

Freight trains return to Sonoma County



CRISTA JEREMIASON / The Press Democrat

Employees with Balfour Beatty Rail, Inc. make their way north on the historic Northwestern Pacific Rail line in Petaluma near Corona Road. The company was dropping railroad ties in preparation for repairs to the track to get it back up and running.

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Rail fans waved and snapped photos as a work train rolled through Petaluma on Tuesday, marking the Northwestern Pacific Railroad's return to Sonoma County after an eight-year hiatus.

"It was exciting," said Lynda Ammons, who watched the train rumble by Petaluma's vintage 1914 rail depot. "The ground shook. I got chills."

The work train is fixing a 62-mile stretch of track between Napa County and Windsor, preparing for the resumption of freight service early next year.

The work train could reach Windsor next week, said Mitch Stogner, executive director of the North Coast Railroad Authority.

“People are going to get used to seeing trains again,” said Stogner. “So far, the response has been overwhelmingly positive.”

On Tuesday, people gathered at Petaluma train crossings to watch a giant diesel locomotive pull three flatcars loaded with replacement railroad ties. The engineer blasted his horn and flagmen stopped traffic as the train crossed Southpoint Boulevard.

At Corona Road, cows in a nearby pasture scattered as the train approached.

Rail buff Roger Graeber of Sebastopol recorded the event on video for the Northwestern Pacific Railroad Historical Society. He said it was good to see a train back on NWP’s tracks.

“It’s about time,” Graeber said.

Workers pushed heavy wooden ties off the flatcars and onto the railroad right-of-way. Another crew will fit them under the rails.

About 10,000 new ties will be installed between Novato and Windsor, Stogner said.

The Northwestern Pacific has been closed since 2001, when storm damage made it unsafe for cargo trains. The railroad authority is finishing about \$50 million in state-funded repairs before reopening the southern end of the line.

State lawmakers created the railroad authority in 1989 to keep cargo trains running on the NWP, a former branch of Southern Pacific Co.

Freight trains would share part of the route with Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit, which plans to operate commuter service starting in 2014.

“NCRA freight service will be the warm-up act for SMART,” said authority chairman Allan Hemphill.

Cargo trains were scheduled to start in October, but the launch has been delayed until early 2010 because the authority needs special permits for repair work on three bridges, Stogner said.

Service would begin with three round-trip trains per week, but could later expand to two round-trips per day with up to 60 cars per train.

Trains would carry building materials, animal feed, wine and other commodities, according to the authority. They could also replace trucks used to haul Sonoma County's garbage to out-of-county landfills.

The NWP connects to the national rail network at Lombard, south of Napa.

The authority has contracted with a Palo Alto firm, NWP Co., to operate the cargo trains. Freight service could be extended to Willits by 2011 and eventually to Eureka, according to the authority.