willmar Rail Connector and Industrial Park Access Project (Willmar Wye) will provide a direct connection between the Marshall and Morris Subdivisions of the BNSF rail network. Providing this direct connection will decrease the number of trains that need to pull into the rail yard in downtown Willmar. The project also includes a rail spur that will provide access to the city of Willmar's industrial park.

The purpose of the Wye project is to:

- Provide a direct connection between the Marshall and Morris Subdivisions of the BNSF Railway freight rail network
- Provide freight rail access to the City of Willmar's industrial park

Project benefits

- Improve safety for travelers by reducing at-grade crossing exposure
- Increase multimodal opportunities for shippers
- Encourage economic growth
- Improve quality of life
- Delay and emissions savings for travelers (e.g. drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists) by reducing wait times for crossings to clear.
- Reduce the number of trains traversing through downtown Willmar and the accompanying noise.

Regional demands

Rail shipments of oil have grown sharply in regions, such as North Dakota's Bakken energy fields, that lack sufficient pipelines as alternatives. Investments in the network are needed to allow



network capacity to “catch up” with the new demand. Production is reported to be approaching 1 million barrels a day with roughly 72 percent of that fuel transported by rail. These trains are bound for refineries in the Gulf and locally within the Midwest region, while coal cars are bound for export terminals located both in the Great Lakes and on the West Coast.

Grain trains are also frequently delayed, reducing a farmer’s ability to manage market fluctuations and tempering profit margins. By easing this choke point in Willmar, the project would add much needed capacity in this portion of the rail network.

The Minnesota Comprehensive Statewide Freight and Passenger Rail Plan (MnDOT, 2012) identified the Marshall Subdivision as a corridor that will need investment due to volume and capacity issues.

Project schedule & milestones

- Submission of DRAFT Environmental Assessment (EA) for federal agency review: November 2016
- Copies of the [EA](#) are available for public viewing from February 6, 2017 through March 8, 2017 during business hours at MnDOT in Willmar and on the project website.
- Public hearing: February 2017
- Bid (design-build) letting: December 2017
- Start of construction: Spring 2018
- Project completion: Fall 2020

Finding of No Significant Impact

FRA finds that the January 2017 EA for the Willmar Rail Connector & Industrial Park Access Project, satisfies the requirements of FRA’s Procedures for Considering Environmental Impacts (64 FR 28545, May 26, 1999) and NEPA (42 USC § 4321 *et seq.*).

FRA has determined that the Willmar Rail Connector & Industrial Park Access Project, as presented in assessed in the EA, will have no foreseeable significant impact on the quality of the human and natural environment. This [Finding of No Significant Impact \(FONSI\)](#) was independently evaluated by the FRA and determined to adequately and accurately discuss the purpose and need, environmental issues, impacts of the proposed project, and the appropriate mitigation measures.

As the project sponsor, MnDOT is responsible for fully implementing the environmental commitments and mitigation measures identified for the highway portion of the project. MnDOT is also responsible for ensuring that BNSF, as a project partner and the entity for overseeing the construction of the railway improvements, fully implements the environmental commitments and mitigations for the railway portion of the project.