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I-81 Draft Environmental Impact Statement seriously flawed, group claims; results in improper rejection of freight rail alternative

Salem, VA -- RAIL Solution today released its detailed analysis of the I-81 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) issued by the Virginia Department of Transportation in late November. The rail advocacy group's comments focus primarily on how the DEIS treats freight rail alternatives to massive highway widening, and are highly critical of VDOT's methods and results.

The chief reason for understatement of rail potential in the I-81 Corridor, according to RAIL Solution, is failure of the DEIS to look beyond the 325 miles of I-81 in Virginia. Three earlier state-funded studies had determined that rail diversion of trucks in corridors of less than 500 miles is unlikely.

"We tried to prevent them setting up rail to fail by suggesting in the public comment Scoping Process that the DEIS look at almost 600 miles of the I-81 Corridor between Knoxville, TN and Harrisburg, PA," said RAIL Solution Executive Director David Foster. "But although the idea made it into the study as Rail Concept 4, including mention of our suggested endpoints," noted Foster, "it's there in words only and the analysis is strictly limited to Virginia."

The DEIS, known formally as the I-81 Corridor Improvement Study, assigned the entire cost for rail upgrading in the 600-mile, five-state corridor to the 325 miles in Virginia. Little truck diversion resulted, and Rail Concept 4 was set aside as not cost-effective. The study instead selected Rail Concept 3 as the rail planning benchmark for use with all highway options. The RAIL Solution response describes Rail Concept 3 as too weak to do any good:

"Concept 3 is limited to 13 short segments of railroad within Virginia, ranging in length from one-half mile to 10 miles, with most of them a mile or two in length. With these few contemplated improvements, six additional trains per day in each direction could be handled, with an average train speed of 33 mph. Projections of truck diversions are virtually useless and self-defeating if based on such meager rail enhancement. To divert meaningful volumes of through trucks from I-81 in Virginia, the upgraded rail line would need to be handle six new trains *per hour*, not per day."

RAIL Solution's response is also highly critical of the DEIS' technical appendices, calling them "riddled with inaccuracies and inadequacies." The DEIS relies extensively on two technical appendices known as the Freight Diversion and

Forecast Technical Report and the Transportation Technical Report for its rail conclusions. They were not made public by VDOT until early December.

"VDOT wants you to look only at the Executive Summary," Foster said. He noted that in the days following release of the DEIS, study director Fred Altizer appeared on television and gave media interviews touting the finding that rail made little difference in the scope of highway construction needed on I-81. More recently VDOT has distributed copies of the Executive Summary to political leaders throughout the state. "They want you to look at their findings but not how they got them," added Foster.

"There are so many errors in the technical appendices, even basic, verifiable issues of fact, that it's hard to explain them through carelessness or incompetence alone," Foster stated. "You almost have to see purposeful misrepresentation there." The RAIL Solution response details several pages of claimed errors and shortcomings.

In addition to confining the rail analysis within the borders of Virginia, and flaws in the DEIS' technical support, RAIL Solution also claims rail was prematurely ruled out because of lack of financing for rail upgrading. The group quotes from page 3-9 of the DEIS: "There are currently no federal highway funding categories that VDOT can use to implement improvements to privately owned rail lines as part of this study." But VDOT did not look beyond familiar highway funding:

"No evidence appears in the DEIS study that alternative sources of funding for rail improvements were explored. For example, federal funding may well be possible through Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing (RRIF)," says the RAIL Solution paper. "Congress has set aside \$35 billion to loan to railroads and their public sector joint venture partners to finance construction of new railroad infrastructure, rehabilitate existing rail properties, and develop intermodal facilities."

"Remember how politicians were tripping over themselves to secure an \$800 million federal earmark for the STAR Solutions' dedicated truck lanes?" quipped Foster. "And here is a federal program with billions available for rail that no one seems to pay any attention to." He noted that the money could fund a pilot project to demonstrate highway freight diversion to rail through Virginia's I-81 Corridor.

"We can do things smarter in Virginia. Save the environment, reduce cost, and help pioneer a model for a 21st Century transportation paradigm for the nation," Foster said. "Gone are the days when we can address every problem of congestion and growth by building more lanes of highway."

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